

Bohemian Bureaucrat

Making Sense of Walt Whitman's Scribal Documents

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ABSTRACT

The essay presented here served as the presidential address at the Society for Textual Scholarship conference held at the University of Maryland, College Park, June 1, 2017. It considers the implications for editing and criticism of Walt Whitman of the fairly recent discovery of approximately 3,000 documents in his handwriting produced when he was clerk in the Attorney General's Office. For the most part, I have retained the tone and relative informality of a spoken presentation; I have also retained references to topical events.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I WAS FORTUNATE TO BE ABLE TO ANNOUNCE the discovery of 3,000 previously unidentified documents inscribed by the hand of Walt Whitman. These documents, from his time as a clerk in the Attorney General's office, treat everything from routine office requests to disputes over the railroads claiming western lands; conflicts with Native Americans; plural marriage in the Utah territory; controversies over the disenfranchisement of people who had taken up arms against the federal government; the rise of the Ku Klux Klan; black voting rights; international incidents, and much else. I didn't know what people would make of these documents. The documents themselves were not a discovery: they were known records housed right where they should have been in the historical files of the Department of Justice, a governmental unit still much in the news. The breakthrough was in the recognition of the handwriting. The size of the discovery was also remarkable, but did the content have much significance? The words were associated with Whitman because of his handwriting, but were they his thoughts and ideas, were they *his* in any meaningful way? The story of the discovery was covered in outlets from Australia to Azerbaijan, from Cuba to India, underlining Whitman's international stature, but it didn't probe these thornier issues. I suspect that the scribal documents appealed to journalists because they highlighted something odd: Whitman, widely known as a free thinker, a sex radical, a bohe-

mian, was a bureaucrat. In contrast to the immediate outpouring of news stories, the critical response has been muted, with little being done thus far by critics and biographers with this discovery. I want to reflect on the editorial and critical challenges caused by the inseparability of Whitman the copyist and Whitman the creator. These documents are also thought provoking for our work as scholars, as textual editors, as organizers and transmitters of information, and as people interested in the complex interplay of government and the arts.

How did Whitman end up inscribing so many government documents? After years of living in New York, the poet hurried to Fredericksburg, Virginia, in December 1862 when he learned that his brother George had been wounded in the Civil War. Once assured that his brother was not badly hurt, he helped wounded soldiers travel to Washington hospitals for treatment. He found it rewarding to help hungry, cold, and suffering men: accordingly, he spent the remainder of the war as an attentive visitor to thousands of northern and southern soldiers in dozens of Washington hospitals. Having unexpectedly moved to the capital, he needed to support himself and his hospital work where he supplied soldiers with food, money, stationery, tobacco, and love. Fortunately, he found low-level government jobs working as a clerk, first in the Army Paymaster's office, then in the Bureau of Indian affairs, and finally in the Attorney General's Office from 1865–1873.

I have looked for traces of Whitman in all of these offices, though it is only in the records of the Attorney General's Office that I've been able to find any papers in Whitman's handwriting. Elsewhere I've encountered another type of scribal document, letters written by Whitman as a private citizen on behalf of soldiers who could not write for themselves for one reason or another—often, illiteracy, injury, or exhaustion. For example, he inscribed a love letter for an illiterate soldier, Nelson Jabo, to his wife, a year before Jabo died from Civil War wounds (PRICE and BUDELL 2012, 38). He also served as the scribe—and perhaps proxy author?—for a soldier who wished for “an officer's position in one of the Colored Regiments now forming in the District of Columbia” (FRAYER). Taken together, these letters for soldiers and for the Attorney General, precisely because they are *not* what literary editors ordinarily treat, can be illuminating about our work as textual scholars. They put pressure on our methods and assumptions about authorship. They prompt questions about what we include and why. Where should we place the borders of an edition and where of a digital archive? When we attempt to edit the complete writings of an author or attempt a comprehensive archive, just how literally comprehensive do we mean to

be? Do we wish to treat all that was written or all that was authored? And are the distinctions between authorial and non-authorial always clear and vital?

