

NOTES

WHITMAN, RACE, AND LITERARY HISTORY: A RECENTLY RECOVERED DIALOGUE

A prose manuscript recently rediscovered at Huntington (New York) Public Library and reproduced on the back cover adds to our understanding of Whitman's composition processes and provides new clues about his thinking on the topics of language, literary history, and race.¹ The manuscript is written on a single sheet of peach-colored paper, to which a newspaper clipping is pasted at the upper left. Whitman's writing wraps around the clipping on three sides—above, to the right, and below. Previous publications obscured the manuscript's true import, providing only a "clear-text" reading, with none of Whitman's revisions indicated.² Moreover, neither the text of the clipping pasted to the manuscript nor even its existence has been recorded. Because these details are crucial in fleshing out the intellectual context for this and several related Whitman manuscripts, the double transcription below presents, first, the complete text of the clipping and, second, Whitman's prose draft, complete with cancellations and additions.

GREEKS, ROMANS, AND HEBREWS.—Says an English writer—In the old world, the only two great Gentile nations who have left an impress upon society by means of recorded literature are the Greeks and Romans. These unite with the Hebrews to constitute a triune power, into whose hands was committed the work of civilization before the Christian epoch, and for many years after it; Hebrew, Greek, and Latin are, therefore, the three fountains of literature. The oldest books in the world are in Hebrew, the next oldest in Greek, and the next oldest in Latin. These three languages were posted on the cross at the crucifixion, and they represent the reigning powers of the old world of civilization. Each, however, has a distinct and characteristic mission. They are not all adapted for the same work. The Hebrew is a sublime, poetical language, specifically adapted for lofty ideas, and not at all suited for the common place transactions of life. The Greek is a philosophical language, admirably adapted for metaphysical subtleties, and superior to every other language—modern German, perhaps, excepted—as a vehicle for conducting philosophical investigation. This, then, was the mission of the Greeks. They were commissioned to develop the resources of the human mind in the cultivation of philosophy, and the elegant arts to which it naturally gives birth; a commission which could not be given to the Hebrews without depriving them of their own special mission, as well as of their very peculiar language. The Latin is much less philosophical than the Greek, insomuch that it was for a long time doubted whether it was capable of presenting philosophical ideas in an intelligible form. Before the time of Cicero, those Romans who studied philosophy were obliged, at the same time, to study the Greek language, as modern fashionables study French, in order to acquire the *bon ton* of fashionable life. Cicero, however, made a great and successful effort [t]o accustom the Romans to treat philosophical subjects in [t]heir own language, and after his time the practice became more and more general; but still the Greek was, and is to this day, the sacred fountain of scientific and philosophical expression. If a man of genius invent a new machine, he

borrowed its name from the Greek; if he discover a new chemical substance, none but a Greek name will suffice for it. Even a perfumer, when he makes up a hair dye or tooth powder, must consult a Greek scholar or a Greek lexicon for an appropriate title. Almost all scientific names are Greek. They seem to be intruders and foreigners, if they come from another language. Thus astronomy, astrology, geography, geology, hydrostatics, pneumatics, phrenology, physiology—besides names of scientific instruments, as chronometer, hydrometer, goniometer, &c., are all Greek words; for Greek is sanctified and set apart for science.

We know of no beginning in ^{universal} literature any more than in chronology.— We only what ^{is} first to be mentioned.

~~Although no Egyptian~~

~~book, or trace of any~~

~~book, exists~~

The first literature

to be mentioned is

^{prob} doubtless Assyrian literature and
of Egypt and Hindostan.

~~Egyptian~~ the literature[^]

many, many thousand years since,

Books, histories, poems,

romances, bibles, hymns,

works ~~on~~ illustrative of mechanics,

sciences, [^] arithmetic, humor, government,

war, manners, man-

ufactures, and all the

principal themes of interest to ~~men~~

civilized life and to men and women,

were common ~~empire of H~~ in the great [^] Asiatic cities

of Nineveh and Babylon, and their

~~empi~~ empires, and the empire of Hindostan and in the ^{African} Memphis

and Thebes, and ~~all~~ through Egypt

Cheap copies of these books circulated among the commonalty, [^] or were eligible to them

and Ethiopia.— Vast libraries existed,

~~and~~ there were institutions in which

learning and religion grew together.—

Religion had a deep and proportionate
meaning, the best ^{fitted to} the people and
the times.— Astronomy was understood —
with which no nation can be degraded,
nor any race of learned persons remain
without grand thoughts and poems.

