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The Uniform Hieroglyphic: A Contemporary Graphological Study of Whitman's Signature

Todd Richardson

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on the title page. In that unintended but highly evocative way, this haunting image of the nameless woman reflects the book she holds in this mirror-image daguerreotype. Both the poet and the woman reader are unique individuals who, in some sense, represent us all.

This image was no doubt taken in or soon after 1856, at the end of the era of the daguerreotype. The book this nameless woman holds is, as all of Whitman's books were, an object that the poet had a major hand in designing. We still have his careful draft drawings for the spine of this volume—perhaps the most significant spine in the history of the American book, with the first cover blurb in American literature, Emerson's now-famous sentence from a private letter he sent to Whitman, one he never gave permission to have quoted: "I greet you at the beginning of a great career—R. W. Emerson."[4] This anonymous young female reader, in her eloquent silence, greets Whitman as well.

The University of Iowa ED FOLSOM

NOTES

1 The daguerreotype was first printed in Mark S. Johnson, ed., *The Daguerreian Annual 2000* (Pittsburgh: The Daguerreian Society, 2001), 167, with commentary by Osborne. The daguerreotype can now be accessed online at The Daguerreian Society website, in their NEA Research Database Project (http://www.daguerre.org/search.php); type in "Leaves of Grass" in the subject field on the search page.

2 See Sherry Ceniza, *Walt Whitman and 19th-Century Women Reformers* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 45, 128-130.

3 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 9 vols. (various publishers, 1905-1996), 2:331.

4 For reproductions of Whitman's sketches for the 1856 spine, see Joel Myerson, *Walt Whitman: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993), 27; and the back cover of the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 4 (Fall/Winter 1986-1987).

THE UNIFORM HIEROGLYPHIC: A CONTEMPORARY GRAPHOLOGICAL STUDY OF WHITMAN'S SIGNATURE

The branch of graphology that studies character by way of handwriting hit its stride as a "profession" in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Like other pseudo-sciences of the time, such as chirography, phrenology, and physiognomy, graphology reified abstract and culturally determined characteristics such as gender, sophistication, and strength, and inferred a necessary connection between these entities and arbitrary outward appearances. That is, graphology confirmed prejudice by way of "scientific objectivity."[1] Concerning the famous surgeon Mary E. Walker, for example, graphologist Felix de Salamanca wrote, "Her style is a forced and unnatural masquerade of the unfair sex." Fellow graphologist William T. Call shared this opinion of the doctor, and recommended Florence Nightingale, who "sets a good example in the quiet neatness of her signature."[2]

Until now, only one graphological assessment of Whitman has been located. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the previously known assessment, by de Salamanca,

reflected Whitman's mixed public opinion of the late 1870s and 1880s. De Salamanca professed that "Whitman's chirography is not a pleasing nor an intellectual one as a rule, although at intervals . . . it is not without a certain grandeur."[3] I add one additional graphological assessment by Call. Since Call is a known (if minor) Whitmanian, his assessment, naturally, reflects his good opinion of the poet. Ultimately, he abandons his own pretensions to read Whitman's character graphologically, and defers to Buchanan's exalted characterization of Whitman as a Christ-like American Socrates.[4] Here is Call's assessment, which originally appeared following a facsimile of Whitman's signature:

WALT WHITMAN. This autograph is a genuine surprise. It is, indeed, entirely ordinary, not at all outlandish, and even tends downward—what! no ambition? Whence, then, those acrobatic, juggleristic, prestidigitatorial feats with language? Robert Buchanan, the Scotch-English critic, playwright, and poet (a good one in spots) rises to explain. He christens the "good, gray poet" of Camden (N. J.) the American Socrates, but greater, and likens him to the founder of Christianity. This modern Titan lives "in a land [N. J. is part of the U. S.] of which he will one day be known as the chief literary glory," and he (Mr. B.) has seen "face to face the wisest and noblest, the most truly great of all literary men." Of course it would be useless, and even sacrilegious, to attempt to dissect the great one's sign-manual, for Mr. Buchanan is speaking for a coterie of latter-day poets and prophets.[5] It is not out of place, however, to reproduce the words of one who has seen a real Whitman manuscript. "The handwriting is bold, rugged almost, as would be expected in one who aims at thought and truth, and disregards the means by which ordinary people do ordinary things. If he makes a mistake, he scratches it out or rubs it out with his finger. Having seized an idea he puts it down on anything at hand. A single page may represent brown, blue, and white paper and red and black ink, with some pencil marks." In this light the above signature is useless to the character reader.

University of Texas of the Permian Basin TODD H. RICHARDSON

NOTES

Thanks to Joel Myerson for alerting me to William Call's graphological study.

1 See Stephen Jay Gould's *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1981) for more on the fallacy of reification in nineteenth-century pseudo-science.

2 See Felix de Salamanca's *The Philosophy of Handwriting* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1879), 148, and William T. Call's *Remarkable Autographs with Notes on Indications of Character in Handwriting* (New York: B. W. Dinmore & Co., 1887), 17 and 46.

3 De Salamanca, 149. This assessment is noted in Scott Giantvalley's *Walt Whitman, 1839-1939: A Reference Guide* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981), 46.

4 Call, 21. Call (1856-1917) also wrote *A Plea for Shakespeare and Whitman* (Brooklyn: W. T. Call, 1914).

5 See Robert Buchanan, "The American Socrates," in *A Look Round Literature* (London: Ward and Downey, 1887), 341-346. This is not the same text as the poem "Socrates in Camden, with a Look Round" (*Academy* 28 [August 15, 1885], 102-103). The "coterie" Call refers to in Buchanan's article includes the "little band of English admirers headed by Mr. William Rossetti."