As editors at the *Walt Whitman Archive*, in confronting the government documents, we needed to make choices. Should we treat this previously unknown material, or should we treat his more famous writings? Time is always limited, so we had to prioritize something. We concluded that Whitman's published poetry and prose was widely available in various editions, some with good annotations, so we altered our work plan in order to transcribe the newly identified documents and to publish them with accompanying digital images. We didn't annotate the documents—that is a huge task that remains to be done—but we wanted to share with others at the earliest possible time a new resource rather than keep it under wraps. We concluded that our treatment of known material would add only incrementally to knowledge and thus was less consequential than presenting previously unknown Whitman-associated documents.

The government documents make it impossible to avoid the question of authorship. It is unclear in any particular instance if the poet served as author or copyist or both. Fortunately, we do know something about how the office worked: Whitman explained to his late-in-life Boswellian friend Horace Traubel that he had been “put in charge of the Attorney General's letters”. He further explained that “cases were put into my hands—small cases: the Attorney General could not attend to them all so passed some of them over to me to examine, report upon, sum up” (TRAUBEL vol. 3, 156). Another remark made by Whitman about Henry Stanbery is revealing. Stanbery was the attorney general under President Andrew Johnson, before stepping down in order to defend Johnson during his impeachment. “I was the Attorney General's clerk there”, he said, “and did a good deal of writing. [Stanbery] seemed to like my opinions, judgment. So a good part of my work was to spare *him* work—to go over the correspondence,—give him the juice, substance of affairs—avoiding all else” (TRAUBEL vol. 6, 147). Evidently, Whitman's intellect and judgement were valued and his writing abilities recognized. It is not at all hard to imagine that he would, in attempting to “spare . . . work” for others, draft some letters or at least co-conceive them. That is to say, it is unlikely he was a Bartleby, a mere copyist, on all of these documents. However, even if we were to assume the absolute least about his involvement with their creation, we know that they all passed through his mind and his fingertips, thus raising for interpreters of Whitman the complicated question of how to supply the dots connecting these documents and what he expressed in his own voice in

his mid-career poetry and prose works such as “Democratic Vistas”. With the government documents, no matter what we assume about his degree of authorial involvement, he was giving voice to the policies of the Attorney General’s office, policies that might or might not align with his personally held opinions.

On first consideration, one might conclude that there is a sharp distinction between Whitman’s writing here as a clerk in an overtly collaborative work environment and his solitary creative efforts. However, the distinction between collaborative and independent work is hardly as clear as might be thought. I would argue that the monumental twentieth century edition, *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman*, despite all its great accomplishments, ultimately distorted the nature of Whitman as a writer through its insistent focus on the solitary creator and its search for the authoritative text. In his non-governmental role as a writer, Whitman was regularly collaborative and often anonymous: in his correspondence, interviews, journalism, marginalia, and in his unacknowledged contributions to criticism of himself, in reviews, articles, and books, we see repeated collaborative efforts. Even his plagiarism, or if you prefer, his artful reworking of everything from scientific treatises to newspaper stories in the service of “found poetry”, can be seen as multi-authored efforts (SCHÖBERLEIN 2012, 57–77; BARRETT 1999, 6–17). In addition, he was a book maker in every sense of the word, and thus highly conscious of the importance of printers and designers. He collaborated with printers sometimes to achieve startling effects, as with the sexually suggestive lettering of the title of page of *Leaves of Grass* in 1860 (FOLSOM, “A Spirt” 2010, 585–600). In short, a tight focus on Whitman as a solitary creator serves more to distort than to clarify. The government documents are a dramatic illustration of the limitations we inherit if we adhere too tightly to a single-author model of editing. Not only does a single-author approach leave us without a useful way of thinking about or valuing these documents — a lack that may help to account for the reticence of critics in relation to them — but it also may conceal overlaps between Whitman’s government inscription and his literary production. Too much preoccupation with a single-author model may reinforce artificial boundaries between “literature” and “government bureaucracy” that have made it difficult for insights from each to penetrate the world of the other to this day.

