

## NOTES

### THE TEXT OF A WHITMAN LINCOLN LECTURE READING: ANACREON'S "THE MIDNIGHT VISITOR"

From 1879 to 1890 Whitman gave five lectures on Lincoln.<sup>1</sup> He usually followed these lectures with other readings. Six were from *Leaves of Grass*, among them "The Whale Chase," a section of "A Song of Joys," and "O Captain, My Captain!" Other Lincoln lecture readings included Poe's "The Raven," several selections from William Collins, and Thomas Moore's translation of Anacreon's "Ode XXXIII," which Whitman titled "The Midnight Visitor."<sup>2</sup>

Whitman's manuscript for lines 1-20 of "The Midnight Visitor" has been preserved. It is on permanent display at the Walt Whitman House, 330 Mickle Street, Camden, New Jersey. This rare holograph permits the examination of a little-known favorite of Whitman's associated with the celebrated Lincoln lectures. If Whitman had copied out verbatim the Moore translation the manuscript would simply be an interesting curiosity. But throughout his career Whitman had not only been a compulsive revisor of his own poetry, he regularly revised the poetry of others as well. A comparison of the manuscript and the galley proof set from it with Moore's translation would support Furness's general observation that "He seems to have edited rather heavily most of the poems [by others] which he read in public" (p. 205). He made substantive alterations in seventeen of the thirty lines found in the manuscript and galley proof of this forty-eight line poem.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, he departed from Moore's format by marking separate stanzas and made alterations in tense, capitalization, and punctuation. In his attempt to improve the rhythm of the poem, he tightened phrasing and often substituted specific images for general ones.

With its heavy sentimentality and simplistic rhyme scheme, "The Midnight Visitor" would appear to be an odd choice for a public reading by the author of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman's emphasis during most of his career was on realistic subject matter couched in forthright colloquial diction. But then Whitman's tastes in poetry were eclectic.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, at this point in his career Whitman was quite aware of the notoriety of his public image as the author of *Leaves of Grass*, and perhaps he felt that a poem of this sort, among the others he read at the Lincoln lectures, might quietly help to blur that image by appealing to an audience whose conventional tastes in poetry ran to the sentimental and dramatically benign.

"The Midnight Visitor" holograph, 8" x 7<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>", on white paper, probably dates from the initial 1879 Lincoln lecture. It was carefully copied out in black ink, with one minor revision, apparently from an intermediate, revised draft of Moore's translation. In pencil he added the title, along with instructions to the printer to "follow copy in punctuation &c." He also marked the holograph leaf for separate stanzas, which do not appear in the translation. There is no record that Whitman had published this reworked Anacreon poem. Whitman, a former printer, here followed his lifelong habit of having his poems set in galley proof, both for convenience and visual effect.<sup>5</sup> The galley proof contains yet other revisions in Whitman's hand and follows the manuscript without change.

A fair copy of lines 1–20 of Whitman’s manuscript for “A Midnight Visitor” is followed below by lines 21–30 of the galley proof. Given its substantive departures from Moore’s text, the galley proof apparently was set from the now missing manuscript printer’s copy for the remainder of the poem. Alterations in Whitman’s hand in the galley proof follow. This in turn is followed by a list of substantive differences from Whitman’s manuscript and galley proof in Moore’s text, lines 1–30, in *Odes of Anacreon Translated into English Verse . . . by Thomas Moore . . .* (New-York: Printed and Published by D. Longworth, at the Shakspeare-Gallery, 1805), 1:59–61. A second galley proof containing the resolution of the poem in lines 31–48 is missing. To fill the gap, the text of lines 31–48 from Moore’s text is appended.

Alterations in punctuation, capitalization, and the like, are not noticed unless they occur in a line with substantive variants. However, alterations in tense are noted.

*Whitman’s manuscript:*

*The Midnight Visitor  
From Anacreon*

T’was noon of night, when round the Pole,  
The sullen Bear is seen to roll,  
And mortals wearied with the day,  
Are slumbering all their cares away;  
5 An infant, at that dreary hour,  
Came weeping to my silent bower,  
And waked me with a piteous prayer  
To save him from the chill wet air.  
“And who art thou,” I, starting, cry,  
10 “That mak’st my blissful dreams to fly?”  
“O gentle sir,” the young one said,  
“In pity take me in<sup>6</sup> thy shed;  
Nor fear deceit—A lonely child,  
Faint, lost, I wander o’er the wild,  
15 Numb with the rain, while not a ray  
Illumes the drear and unknown way.”  
I hear the baby’s tale of woe,  
While sharp the bitter night-winds blow,  
And eager to relieve his fate  
20 Trimming my lamp, I ope the gate.

