

## NOTES

### MEMORIALIZING LINCOLN: WHITMAN'S "REVISION" OF JAMES SPEED'S ORATION UPON THE INAUGURATION OF THE BUST OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

On December 29, 1866, Attorney General James Speed penned a letter to J. Hubley Ashton, a close friend and Assistant Attorney General, informing him (among other things) that he would soon deliver an address inaugurating a new bust of Abraham Lincoln in Speed's home town of Louisville, Kentucky. Pressed by cases he had "to argue," he further requested that Ashton "see our friend Walt Whitman and ask him whether he will take my rough draft of an address and revise and finish it. . . . I have a notion that if he has the time and is in the mood he can do it better than any man I know." Speed's intimate reference to Whitman as "our friend" refers to the period, near the close of the Civil War, when he was able, at Ashton's behest, to provide Whitman with a clerkship in the Office of the Attorney General immediately following his dismissal from the Bureau of Indian Affairs by Secretary of the Interior James Harlan of Iowa. Many believe this dismissal the result of Harlan's discovery on Whitman's desk of the "blue-book" edition of *Leaves of Grass*, an annotated copy of the poet's 1860 edition. When confronted by Ashton and being convinced of Whitman's good character, Harlan nevertheless declared that "he would not restore Walt Whitman to his place in the Interior Department if the President asked him to do so, and it was even difficult to obtain his express assurance that he would refrain from opposing the appointment of Whitman to another position in the public service in Washington" (Barrus, 29). Even so, Whitman held the new appointment in the Attorney General's office until January 1872, when he was transferred to the Office of the Solicitor of the Treasury.

This information is readily available, and both Clara Barrus and Gay Wilson Allen cite correspondence from several sources concerning the rather infamous firing and rehiring of Whitman.<sup>1</sup> Allen's *Solitary Singer* also includes an excerpt from Speed's request to Ashton for Whitman's editorial services (377). Yet Allen, uncharacteristically, leaves us hanging at this juncture, without examining or even citing the text of Speed's oration. The extensive editorial work involved in the composition of the oration in question, published in 1867 by Bradley & Gilbert of Louisville, Kentucky, has thus never before been acknowledged as, at least in part, the work of Whitman.<sup>2</sup> However, a close examination of Speed's oration reveals Whitman's critical role in its composition.

Whitman's veneration of Lincoln and his emphasis on the democratic ideal of comradeship merge in the characteristic prose style. Note in the following example the complex sentence structure, distinctively composed of lists, series of phrases, and dependent clauses:

Through all the avenues trodden by multitudes of thinkers and workers in every conceivable vocation of life, knowledge comes—comes thick and fast, accumulates in great storehouses, priceless in value—but it is only here and there in a generation, that the man comes whose peculiar organization absorbs the labor of all others, assimilates it to himself, and shows what wisdom is.<sup>3</sup>

The main clauses, “knowledge comes. . . . but it is only here and there,” are surrounded and amplified by phrases and dependent clauses—the opening adverbial prepositional phrase, and the closing pair of relative clauses. Further, the dashes surrounding the adverbial appositive illustrate one of Whitman’s most characteristic forms of punctuation, found frequently in both poetry and prose. Also, in the opening phrase is the verb “trodden,” echoing Whitman’s use of the negated form of the word in his poem, “In Paths Untrodden.” The passage, then, not only bears Whitman’s grammatical imprint, but also, through the analogical use of the verb (“trodden”), it weaves together the specific qualities of wisdom and virtue associated with Lincoln with those of fraternal love, the love of comrades, in Whitman’s poem: “The soul of the man I speak for rejoices in comrades.”<sup>4</sup>

Whitman’s respect and love for Lincoln (and the Union he represented) much occupied the writer’s thoughts and his work from the months when he first ventured to Washington, D.C., in 1862 until the end of his life: this period was punctuated by at least eleven recitations of his Lincoln lecture. This affectionate and reverent preoccupation is equally as evident in Speed’s address as in Whitman’s Lincoln-related works. From the first paragraph, exalting the “colossal proportions of the man,” to the final sentence, emblemizing Lincoln as one who was sent (like Christ) to “leadeth [us] through green pastures and beside still waters” (8), there are clear and compelling echoes of the personal and ideological attachment Whitman felt toward the President. The following paragraph illustrates this best:

His character was the legitimate product of American institutions. Step by step he ascended from the humblest to the highest position. His elevation was not an accident. The student of his life must see that he was the child of progress, as the student of our institutions must acknowledge that they are founded on the law of progress. Not the irregular and revolutionary efforts that would pull down rather than build up, but that progress that would wisely use the debris of the past to fertilize the soil for the coming seasons, the healthy and life-giving progress which comes from a clearer and broader view of human rights and a larger experience, inducing a prudent effort to rectify, not destroy; the progress which makes the lessons and wisdom of our fathers the pedestal upon which brighter and higher hopes are to be realized in the future; the progress which springs from a sense of duty, and makes us ever recognize ‘that from any fruition of success, no matter what, shall come forth something to make a greater struggle necessary.’ As the child of progress, Mr. Lincoln’s character grew and developed in obedience to its surroundings. His was a life of growth and expansion from the cradle to the grave. There are many lives like to certain streams, larger at their source than ever after. They start off with some promise from the parent fountain, but receiving no wayside accessions to their strength, are gradually absorbed, or stagnate and sink, having refreshed no living thing, vegetable or mineral. Mr. Lincoln’s life was not one of these. Originating in the lower slopes of the mountains, and, by the law of progress which was native to him, and fostered by the institutions of the country, cutting itself a channel through fertile lands, it swelled into a majestic river, adding beauty and richness to all the territory that it touched.(4-5)

In addition to the obvious syntactic elements—parallel structure of dependent clauses and participial phrases—are the characteristic philosophical underpinnings, embodied in Whitman's ardent admiration for Lincoln, a man who represents an almost perfect symbol of American unionism and nationalism. Lincoln, "the product of American institutions," rises from a humble background ("originating in the lower slopes of the [Kentucky] mountains"), of good ("promising") parents, and grows to his greatest potential ("swelling like a majestic river, adding beauty and richness to all the territory that it touched").

In *Specimen Days*, Whitman records his earliest description of Lincoln, depicting a man, who though President of the Union, wears "ordinary" attire, and who does not elevate himself above the "commonest man," his "dark brown face, with the deep-cut lines, the eyes, always to me with a deep latent sadness in the expression."<sup>5</sup> He writes: "None of the artists or pictures has caught the deep, though subtle and indirect expression of this man's face. There is something else there" (61). This "something else" to which Whitman refers (the poet believes) is Lincoln's overarching concern to preserve the Union. In a later entry, dated April 16, 1865, he records a section from his notes on the death of Lincoln, an equally eloquent expression of admiration, calling Lincoln "the greatest, best, and most characteristic, artistic, moral personality" (98). At the heart of this passage lies Lincoln's most powerful "virtue" in the eyes of Whitman:

UNIONISM, in its truest and amplest sense, form'd the hard-pan of his character. . . . By many has this Union been help'd; but if one name, one man, must be pick'd out, he, most of all, is the conservator of it, to the future. He was assassinated—but the Union is not assassinated—*ça ira!* One falls, and another falls. The soldier drops, sinks like a wave—but the ranks of the ocean eternally press on. Death does its work, obliterates a hundred, a thousand—President, general, captain, private—but the Nation is immortal. (98-99)

The man celebrated here is the same man described in the Speed oration, whose biography is so inextricably interwoven with the nation's history that they seem one—one Union. Yet while the man is mortal (of human parents born), the Nation will live on, enriched (even preserved) through his virtuous existence and timeless contributions.

Whitman's commemorative oration, "The Death of Abraham Lincoln," delivered first in New York on April 14, 1879, echoes the same nationalistic reverence for the martyred President. Again, he describes the first time he saw Lincoln (then, in the moments just preceding his inauguration, still President-elect) in New York in February 1861—the silence of the crowds as the "tall figure" stepped from his barouche into their midst, his natural "magnetism," his "perfect composure and coolness" (*PW*, 2:499-500). Similarly, in Speed's oration, Lincoln distinguishes himself as one of the "foremost men of his day," not through "boisterous exhibition of imagined powers" but through the "persistent exercise of high and generous impulses" (3-4). In both pieces, Lincoln is "large-hearted" (Speed, 5), the "best and sweetest of the land" (*PW*, 2:507), the noblest representative of American democracy, whose life and death "consecrated" the cause of "universal freedom" (Speed, 8).