Until recently scholars didn’t think of Whitman’s work as emerging from a network, though the efforts of Ed Whitley and others at the Vault at Pfaff’s have begun to change this (WHITLEY 2017, 287–306). Those studying the bohemians at Pfaff’s beer hall in New York have shown that Whit-

man during a key period of his career in the late 1850s and early 1860s, was indebted for ideas, publicity, and comradeship to writers that included Henry Clapp, Ada Clare, William Winter, Edmund Clarence Stedman and a host of others. What hasn't been appreciated by critics and biographers is that when Whitman moved from New York to Washington, he developed a new network made up of clerks and other government workers. This new network of sustaining friends and intellectual companions included William Douglas O'Connor, author of *The Good Gray Poet*, and the naturalist John Burroughs, who wrote numerous studies of Whitman. The long list of federal employees in his Washington network included Julius Bing, Joseph Marvin, and Charles Eldridge, to name a few. All of these people, like his earlier bohemian friends, were or had been writers, editors, or publishers. They suggested topics for poems to him while other federal workers provided statistical and demographic information undergirding his writings.

It is no doubt because of the rich exchanges Whitman had with those in his Washington network that he often spoke favorably about his work in the Attorney General's office, a result that could not have been foreseen in light of his earlier comments. In 1856, in an article published in *Life Illustrated*, he had spoken disparagingly about clerks:

—a slender and round-shouldered generation . . . trig and prim . . . [with] hair all soaked and “slickery” with sickening oils. Creatures of smart appearance, when dressed up; . . . how ridiculously would their natty demeanor appear if suddenly they could all be stript naked! (“Broadway”, 116).

Prior to actually becoming a clerk himself Whitman held in contempt fop-pish clerks befouled in perfume and hair oils. At the time of the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, he thought clerks were beyond the pale. In number 13 of “Chants Democratic” he declared: “There shall be no subject but it shall be treated with reference to the ensemble of the world, and the compact truth of the world—And no coward or copyist shall be allowed” (WHITMAN, *Leaves* [1860], 185).

And yet a clerk is what he became. As a clerk, Whitman found himself acting as an amanuensis. Given Whitman's pride and self-celebration, it is intriguing to think about him in this role. The word amanuensis has its roots in two different structures of authority, one embodied, one textual: slavery and signatures. In ancient Rome, the word amanuensis applied to a slave within hand's reach, acting on any command; subsequently, it became applied to a trusted servant, typically a freedman, acting as a personal sec-

retary. The word can also refer to someone who signs a document on behalf of an authority. In his poetry, Whitman's protean sense of self briefly inhabits a slave's identity in "Song of Myself" and does the same more effectively in the draft manuscripts of "The Sleepers". Late in life, when describing his hospital work to Horace Traubel, Whitman also thought in terms of slavery and servitude, male-male attachment, and the very roots of *Leaves of Grass*: "What did I get? Well—I got the boys, for one thing. . . . I gave myself for them: myself: I got the boys: then I got *Leaves of Grass*". His hospital work became his "lodestar", his "religion". It was his "master", and it "seized upon me, made me its servant, slave" (TRAUBEL vol. 3, 581–82). This remark engages in a certain amount of retroactive mythmaking since Whitman wrote three editions of *Leaves of Grass* before his visits to Civil War hospitals began. Nonetheless, he underscores a connection between amanuensis work and *Leaves of Grass*, between bodies and writing, between submission and authority, that always existed for him but at no time more dramatically than when Whitman the scrivener worked in Washington offices.

As a clerk, was Whitman tamed, muted, constrained by the government, with the self-described poet of democracy kneeling, paradoxically, within a hierarchical order? Many documents Whitman inscribed close with a ritualistic and obsequious declaration: "your obedient servant". This was a convention, of course, but inscribing such a closing repeatedly must have had some effect on the inscriber. Even if Whitman the scribe told himself he wasn't speaking for himself, it is doubtful he could keep his roles as poet of democracy and dutiful clerk so compartmentalized as to prevent seepage. A remarkably decorous language appears in Whitman's letter to John Binckley, Assistant Attorney General, when the poet chose not to seek the position of Pardon clerk. Speaking for himself rather than as an employee, Whitman writes:

In reference to the brief conversation between us a few days since, allow me in candor to say, that I should decidedly prefer to retain my present post as Record Clerk, the duties of which I feel that I can fulfil properly—& that I would therefore, as far as my personal choice is concerned, wish to be not thought of in view of the pardon clerkship.

