

WHO IS “W.”?: QUESTIONS ABOUT WHITMAN’S FIRST KNOWN PIECE OF PUBLISHED JOURNALISM

In *Specimen Days* (1882), Whitman reminisces about his early newspaper days and the delight he experienced upon seeing his first published articles in print:

I commenced when I was but a boy of eleven or twelve writing sentimental bits for the old ‘Long Island Patriot,’ in Brooklyn; this was about 1832. Soon after, I had a piece or two in George P. Morris’s then celebrated and fashionable ‘Mirror,’ of New York city. I remember with what half-suppress’d excitement I used to watch for the big, fat, red-faced, slow-moving, very old English carrier who distributed the ‘Mirror’ in Brooklyn; and when I got one, opening and cutting the leaves with trembling fingers. How it made my heart double-beat to see my *piece* on the pretty white paper, in nice type.¹

The *Journalism* volumes in the *Collected Writings of Walt Whitman* include none of the “sentimental bits” he wrote for the *Patriot*, since only one issue is extant from the June 1831-September 1832 period during which Whitman was associated with the paper, and that issue has nothing identifiable as Whitman’s.² The earliest known piece of Whitman’s journalism, then, has up to now been identified as the brief “The Olden Time,” which appeared in the *New-York Mirror* in the November 29th 1834, issue. It is signed “W.,” and appears in the “Original Communications” section of the paper. The *Journalism* volumes print it as Whitman’s sole contribution to the *Mirror* and place it as his first published piece of journalism, dated to when Whitman was only fifteen years old.³

The identification of Whitman as the author of this article has been based on the fact that it is signed “W.” and that Whitman had begun work as a compositor in New York City perhaps as early as 1834.⁴ Herbert Bergman, editor of the *Journalism* volumes, provides additional reasons why he believed “The Olden Time” was by Whitman: Whitman used the phrase “the olden time” in other pieces, including an 1846 article in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* and an 1845 piece in *The American Review*; Whitman “had lived in Suffolk County and was

interested in Long Island history,” which is consonant with the focus in the piece on Smithtown in Suffolk county; and Whitman often expressed an interest in “the aged ‘patriots’ who ‘are left as visible and speaking mementos of their brethren.’”⁵ The article reports on “a *Negro Harry*” who died in 1758 at the age of “at least one hundred and twenty years,” and who “remembered New-York, he said, when there were but three houses in it.” The article also records the death in 1762 of “one John Crockeser, an extremely aged person,” who had gone hunting in “a wilderness, where [there] is now a city.”

Nick Hentoff, a New York attorney and collector of literary first appearances, recently found another piece in the *Mirror* signed “W.” It appeared a month earlier, in the November 1, 1834, issue, also in the “Original Communications” section of the paper, and its title—“New-York in the Olden Time”—contains the same “The Olden Time” heading of the other article.⁶ It consists of a long description of—and paraphrases and excerpts from—a book “done about the year 1700, by a reverend gentleman who had visited New-York, as the chaplain of Governor Andros⁷ and the few English Episcopalians which could be found in a land then so new, and so generally Dutch.” “W.” identifies the author of the book only as a “Rev. C. W.,” who arrived in New York in 1678. While “W.” does not identify the book beyond this, it is in fact *A two Years Journal in New-York: And part of its Territories in America*, by Rev. Charles Wolley (London: John Wyat, 1701), identified on the title page only as “C. W.”⁸ “W.” quotes Wolley’s description of early New York and adds a parenthetical commentary on it: “The city of New-York he found as large (what a vague measurement) as some market-towns in England, and all built *the London way*.”

It might seem, then, that “New-York in the Olden Time” is also by Whitman, confirming the poet’s late recollection that he published “a piece *or two*” [emphasis added] in the *Mirror*. All the reasons that Bergman offers for identifying “The Olden Time” as Whitman’s apply equally well to “New-York in the Olden Time.” They are the only two prose articles in the *Mirror* signed “W.”⁹ and, like “The Olden Time,” “New-York in the Olden Time” would highlight Whitman’s antiquarian streak, so evident in many of his later journalistic writings, including *Brooklyniana*, a long series on Brooklyn history published

in the Brooklyn *Standard* in 1861-1862. Hentoff's discovery of the earlier piece by "W.," then, initially appeared to be a major contribution to our understanding of Whitman's work, offering us what now would become the earliest known piece of Whitman journalism.