The manuscript provides a number of tantalizing though inconclusive hints as to the date of composition that eventually may be useful in shedding light on the provenance of this and several related manuscripts.³ More important than these clues, however, are the insights it offers into Whitman's compositional practices and his thinking on social issues. Whitman's writings on race have in recent years drawn increasing attention, and most scholars see in them a somewhat paradoxical combination of conservative racial biases and more progressive, inclusive ideas.⁴ In the present manuscript, the dialogue between the newspaper clipping and Whitman's commentary evinces both of these strands in Whitman's thoughts on race. On the one hand, we see a stark contrast between the unidentified English author's claims that the "fountains of literature" and civilization are exclusively Greek, Roman, and Hebrew and Whitman's claim that "all the principal themes of interest to civilized life" were found in the literatures of Assyria, Babylon, "Hindustan," Egypt, and Ethiopia. Also worth noting are the several places where insertions indicate that Whitman was, even as he drafted, consciously trying to broaden the scope of inquiry to include places and cultures that lay outside the restrictive, triangular literary history that the clipping propounds: "Hindustan" is in both of its occurrences added, as are the words "Asiatic" and "African." These latter terms, especially, highlight the discrepancy between the focus on the West in the traditional narrative and Whitman's own inclinations to view literary history in more broadly expansive and inclusive terms. One importance of the clipping, then, is that it provides a context for Whitman's ideas: into its account of the West's cultural monopoly, Whitman reinscribes the literary and cultural contributions of non-European, non-Judeo-Christian people. Of course, Whitman's inclusiveness has at least one significant limitation, too: in this manuscript, as elsewhere, his claims for the cultural equality of non-Western peoples are limited to the far-distant past.⁵

Aspects of Whitman's ideas about language and literature also emerge more clearly when seen in dialogue with the newspaper clipping. For instance, though Whitman does not make explicit claims about the aptness of particular languages for particular forms of literature, his statement that a wide range of literature flourished in a multitude of cultures implicitly contradicts the main argument of the clipping that "each [language] has a distinct and characteristic mission."⁶ Whitman himself clearly believed that languages manifest cultural characteristics, but his response to the clipping takes issue with the suggestion that certain languages are *inherently* or *immutably* suited to particular kinds of thought and expression. Instead, as his comments on religion suggest, meanings are produced in the mutually constructive interactions between culture and language, thereby becoming "fitted to the people and the times."

Whitman's comments also call into question the grounds upon which the narrative of literary history is founded. While the clipping takes as its purview "recorded literature," Whitman emphasizes the evidence for extensive literatures that have been lost, and he intimates, in his first sentence, that beyond these surely lie other literary cultures of which we have no record at all. His approach thereby substitutes for the tidy and certain history of the clipping a more suggestive and profoundly uncertain account.

Ultimately, perhaps, the most important message that the rediscovery of this manuscript delivers is one that has been stated a number of times by others but is worth reiterating: even after the massive efforts of the editors of the New York University Press edition, much work remains to be done with Whitman's manuscript materials. As Charles B. Green noted in 1998 about the six-volume *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, "Edward Grier may have been premature in pronouncing the project 'complete.'"⁷ As manuscript materials continue to come to light, the limitations of that edition are multiplied. At the same time, our abilities to contextualize the materials expand, and the need to make meaningful connections—both among various manuscripts and between manuscripts and the broader culture—increases.⁸

University of Nebraska, Lincoln

BRETT BARNEY

NOTES

1 Permission to include typographic and photographic reproductions of this manuscript is courtesy Walt Whitman Collection, Huntington Public Library, Huntington, New York. I am very grateful to Alice Lepore, Assistant Director, for her patience and precision in answering questions and providing scans and photocopies. The existence of the manuscript was brought to light through the efforts of the *Walt Whitman Archive* to collect information on all of Whitman's poetry manuscripts. I wish to thank in particular Kenneth M. Price for calling the manuscript to my attention and for his generous assistance in the preparation of this article.