Only in case of urgent wish on your or [the Attorney General's] part, would I deem it my duty to waive the preference mentioned, & obey your commands. (*Correspondence 2:24–25*)

This can be seen as ordinary employee-employer correspondence. But it is also fascinating as written by a poet proud of his democratic standing: "I

cock my hat as I please indoors or out". The contextual situation is starkly different in these utterances, and that is important. A poet, especially an unconventional one like Whitman, risked losing his edginess within a bureaucracy. An unpublished pair of poetic lines, probably drafted around 1860 when he experimented with aphoristic poems called "Thoughts", clarify that even before he entered government work he recognized some peril in mixing public and private roles:

What would it bring you to be elected and take your place in the capitol?
I elect you to understand yourself; that is what all the offices in the
republic could not do.

(Berg Collection, New York Public Library)

Here "offices" undermine rather than advance self awareness. Going forward, we need a better grasp of how he coped with the demands of these years. How was he altered by working within the government, by embodying the government, by enacting policy and law through his pen?

Many of Whitman's friends, including William Douglas O'Connor, chafed in their roles as government employees. Whitman commented in a revealing fashion on O'Connor's plight.

It is almost tragic to see a man endowed as he is so largely silent—so much of him just fired up and never expressed. A nobler genius never walked the earth. William has a world all his own—a potential world: I used to think he would some day give it birth: but the days pass, the years pass, by and bye William will pass, I am afraid, with the work undone. That damned job in Washington ties him down to a few feet of grass: I ought not to growl at it: it is splendid work: but somehow I resent it—just a little, anyway. (TRAUBEL vol. 1, 181).

The "few feet of grass" comment resonates coming as it does from the author of *Leaves of Grass*. Was Whitman speaking indirectly of his own resentment toward government work? Did he feel it had curtailed his own imaginative productions?

In "Success and the Pseudonymous Writer" Joyce Carol Oates writes: "Like the experience of first authorship, writing under a pseudonym gives one the sense of discovering oneself by way of redefining oneself, even if it is only for the space of a single book. There is the possibility, however quixotic, of making a fresh start—in . . . 'renewing' oneself—and not being held to severe account for it" (Oates). During the Civil War and

early Reconstruction Whitman “gained life experience as a ventriloquist of sorts—throwing his voice to become soldiers themselves as he wrote as and through them to their friends and loved ones, just as he regularly assumed the identity of others as he conducted his work as a government scribe. These experiences of inhabiting another’s view—accelerated his developing tendency to write from the perspective of various personae” (PRICE 2010, 687). Whitman for example employs a dramatic speaker in several post-war poems including “Ethiopia Saluting the Colors”, “Prayer of Columbus”, and “Osceola”. Intriguingly, Ed Folsom has considered the possibility of Whitman also speaking from the perspective of a black soldier in the somewhat earlier *Drum-Taps* poem “Reconciliation” (FOLSOM, “The Lost Black”, 3–31).

Pinning down what Whitman thought can be tricky because his identities were as varied as his pseudonyms—“Schoolmaster”, “Paumanok”, “A Traveller”, “A Pedestrian”, “You Know Who”, “Mose Velsor”, “George Selwyn”, “J.R.S.” and “Velsor Brush” only begin the list. “Walt” was itself a tweaking of his name and a new identity taken on by Walter Whitman. Within his universe of shifting personae and tolerance for contradiction, where do we find Whitmanian stability? I think nearly all scholars would expect to find at bedrock a Whitman committed to a democratic manner of being and to adhesiveness or same-sex attachments. Yet Whitman’s democratic manner came under pressure in his government work, and I want to speculate now about a possible connection between his government work and crises he endured over same-sex love in these years.

As noted, Whitman was engaged in trying on identities in the postwar years. When he moved to DC he needed to rebuild or create anew the emotional and intellectual network that had sustained him in New York City where his friends at Pfaff’s beer cellar were key, among them Fred Vaughan, the likely love interest who triggered the writing of “Live Oak, with Moss”, a sequence that ultimately developed into the “Calamus” poems in the third edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman’s fond memories of his New York days come through in an 1863 letter to Nathaniel Bloom:

dear friend, how long it is since we have seen each other, since those pleasant meetings & those hot spiced rums & suppers & our dear friends Gray & Chauncey, & Russell, & Fritschy too, (who for a while at first used to sit so silent,) & Perkins & our friend Raymond—how long it seems—how much I enjoyed it all. What a difference it is with me here—I tell you, Nat, my evenings are frequently spent in scenes that make a terrible difference—for I am still a hospital visitor, there has not

passed a day for months (or at least not more than two) that I have not been among the sick & wounded, either in hospitals or down in camp—occasionally here I spend the evenings in hospital—the experience is a profound one, beyond all else, & touches me personally, egotistically, in unprecedented ways—I mean the way often the amputated, sick, sometimes dying soldiers cling & cleave to me as it were as a man overboard to a plank, & the perfect content they have if I will remain with them, sit on the side of the cot awhile, some youngsters often, & caress them &c.—It is delicious to be the object of so much love & reliance, & to do them such good, soothe & pacify torments of wounds &c—You will doubtless see in what I have said the reason I continue so long in this kind of life—. (WHITMAN, *Correspondence*, vol. 1, 142)

Importantly, the move to Washington, despite entailing a “terrible difference”, had not led to any lessening of his commitment to forms of attachment he describes as “delicious”. This affirmation should be kept in mind in light of his puzzling and still under-explored crises over same-sex attachments in the Washington years.

The “delicious” comment about caring for—being needed by—soldiers is in striking contrast to an odd document I came upon in Whitman’s papers at the Library of Congress. It is an anonymous letter to Attorney General James Speed of August 1865 accompanied by an envelope with Whitman’s word “bogus?” written on it (Feinberg Collection). The letter is an attempt to influence a famous legal case. The letter, ostensibly from a Private in the 5th Pennsylvania Cavalry, argues that the hardships and disease suffered by captured Union soldiers at Andersonville, the notorious Confederate prisoner of war camp, was not a result of mistreatment but instead followed from the “unnatural and criminal practices of those worse than brute men. . . . *Sodomy* was the cause of their disgusting condition”. The letter arrived at the Attorney General’s office near the beginning of the trial of Captain Henry Wirz—the commandant of the Confederate prison at Andersonville, Georgia—who was arrested in May 1865 and became the only Confederate soldier to be charged with war crimes during the Civil War. A military tribunal found Captain Wirz guilty on all counts and sentenced him to death. We can’t be sure why or how this document came into Whitman’s personal possession rather than remaining in the office files. Nor can we know if this charge of sodomy against Union soldiers unnerved him, though it might have been unsettling coming only two months after he had himself been run out of his job in the Bureau of Indian Affairs, just prior to his work in the Attorney General’s office, by a

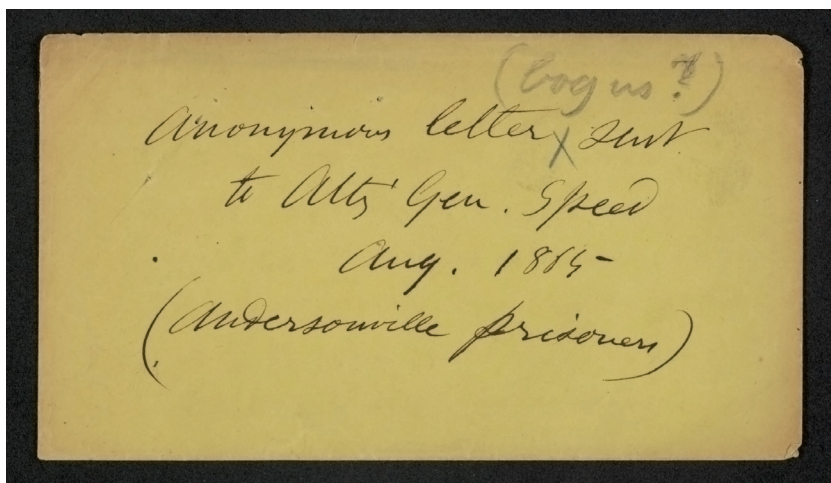


Figure 1. Envelope with Whitman's annotations. Courtesy of the Charles E. Feinberg Collection, the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

zealous head of department, James Harlan, who disapproved of the “moral character” of Whitman’s poetry of the body.

