

being a mere clerk, & of low grade— & our office is in confusion—the Attorney General having yesterday resigned his place—.”¹²

Little more than a week earlier Whitman had used his personal influence (as well as office if the Attorney General's letterhead carried authority)—then denied he had any influence or office to use. That the Attorney General, Henry Stanbery, resigned on March 11 to serve as one of President Johnson's counsels during his impeachment proceedings and left the office in confusion provided Walt an excuse that was convenient since it further released him from the favor he had just performed for Dr. Bowen.

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NOTES

- 1 Letter from Dr. Charles H. Bowen to Charles H. Crane, M.D., Surgeon General U.S. Army, dated June 14, 1883 [located in the Volunteer Staff Officers File (Union Army) in the Military Service Records of the National Archives in Washington, D.C.].
- 2 Acting Assistant Surgeons were usually “contract” surgeons who held no commission but worked under contract for a term of enlistment at each hospital for the salary of \$80–\$100 per month, equivalent to the pay of a first lieutenant or captain.
- 3 Volunteer Staff Officers File (Union Army).
- 4 *Walt Whitman: The Correspondence*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1961–69), 1:331.
- 5 An entry in Whitman's address book, located in the Library of Congress.
- 6 See *The Complete Writings of Walt Whitman*, ed. Richard Maurice Bucke, Thomas B. Harned, and Horace L. Traubel (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1902), VIII, 40–41n.
- 7 The letter is located in the Thomson-Kinney Collection (Archives RG 69:3, Autograph Album No. 1) at the Connecticut State Library in Hartford, Connecticut. It is printed here by permission of the Connecticut State Library Archives.
- 8 Volunteer Staff Officers File (Union Army).
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Correspondence*, 2:23.

WHITMAN AND SPENSER'S “E.K.”

Rather than evoking censure, Whitman's laudatory reviews of his own poetry have in our time generally enjoyed their readers' good-humored indulgence. For his admirers no justification of the reviews is necessary, while those less patient

with Whitman's self-congratulatory ways simply dismiss them as puffery. Some years after, however, Whitman felt called upon to defend himself for engaging in what he tried to present as a well-established literary practice. That defense, brief and unyielding, consisted simply of a reminder that "Leigh Hung criticised his own poems. Spenser criticised himself."¹

In the second half of that defense Whitman was echoing a commonly held theory in his century concerning the identity of the commentator known only as "E.K." who not only commented on but praised Edmund Spenser's first published work, *The Shepheard's Calendar*. Through the medium of his own notebooks it is possible to share the moment when Whitman seems to have taken as inspiration what he chose to believe was true, that Spenser and "E.K." were one and the same.

During the late 1840s and the early 1850s Whitman kept notebooks into which he studiously inserted literary selections, articles, and his own notes. For a time he was interested in the English poets, among them Edmund Spenser. His interest may have been sparked initially by the publication in 1847 of Caroline Kirkland's *Spenser and the Faery Queen*. His notebook summary of Book I of the epic reads enough like Mrs. Kirkland's redaction to lend support to the claim that Whitman knew her work.² Possibly he had attempted to read *The Faerie Queene* and had found it rather slow going. In the margin of an article on Spenser that he inserted into his notebook there is a handwritten note of approval—"Brava!"—next to a quotation from Macaulay that claims "the fault of tediousness . . . pervades the whole of the Fairy Queen."³ Spenser's "Hymn to Heavenly Beauty" had greater appeal it seems, and was pasted into the notebook.⁴

For the facts of Spenser's life Whitman gleaned some information from an anthology, *Half-Hours With the Best Authors*, and from an old article that he had saved. Titled "America and the Early English Poets," the article appeared in *The United States Democratic Review* for May 1839. The anonymous author, who may have been responding to the publication in that year of the first American edition of Spenser's works, looked to the poetry of the reign of Elizabeth and of James I for evidence of "the state of the public mind in England, in reference to the early settlement of America." Elizabeth, for whom the Virginia colony was named, is spoken of as a blend of "all that is humiliating in personal vanity with all that is great and ennobling in public spirit," and Edmund Spenser is said to have laid "that great masterpiece of fancy and invention, the Fairy Queen . . . at the feet of his great patroness and friend."⁵

The article is unmarked, but to his notebook outline of biographical facts on Spenser, taken largely from *Half-Hours*, Whitman adds: "Wrote adulatory verses on Queen Elizabeth—Great Gloriana." Then, indicating that the impression gained from his reading was not a favorable one, he comments, "He [Spenser] danced attendance like a lackey for a long time at court, but without luck."⁶

A concluding comment in the notes is of special interest, however, in light of the three highly commendatory reviews of his *Leaves of Grass* Whitman wrote a few years later. Referring to the editorial commentator on *The Shepheard's Calendar*, Whitman says, adding his own emphasis: "The 'E.K.' often mentioned by Spenser is supposed to have been *himself*—'E.K.' has much to say of Spenser's Writings—commends them."⁷

If Whitman's poetic style cannot be shown to have profited from his rather

cursory study of Spenser's work, it may be that in this brief note we have the evidence of another kind of influence, one that provided for him a justification for his own dancing attendance at the court of public acclaim.

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NOTES

- 1 Walt Whitman, *The Complete Writings of Walt Whitman*, ed. Richard M. Bucke, Thomas B. Harned, and Horace L. Traubel (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1902), 9:119.
- 2 See Emory Holloway, ed., *Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1921), 1:128n. A search of Whitman's reviews during his tenure as editor of *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* has failed to substantiate Holloway's claim that Whitman reviewed the book.
- 3 Floyd Stovall, *The Foreground of Leaves of Grass* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1974), p. 234.
- 4 *The Complete Writings of Walt Whitman*, 10:83, No. 310.
- 5 "America and the Early English Poets," *The United States Democratic Review*, V (May 1839), p. 469.
- 6 *The Complete Writings of Walt Whitman*, 9:77.
- 7 *Ibid.*

RICHARD SELZER: POET OF THE BODY AND POET OF THE SOUL

Rarely has the spirit of Whitman breathed so freely as it does through the recent writings of poet-physician Richard Selzer.¹ Selzer never invokes Whitman's name, but his presence is felt everywhere: in Selzer's quest for the "exact location of the soul," in his "Pages from a Wound-Dresser's Diary," in his robust reverence of the body ("I love the solid heft of men as much as I adore the heated capaciousness of women"), and in phrases casually dropped here and there ("Out of this pelvis, endlessly rocking, drops man").

Whitman himself was not one to shrink from disease, peering deeply, intently at the rheumatic, the consumptive, the insane, the wounded:

I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I
myself become the wounded person,
My heart turns livid as I lean on a cane and observe.²

Dr. Selzer, too, is ever observing. "I spy on my patients," he writes in "The Discus Thrower." "Ought not a doctor to observe his patient by any means and from any stance? So I stand in the doorways of hospital rooms and gaze."³ It is Dr. Selzer's penetrating eye which most draws us—probing the inner secrets of the body, gazing