2 The manuscript was twice printed by Richard Maurice Bucke, first in *Notes and Fragments Left By Walt Whitman* (London, Ontario, 1899), 102, and again in *The Collected Writing of Walt Whitman* (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1902), 9:105-106. Edward F. Grier's printing in *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 5:1566 [hereafter abbreviated *NUPM*] is based on Bucke's printings, since Grier was unable to locate the original.

3 I have been unable to locate the source of the clipping, although the phrase "Says an English writer" and the typography suggest it is taken from an American newspaper. I have also been unsuccessful in identifying the author or work whose ideas the clipping paraphrases. Though not definitive, various bits of evidence do support Grier's unexplained assertion that "this was probably written between 1855 and 1860"; in fact, most indications would point to a narrower range of dates, between 1856 and 1858. For one thing, the paper Whitman used seems to be an extra sheet of the wrappers for the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. If indeed this is the case, then the manuscript can be no earlier than mid-1855, though the clipping of course could date from several years earlier. In the catalogue of the auction at which it was sold in 1936, the manuscript is listed as item #24: "BEGINNING OF LITERATURE. 1856," though dates given are admittedly "only approximate" (see *Manuscripts, Autograph Letters First Editions and Portraits of Walt Whitman* [New York: American Art Association Anderson Galleries, 1936],

"Prefatory Note" and p. 12). A manuscript on similar paper, now in the Trent Collection at Duke University, contains Whitman's notes on Bunsen's *Outlines of the Philosophy of Universal History*, published in 1854 (see Floyd Stovall, *The Foreground of Leaves of Grass* [Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1974], 164-165). Beyond the similarity of paper, the two manuscripts also share a common subject matter—ancient literary history. A section of the notebook "Words," now at the Library of Congress, is also made up of these pink sheets and contains a collection of notes on linguistics drawn from several sources, Bunsen among them. Several of the entries in this section of the notebook deal with the antiquity of various languages and their "fitness" to particular modes of thought and expression, ideas central to the manuscript at hand. In addition to these, a number of other manuscripts thought to date from this period, though written on different paper, display affinities of phrasing and thought (see especially "Taking En-Masse," "Spring of '59," "Immortality Was Realized," and "The Most Immense Part" in *NUPM*; 4:1562, 5:1861-1863, 5:1922-1923, and 5:1924-1926, respectively). Even though the clipping cannot be dated, the fact that the manuscript contains a clipping could itself be significant: Stovall's analysis of Whitman's clippings (143-146) suggests that the bulk of the newspaper clippings come from the period 1856-1858.

4 See, for example, Leadie M. Clark, *Walt Whitman's Concept of the American Common Man* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955); Kenneth M. Price, "Whitman's Solutions to the 'The Problem of the Blacks'" (*Resources for American Literary Study* 15 [1985], 205-208); Geoffrey Sill, "Whitman on 'The Black Question': A New Manuscript" (*Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 8:3/4 [1991], 69-75); Martin Klammer, *Whitman, Slavery, and the Emergence of "Leaves of Grass"* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995); Luke Mancuso, *The Strange Sad War Revolving: Walt Whitman, Reconstruction, and the Emergence of Black Citizenship, 1865-1876* (Columbia, S.C.: Camden House, 1977); and Ed Folsom, "Lucifer and Ethiopia: Whitman, Race, and Poetics before the Civil War and After," *A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman*, ed. David Reynolds (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 45-95.

5 Folsom's "Lucifer and Ethiopia" (59-68) provides an excellent discussion of how historical distancing, in this case of Ethiopia, effectively insulated Whitman's confidence in American ascendancy.