Harlan, head of the Department of Interior, and a former Methodist minister, had discovered Whitman’s Blue Book, his personal copy of the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, a copy in blue paper covers he kept with him during the war years, and extensively revised with annotations and tipped-in pages for an intended (but never realized) future edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The Blue Book reveals Whitman’s plan to cut no fewer than eleven of the “Calamus” poems. This is one of the crises I mentioned: what pressure, loss of faith, change of heart could have moved Whitman to disown so many tender love poems? Ironically enough, near the time when he was cutting what modern readers find his most powerful poems on love and attachment, he was fired from his position in the Bureau of Indian Affairs for his amorous verse. The cuts then were made within two key contexts: 1) Whitman was enmeshed within officialdom, working for the government in one capacity or another and in a setting that put a premium on caution and decorum and 2) he was visiting Washington hospitals daily and thereby experiencing the beneficial nature of a healing and sustaining love, a love affirmed and reaffirmed not in hypothetical terms but in hundreds of visits to thousands of wounded, ill, and desperately needy soldiers. Having reversed himself on nearly one quarter of the “Calamus” poems, Whitman ultimately reversed his reversal by restoring all but three of the eleven

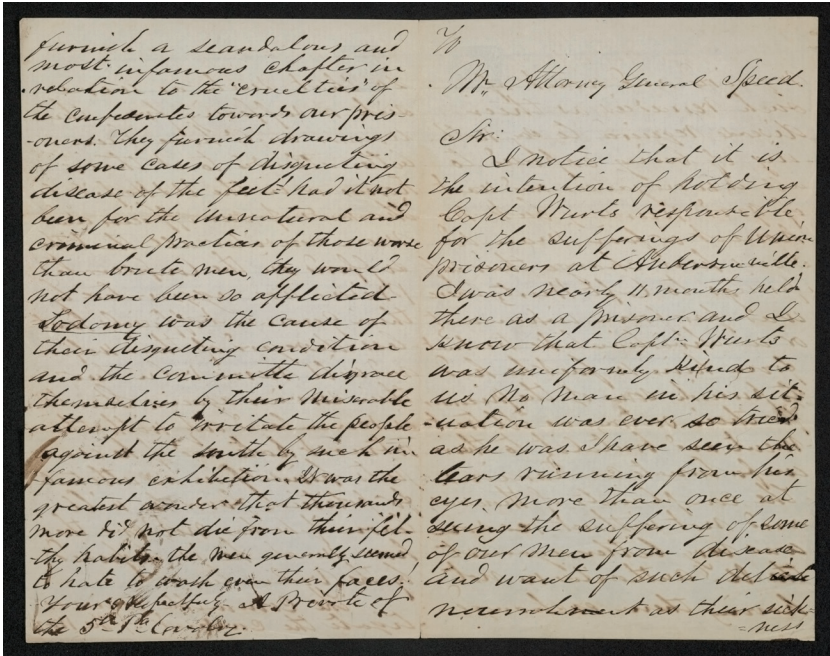


Figure 2. First and last sections of a multi-page letter ostensibly from a “Private of the 5th Pa. Cavalry”. Courtesy of the Charles E. Feinberg Collection, the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

poems marked for deletion in the 1867 *Leaves of Grass*. The two contexts of his government work and his hospital volunteering pulled Whitman in conflicting directions.

Just as perplexing as Whitman’s on-and-off affection for his “Calamus” poems in these years is what can be called for shorthand the Peter Doyle “perturbations” notebook. This is a famously coded document with the numbers 16 and 4 standing for the letters P and D, and a “him” in two places erased and changed to “her”. This notebook was written at least partly and perhaps largely in the Attorney General’s office. One temporal context explicitly noted by Whitman is Congress adjourning with excitement at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War. Just below noting that fact, he exhorts himself to give up the “undignified pursuit” of Doyle. He does not specify what made the pursuit undignified—an asymmetry in their levels of interest and the differences in their ages are possibilities. He is apparently uneasy about what others might think of the same-sex nature of the attachment, given the effort to hide Doyle’s name and the “him”