There is a significant problem with this identification, however, one that in fact puts in question Whitman's authorship of *either* piece in the *Mirror*. Soon after making his discovery, Hentoff found yet another and even earlier piece in the *Mirror* signed "W.," this one appearing in the October 25, 1834, issue.¹⁰ Instead of another piece of prose journalism, however, this contribution by "W." was a poem—four quatrains of conventional verse called "The Morning Serenade," in which the speaker awakens his lover by describing the dawn of a new day. It does not sound unlike some of Whitman's very early newspaper verse, but this particular poem is in fact identifiable: it is by Thomas Richard Whitney, republished (with slight alterations) in his 1844 poetry collection called *Evening Hours*.¹¹ Whitney (1807-1858) was a New York City engraver, journalist, poet, fiction writer, and politician, a prominent figure in the Native American (later just "American") anti-immigrant party (the Know Nothings) and elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1855.¹² He was an editor and publisher at the *New York Sunday Times* (starting in 1844-1845), the *Sunday Morning News* (1847), and *The Republic* magazine (1851), which he founded.

When, in 1834, the twenty-seven-year-old Whitney initially submitted "The Morning Serenade" to the *Mirror*, the editors commented in their "To Correspondents" section (a kind of ongoing chat with readers and contributors about what kinds of writing would and would not work in the paper): "We do like 'The Morning Serenade,' and yet we will not 'put it in the Mirror,' as the writer bids us, unless he will send us other and still better 'tastes of his quality.'"¹³ This comment appeared in the October 4 issue, and the poem appeared in the paper three weeks later. Clearly, Whitney *did* send the editors other samples of his writing after October 4th, which the editors must have liked and so published all three contributions by the end of November. Since the "W." initial clearly is attached to Whitney in these weeks, it is likely that he was the author of the poem and both of the "Olden

Time” pieces. The “piece or two,” then, that young Walt Whitman published in the *Mirror* remain unidentified.¹⁴

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NOTES

- 1 *Specimen Days*, in Whitman, *Prose Works 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York University Press, 1962), 1:287. The piece was published first in the *Camden Courier* (June 1, 1882), then reprinted in the *New York World* (June 11, 1882).
- 2 Walt Whitman, *The Journalism*, Volume 1: 1834-1846, ed. Herbert Bergman, Douglas A. Noverr, and Edward J. Recchia (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), xliii n5.
- 3 *Journalism*, 1:3. The piece appeared in the *Mirror* 12 no. 22 (November 29, 1834), 173.
- 4 See Bergman’s explanation in *Journalism* 1:xliv-xlv.
- 5 Bergman, *Journalism*, 1:487.
- 6 *New-York Mirror* 12 no. 18 (Saturday, November 1, 1834), 141. Jason Stacy, current editor of Whitman’s journalism for the *Walt Whitman Archive* and co-editor, with Douglas Noverr and Zachary Turpin, of the forthcoming *Collected Writings of Walt Whitman: The Journalism* volumes, has pointed out that “The Olden Time” was a continually recurring motif in the *Mirror* in 1834 and 1835, very much like an informal journalistic series with a number of different contributors. Stacy suggests that both “W.” articles appear to be part of that series, with “New-York in the Olden Time” inaugurating it. The “Olden Time” articles thus include: “New-York in the Olden Time” (November 1, 1834), 141, signed “W.”; “New York in the Olden Time—Ancient Dutch Edifices—Corner of Broad and Garden Streets” (November 15, 1834), 153, unsigned; “The Olden Time” (November 29, 1834), 173, signed “W.”; “A Couple of Stray Leaves from the History of the Olden Time” (January 17, 1835), 229, signed “R.V.M.”; “New-York in the Olden Time—Letter from Lawrie Todd—Being Scraps from His Note-Book for 1799” (February 14, 1835), 261, signed “Todd”; “New-York in the Olden Time—To the Editors of the New-York Mirror” (February 21, 1835), 271, signed “John F. Watson”; “Sketches of the Olden Time—Scene at Cato’s, Twenty Odd Years Ago—A Fragment of a Contemplated Novel” (March 28, 1835), 310, signed “William Dunlap.”
- 7 After the Treaty of Westminister (1674) returned the colony of New Netherland to England, Sir Edmund Andros (1637-1714) was appointed Colonial Governor of New York and served from 1674 to 1683.