*Text of galley proof, ll. 21–30:*

The LOVE—the little mystic sprite!  
His pinions sparkle through the night!  
I know him by his bow and dart,  
I know him by his fluttering heart;  
25 I take him in, and quickly raise  
The smouldering embers’ cheery blaze,  
Press from his dank, his clotted hair,  
The crystals of the freezing air,  
And to my inner body hold  
30 His little fingers stiff and cold.

*Galley proof alterations in Whitman's hand:*<sup>7</sup>

3 [And] «When» mortals  
11-12 ["O gentle sir," the young one said, / "In pity take me in they shed;] «"O Sir" with tear-  
ful voice and thin / The young one said, "O take me in"»  
16 [and] «the» unknown  
17 the «little» baby's  
21 [The] «Tis» LOVE

*Moore's text, Anacreon's "Ode XXXIII," ll. 1-30:*

8 from the midnight air!  
9 thou," I waking cry,  
10 "That bidest my blissful visions fly?"  
11 gentle sire!" the infant said,  
14 "I wander o'er the gloomy wild.  
15 "Chill drops the rain, and not  
16 drear and misty way!"  
18 I hear the bitter night winds blow;  
19 And sighing for his piteous fate,  
20 I trimmed my lamp and oped the gate.  
21 'Twas love! the little wandering sprite!  
22 pinion sparkled  
23 knew him  
24 knew him  
25 and fondly raise  
26 The dying embers' cheering blaze;  
27 his dank and clinging hair  
29 And in my hand and bosom hold  
30 fingers thrilling cold.

*Moore's text, remainder of poem, ll. 31-47:*

And now the embers' genial ray  
Had warmed his anxious fears away;  
"I pray thee," said the wanton child,  
My bosom trembled as he smiled,  
"I pray thee let me try my bow,  
"For through the rain I've wandered so,  
"That much I fear, the ceaseless shower  
"Has injured its elastic power."  
The fatal bow the urchin drew;  
Swift from the string the arrow flew;  
Oh! swift it flew as glancing flame,  
And to my very soul it came!  
"Fare thee well," I heard him say,  
As laughing wild he winged away;  
"Fare thee well, for now I know  
"The rain has not relaxed my bow;  
"It still can send a maddening dart,  
"As thou shall own with all thy heart!"

## NOTES

1 Gay Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer* (1955; rev. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); New York, 1879, 1887, pp. 483–484, 525; Boston, 1881, pp. 491–492; Philadelphia, 1886, 1890, pp. 524, 535. For the Lincoln lecture, see *Memoranda During the War [ & ] Death of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy Basler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), 1–14.

2 The complete list of poems in Whitman's Lincoln lecture "Reading Book," with brief commentary by Clifton J. Furness, ed., *Walt Whitman's Workshop* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928), 204–206, is especially valuable because the contents of the "Reading Book" later disappeared. (See the "Brochure for Notebooks Missing from the Harned Collection of Walt Whitman Papers [in the Library of Congress]," 2 pp., Container no. 7.) Photostats of several of the missing items were recovered from scholars who had used these materials in the Whitman-Harned Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. The photostats include a fragment titled "The truce," a marbled cover with the label "Whitman's Reading Book," and "The Midnight Visitor" galley proof, in the "Reading Book" Folder, no. 111, #3402, Container no. 6. For the text of "The truce" see Edward F. Grier, ed., *Walt Whitman: Notebook and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 3:1054.

A galley proof, with minor revisions, containing two other Lincoln lecture poems, was preserved in another part of the Harned Collection. One was Burns's "John Anderson My Jo" and the second another poem titled "The Midnight Visitor," an English translation of Henri Murger's "La Ballade du Désespéré" (Furness, 205, 43n). *A Catalog Based Upon the Collections of the Library of Congress*, compiled by Harold W. Blodgett and Henry J. Dubester (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1955), 303, lists only one of the two "The Midnight Visitor" galley proofs, the Murger translation.

3 Whitman had inserted a printer's sign for additional spacing at the foot of the manuscript leaf; one may presume additional (unlocated) manuscript leaves for ll. 21–48.

For courtesies in connection with this paper and permission to cite and reproduce "The Midnight Visitor" manuscript, I am grateful to Geoffrey M. Sill and Eleanor Ray, Curator of the Whitman House, Camden.

4 For example, on the letterhead of the Attorney General's Office, Washington, D.C., Whitman had written out yet another heavily sentimental poem, with the same sort of simple rhyme scheme, "I'll Trace This Garden," apparently for his own amusement. A far different kind of poem, Emerson's "Brahma," also appears in his hand. He had served in the Attorney General's Office from 1865 to 1873. See my "A Note on a Non-Whitman Attribution," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 2 (Winter 1984), 27–28.

5 See, e.g., Furness, 248–249, 30n.

6 Replaced the cancelled "to".

7 Whitman's deletions are enclosed within square brackets; his additions within angle brackets.