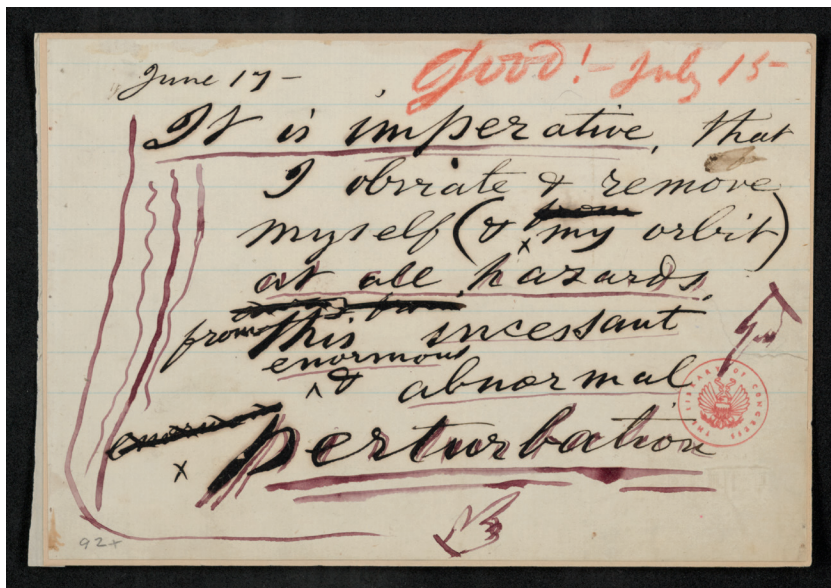


Figure 3. Inscribed and reinscribed page on “incessant enormous & abnormal perturbation”, with underlinings, coloring, and manicules for emphasis. Courtesy of the Thomas Harned Collection, the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

to “her” alterations in the document. The dramatic coloring and unusual inscription/reinscription as he writes over his own words to etch it into the firmest of resolutions, is then reinforced further with a bold manicule—here the body, via the hand, and inscription, are one. He expresses concern about “disproportionate adhesiveness”. He is interested, apparently, in what makes for a balanced and natural life that will lead to longevity, as the clippings nearby in the notebook suggest. He implores himself to “remember Fred Vaughan”, a friend from Pfaff’s, probably a former lover, and as mentioned quite possibly the inspiration for Whitman’s famous “Calamus” poems. Intriguingly, a government seal, affixed at a later date and asserting the property rights of the Library of Congress, interjects itself after the fact with Whitman’s thoughts of Doyle and memory of Vaughan. Whether the government would stamp as its own or try to stamp out a Whitmanian form of love continues to play out in our politics. In his own time, Whitman ultimately reaffirmed male-male attachments, though not without some anguish and doubts along the way, by retaining most of the “Calamus” poems and continuing in his love for Peter Doyle for years beyond this notebook. Perhaps most telling is the government stamp, reaffirming

the government's hold on Whitman as he was archived into the Library of Congress.

As critics and editors, we need to confront such traces of government and other institutional contexts, including the vast trove of scribal documents, in any effort to understand the latter half of Whitman's career, a career profoundly shaped in these years by his dual roles of bureaucrat and poet. This duality is often evident at the level of individual documents, many of which are personal statements but were composed on Attorney General's office stationery, on the verso of official business. In fact, it is at times difficult to differentiate personal and governmental documents. Whitman noted on an envelope of the Attorney General's Office:

Memoranda

pardon applicants Sept 8-9 -1865

also the negro-suffrage

also position of the President (Thomas B. Harned Collection, Library of Congress)

Whitman might have jotted these notes in the course of work in the Attorney General's office. But it is also possible they are notes about issues Whitman weighed as he composed "Democratic Vistas". Whitman's use of a particular type of stationery, however, is not a reliable guide because he often used office stationery for his literary purposes. This document is of interest precisely because of its ambiguity: it might be either a literary or a scribal document, a document written for Whitman's own purposes or for the purposes of others. As such, the document challenges in a useful way the boundaries between literary and scribal documents.