8 The book had a second impression the same year (London: Dickenson Boys; Boston: George Barton, 1701). The book was then reprinted in New York in 1860 by William Gowans and again in 1902 by Burrows Brothers, edited by Edward Gaylord Bourne. The 1902 edition of the book is available online at the Digital Commons@University of Nebraska-Lincoln (digitalcommons.unl.edu), with an introduction by Paul Royster. The scant biographical information known about Wolley is presented in an afterword by Edward Gaylord Bourne (pp. 48-57), which originally appeared as the introduction to the 1902 edition of the book. Wolley was a graduate of Cambridge University (B.A., 1674; M.A., 1677), became garrison chaplain in New York from 1678 to 1680, as indicated in his “journal,” returned to England and was a minister in Alford, Lincolnshire, then gave up the ministry and, in his retirement, wrote this unfinished memoir of his two years in New York (the reason for its never having been completed is unknown).

9 There were other contributors to the *Mirror* who could have used the “W.” signature. John F. Watson, as indicated in note 8 above, published an article entitled “New-York in the Olden Time—To the Editors of the New-York Mirror” on February 21, 1835, but he signed his full name. And William Dunlap, an established writer at the time, published fiction in the *Mirror*, including a March 28, 1835, piece called “Sketches of the Olden Time—Scene at Cato’s, Twenty Odd Years Ago—A Fragment of a Contemplated Novel,” but, again, he signed the piece with his full name. The abbreviated “W.” would have been more likely to have been used by a younger and unknown contributor, as both Whitman and Whitney were at the time (Whitney was then in his mid-20s). Our thanks to Jason Stacy for pointing out the Watson and Dunlap pieces to us.

10 *New-York Mirror* 12 no. 17 (October 25, 1834), 129.

11 Thomas Richard Whitney, *Evening Hours: A Collection of Poems* (New York: Leavitt, Trow, 1844). The poem appears in the book in a slightly revised version, with the four quatrains compressed into two octaves. *Evening Hours* was reviewed quite positively, probably by Edgar Allan Poe, in the *New York Evening Mirror* (December 21, 1844), 2, where the “Morning Serenade” is singled out as “delightful.” See the online *Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore* website (eapoe.org), under “Poe’s Literary Criticism” (eapoe.org/works/criticism/em441207.htm).

12 For a good overview of Whitney’s life and an in-depth study of his involvement in the Native American party and the nativist fraternity known as the Order of United Americans, see Dale T. Knobel’s “Beyond ‘America for Americans’: Inside the Movement Culture of Antebellum Nativism,” in Timothy Walch, ed., *Immigrant America: European Ethnicity in the U.S.* (New York: Garland, 1994), 7-28. Knobel points out that one of the anomalies in Whitney’s particular brand of nativism was that it focused its disdain almost exclusively on poor foreign immigrants, particularly Catholics, but that Whitney had surprisingly positive things to say about American blacks and about American Indians, whom he believed were truly American and worthy of full citizenship, given their established resi-

dence on American land. These views would coincide with the positive comments about American Indians in the November 1 *Mirror* piece as well as the positive attitude toward “Negro Harry” in the November 29 piece. For a more in-depth examination of the odd marriage between Native American ideology and “Native Americans” (American Indians), see Knobel’s “Know-Nothings and Indians: Strange Bedfellows?” in *Western Historical Quarterly* 15 (April 1984), 175-198.

13 *New-York Mirror* 12 no. 14 (October 4, 1834), 111.

14 Stefan Schöberlein of Marshall University has developed a promising computer method for author-identification and agreed to test the “Olden Time” pieces in relation to Whitman’s other early journalism. While the pieces are too short to produce fully reliable results, Schöberlein reports that nothing in the results he was able to generate point toward Whitman as the author. For a description of Schöberlein’s “stylometric analysis,” see his “Poe or Not Poe? A Stylometric Analysis of Edgar Allan Poe’s Disputed Writings,” *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* 32 no. 3 (2017), 643-659.