6 The present manuscript therefore suggests that James Perrin Warren's argument that Whitman considered Indo-European languages to be the pinnacle of linguistic evolution may need revising (see *Walt Whitman's Language Experiment* [University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990], 24-26). It also provides further proof for Ed Folsom's statement that Whitman believed "that language found its source in cultural acts and cultural facts, not in some 'natural' realm" (see *Native Representations* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994], 1).

7 "Missing Me One Place Search Another": Three Previously Unpublished Walt Whitman Notebooks," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 15 (Spring 1998), 149.

8 My work in preparing this article has brought home to me the work of synthesizing that remains to be done with Whitman's manuscripts. In addition to the several manuscripts mentioned in the note above, two others have strong material and/or notional affinities and deserve special note. The first is Whitman's annotation on an article clipped from the *North British Review* of August 1849, headed "The Slavonians and Eastern Europe." Next to a passage claiming that the "Caucasian variety" has been mostly responsible for "the destinies of the species," Whitman wrote, "Yes, of late centuries, but how about those of 5 or 10 or twenty thousand years ago?" For brief discussions of this manuscript, see the note by editors Dennis Berthold and Kenneth M. Price in *Dear Brother Walt: The Letters of Thomas Jefferson Whitman* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1984), 92, n.6; and Gay Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer* (New York: New

York University Press, 1967), 122. The second manuscript is "Assyria & Egypt" in *NUPM*, 5:1927-1928, which contains notes headed "Greeks," "Romans," "?India," and "Hebrews." The notes closely parallel the ideas put forth in the newspaper clipping on the current manuscript, suggesting that Whitman was paraphrasing ideas he didn't share. Such cases should serve as a caution against assuming that Whitman's notes always express his own earnest beliefs.

JOHN BUTLER YEATS AND JACK B. YEATS ON WHITMAN

From time to time, some new bit of information turns up that sheds light on those annual Whitman dinners organized to honor the poet's birth. Of those that took place during Whitman's lifetime we have a good knowledge, largely owing to the sterling efforts of Horace Traubel, but of those that occurred in the early years of the twentieth century we are still discovering bits and pieces, some of which lead to unsuspected treasures. One such piece can be found in *Letters to W. B. Yeats* where, in a letter from William Butler Yeats's father John Butler Yeats (1839-1922) written from New York on May 27, 1913, we learn that John Butler Yeats would not only attend that year's Whitman dinner but would make a speech. The latter privilege he deemed "a mixed joy" since he viewed the attendees as "people the most remote from art and literature," and as "all mad—in an amicable sort of way." But if "a fire-brand" were thrown among them "in the shape of a blood-and-thunder speech," he claimed, their amicability vanished. Further, he believed they suffered from "the same lunacy" in their literal interpretation of Whitman's writings as was manifested in earlier readings of the Bible.¹ While no record of his speech exists, it is possible to gain some idea of its general import and to imagine the effect of Yeats's characteristically straightforward, "pull-no-punches" style of delivery on the assembled Whitmanites.

John Butler Yeats was an artist of considerable reputation in his native Ireland when he came to New York in 1907, largely at the urging of John Quinn, who functioned as patron and friend to many artists of the time. Quinn (1870 -1924), born in Ohio, led a fascinating life: he was assistant to the secretary of the U.S. Treasury before joining (on the strength of his Harvard law degree) a prestigious New York law firm in 1900. His interests were art, literature (he was a great friend to Ezra Pound and James Joyce), and all things Irish. He developed a passion for paintings, among others those of John Butler Yeats, from whom he commissioned portraits of prominent Irish figures.² Quinn's correspondence with the artist lasted for years, widening to include William Butler Yeats, and Quinn helped both father and son further their careers in America. When John Butler Yeats came to New York, Quinn, very much a man about town, saw to it that the painter met everyone he would have liked. Among these was John Burroughs, who attended a lunch at the Players Club, where Quinn and Yeats were feted.³ In the days following the lunch, Yeats remarked to others that people regarded Burroughs as another Walt Whitman. With Quinn to introduce him, Yeats, a voluble and witty man, soon became known in New York as much for his skills as an after-dinner speaker as for his paintings. It was not long before he was also writing essays for magazines.