"When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," perhaps Whitman's most eloquent tribute to Lincoln, underscores the "mnemonic" significance of the President's sacrifice found in these orations (*PW*, 2:509). Note especially these lines quoted above from the Speed oration:

Not the irregular and revolutionary efforts that would pull down rather than build up, but that progress that would wisely use the debris of the past to fertilize the soil for the coming seasons, the healthy and life-giving progress which comes from a clearer and broader view of human rights and a larger experience, inducing a prudent effort to rectify, not destroy. . . . (4)

Compare these lines to Section 5 in "Lilacs," as Whitman describes the journey of the train carrying Lincoln's body to its final resting place in Springfield, Illinois, then to Section 15 of the elegy as he recalls and describes the "myriad" dead of the Civil War, merging the images of Lincoln with those of the countless dead. Thus the following lines of the poem reveal a description very much in the same spirit as that of the orations:

Over the breast of the spring, the land, amid cities,  
Amid lanes and through old woods, where lately the violets peep'd from the ground,  
spotting the gray debris. . . . (*LG*, 330)

. . .  
I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them,  
And the white skeletons of young men, I saw them,  
I saw the debris and debris of all the slain soldiers of the war,  
But I saw they were not as was thought,  
They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer'd not. . . . (*LG*, 336)

In the prose passage, "progress" (i.e., Lincoln) will make "wise" use of the "debris of the past," using it to "fertilize the soil" for coming years ("seasons"). From this rich ground, then, will grow for the Union a "clearer and broader" vision of "human rights and a larger experience." Similarly, in the elegy, as spring fosters violets among the "gray debris" of "battle-corpses," Whitman seeks to assure us that such a rebirth, both personal and political, is possible. Lincoln's body symbolizes not only the slain body politic but also a human being (the "man"), one who, as in "This Dust Was Once a Man," "saved the Union of these States," becoming part and parcel of the dead and embodying sacrifice and the hope for reconciliation—again, the progress purchased with wisdom and at great price (*LG*, 339).

These common threads of style and democratic philosophy, including the love of comrades, are emblematic of Whitman's work. Thus, Speed's oration bears the indelible imprints of the poet; its ideals and images are closely orchestrated with those in "Lilacs" and other memorial pieces in the 1867 edition. Speed's choice of Whitman as "editor" for his celebratory oration was certainly astute—he was "in the mood," and he did "do it better than any [other] man" could have. The poet's love for Lincoln combined with his patriotic fervor to render a true tribute, a portrait, to one who followed the call of duty, who "consecrated his life" to the cause of preserving the United States (Speed, 8). These many earlier pieces about Lincoln nurture the seeds that

would grow into Whitman's own commemorative address, given irregularly during the years to come on the anniversaries of Abraham Lincoln's death. Whitman's work on Speed's oration must have been effortless, growing out of his sense of duty to himself, to the Union, to Lincoln, and even to Speed. After all, as Ashton reminded friend Charles W. Eldridge, the Attorney General *did* provide Whitman with a stable employment that "enabled" him "to bring out with comfort" the fourth and fifth editions of *Leaves* (Barrus, 29).

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1 James Speed's letter to Ashton can be found in the Feinberg/Whitman Collection at the Library of Congress, "To J. Hubley Ashton," December 29, 1866. See Barrus, *Whitman and Burroughs: Comrades* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1931), 25-41. Barrus begins with Harlan's "evasive" plea of forgetfulness (some twenty-nine years after the fact) about his reasons for firing Whitman, and then goes on to explain his reasons herself through the supportive letters of friends and associates, such as Charles W. Eldridge, Ashton, John Burroughs, Horace Traubel, and William Douglas O'Connor. According to Barrus, Harlan ultimately recapitulated: "'The removal of Whitman was the mistake of my life'" (34). Also see *The Solitary Singer* (New York: New York University Press, 1967), especially 344-350, 376-377, for a similarly supportive description of Whitman's dismissal/rehiring.

2 I am indebted to Jerome Loving, currently at work on a new critical biography of Whitman, for bringing this document to my attention.

3 *Oration of James Speed, Upon the Inauguration of the Bust of Abraham Lincoln at Louisville, Kentucky, February 12, 1867* (Louisville: Bradley & Gilbert, 1867), 7. All citations to Speed's speech refer to this edition.

4 All references to Whitman's poetry are taken from *Leaves of Grass*, edited by Sculley Bradley and Harold Blodgett (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 112. Further citations to Whitman's poetry refer to this edition, abbreviated as *LG*.

5 Floyd Stovall, ed., *Prose Works 1892* (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 1:60. Further citations to Whitman's prose refer to this edition, abbreviated as *PW*.

## ON THE BACK COVER:

### A WHITMAN MANUSCRIPT FRAGMENT

The Library of Congress, through gifts and purchases, continues to add to its vast collection of Whitman materials. One manuscript fragment recently added to the collection appears on the back cover.<sup>1</sup> Along the edge of the scrap of paper on which Whitman's notes are written appears the inscription "Walt Whitman MSS from J. H. Johnston 1911." Johnston was a New York jeweler who befriended Whitman in the late 1870s and often invited Whitman to stay at his home. The manuscript is undated and reads as follows:

As to nationality [*cancelled: &*] in our literature [*cancelled: there are*] a & a demand that it should be autochthonous. There are sentences here and there through his writings