In his office in the Treasury building Whitman enjoyed heated rooms at night and on the weekend, with a great lamp overhead, luxuries missing from the modest rooms he rented at various addresses around the capital. The census indicates that he lived in a mixed-race boarding house at one time, and he also came to know African Americans who cleaned up the office and ran messages. There were no African American or women clerks in the Attorney General's office, though white women began to break into some mostly white collar federal government jobs during the war years. The scribal documents touch on crucially important issues about race, gender and class, which Whitman experienced differently as a clerk than he had either in Brooklyn, or in the New York subculture at Pfaff's, or in Washington's hospitals. The Attorney General's office in those years did praiseworthy work in support of Civil Rights, though Whitman himself in

Democratic Vistas never convincingly answered Thomas Carlyle's charge that American democracy—in extending the franchise to black males—was doing something akin to shooting Niagara in a barrel. He promised to address Carlyle but never does so. In the Attorney General's office, Whitman was positioned to see in lived experience, in policy, and in changing laws the prospects for a new and vibrant multi-racial society. He and the office he worked for achieved much in these years, though there were also heartbreaking missed opportunities and failures of vision. Some of these misses and failings were Whitman's own, and they are especially painful given how much he had done to celebrate a diverse “nation of nations” in his pre-war poetry. Ultimately the best hopes for Reconstruction were of course dashed.

We've heard a lot about the Department of Justice in the current news with the recusal of Attorney General Jeff Sessions from the investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election because he himself made false statements to Congress about his contacts with the Russian government; the rollback of Obama era sentencing guidelines for non-violent drug offenders; the crack down on sanctuary cities; the firing of FBI director James Comey; the appointment of a special counsel and more. I wonder what it must look like from the inside, and I wonder what a poet with a Whitmanian or Ginsbergian sense of things would conclude. Perhaps it is oddly comforting to glance back to the early days of the Department of Justice and to Whitman's role there. Whitman lived when the stability of the Republic didn't just *seem* to be at risk: the Republic was fragmented, battered, torn, divided, shredded. The events of 2017, thus far anyway, are alarming and grave, but the traumas, scandals, and corruption of the Civil War and Reconstruction were of a different magnitude. In recent months, we've seen recurrent violations of the rule of law and democratic norms; we've seen hatred encouraged and murderous violence has come to the very doorstep here in College Park with the killing of Richard Wilbur Collins, III. Whitman lived when armed rebellion exceeded anyone's expectations in its ferocity to become the bloodiest war in US history. No doubt many of us have been sickened recently by the sight of torches carried by white supremacists protesting the removal of Confederate statues in places from New Orleans to Charlottesville; Whitman worked in a government alarmed by the scourge of the Ku Klux Klan presence in the south and the inability of government forces, even with an occupying army, to contain violent lawlessness. We hear talk of impeachment or removal from office on other grounds. Andrew Johnson was not only impeached but came within a single vote of being convicted by the Senate and removed from office.

The Attorney General of course works for the President, and Whitman in turn worked for the Attorney General—positioning him in proximity to power. It is not clear that a Whitman-like figure would be welcome in today's Department of Justice, despite the way some in that Department have pushed back against the President.

I think of Whitman and his stern indictment of the United States at the time of *Democratic Vistas* (1871): “Never was there perhaps more hollowness at heart than at the present, and here in the United States. Genuine belief seems to have left us. The underlying beliefs of The States are not honestly believed in The spectacle is appalling. We live in an atmosphere of hypocrisy throughout” (Whitman, *Prose Works 1892*, vol. 2, 369–370). Shaped by both an artist's view and a bureaucrat's knowledge, Whitman had no illusions. He said of the word democracy that the “real gist” of it “still sleeps, quite unawakened It is a great word, whose history . . . remains unwritten because that history has yet to be enacted” (Whitman, *Prose Works 1892*, 2:393). Like democracy, justice itself—legal and social—is far from being at hand, and in fact is sadly receding. We need to keep faith, through vigilance and at times resistance, in the hallowed nature of goals threatened by hollow times.

Going forward we should strive to be more alive to the resonances, detectable in common processes and subject matter between things like books of poetry and things like government documents. If we look beyond authorship to think about media, inscription, and forms of association/power, we can better understand the continuities and interrelatedness of Whitman's government work and *Leaves of Grass*. That may help us see poetry and governing as related rather than mutually exclusive things. In times as divisive as Whitman's and our own, perhaps it behooves us to re-examine commonplace distinctions—to get the poet back into the government, as it were, if not to explode the distinction between the two altogether. Singularity—of an individual subject, of a career, of a political party, of an author—no longer seems that useful, and may be one of the modes of simplification or patterns of thought that got us into our current fix.

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