



# "Average-Representing Grant": Whitman's General

Martin T. Buinicki

ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)

ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

Copyright © 2008 Martin T Buinicki

---

## Recommended Citation

Buinicki, Martin T. "'Average-Representing Grant': Whitman's General." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 26 (Fall 2008), 69-91. <https://doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.1866>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

## “AVERAGE-REPRESENTING GRANT”: WHITMAN’S GENERAL

MARTIN T. BUINICKI

---

“I feel about literature what Grant did about war. He hated war. I hate literature. I am not a literary West Pointer”

—Whitman to Traubel, 1888

THOSE FAMILIAR WITH WALT WHITMAN’S VIEWS on his relationship with the traditional literary establishment will find little surprising in his provocative declaration: “I hate literature.” The poet maintained an image of himself as a lone voice under siege, even after the evidence suggested that he had at last begun to be embraced by the American audience he had long sought. More startling, perhaps, is Whitman’s self-comparison to Ulysses S. Grant. His implication is clear: Grant hated war yet excelled in prosecuting one; Grant refused to follow the traditional methods of battle taught at West Point and inevitably won out—just as Whitman defied tradition while engaged in his own field of literary combat. If the poet’s use of Grant as an analogy to describe his own career is unexpected, it may be because his feelings for and writings about Grant have received little direct scrutiny, even as recent scholarship has done much to show how important a figure Grant was in Whitman’s life.<sup>1</sup> They are also not entirely consistent: in fact, Whitman’s published writing, private correspondence, and conversations late in life all demonstrate how the poet’s views on Grant shifted over time, culminating in both admiration for and a surprising amount of identification with the general turned president. Specific study of Whitman’s statements about the general and former president offers insight into the poet’s engagement with politics and his own professional position in the government during the early years of Reconstruction. It also provides an illustration of Whitman’s beliefs regarding the heroic nature of the “average” American. Even more tellingly, his conversations about Grant in the late 1880s show how he saw in the general and his critics a symbol of his own poetic battles against the canons of tradition.

## *Grant the Dictator*

When Grant was promoted to the rank of lieutenant general and came east to take command of Union forces in 1864, hopes were high for victory.<sup>2</sup> Whitman expressed his confidence in the character of the new leader in a letter to his mother, Louisa Van Velsor Whitman:

As I told you in a former letter Grant is determined to bend every thing to take Richmond & break up the banditti of scoundrels that have stuck themselves up there as a “government”—he is in earnest about it, his whole soul & all his thoughts night & day are upon it—he is probably the most in earnest of any man in command or in the government either—that’s something, ain’t it, Mother—& they are bending every thing to fight for their last chance—calling in their forces from southwest &c.<sup>3</sup>

Whitman’s remarks are noteworthy for their emphasis not on Grant’s skill but his “earnest” nature, as is his remark that Grant is more earnest than “any man in command or in the government.” This is not likely a comment upon his relative merit compared to Lincoln so much as it reflects the poet’s enthusiasm regarding the new commander. He is a man willing to “bend every thing” to meet his objective, a determination that Whitman would repeatedly refer to as one of Grant’s most admirable traits. After the vacillations of earlier generals, the poet was clearly taken with the straightforward commitment of the new leader.

Like a familial AP reporter, Whitman spent the remaining months of the war reporting back to his mother on Grant’s progress and, often, expressing his unwavering confidence in the general’s plans. His brother George served under Grant in the battle at Vicksburg, and Whitman and his family had a very personal investment in the campaign that the general undertook in assuming command of the Union army.<sup>4</sup> In a letter the following week, the poet linked the general to his beloved president through his faith in the two of them: “Others may say what they like, I believe in Grant & in Lincoln too—I think Grant deserves to be trusted, he is working continually—no one knows his plans, we will only know them when he puts them in operation” (*Corr*, 1:213). Here, again, his support is not premised upon anything having to do with military skill—he admits that “no one knows [Grant’s] plan”—but what matters most to Whitman is that the man “deserves to be trusted.” It is the steadiness of his determination that gains this trust, and, in pairing Grant with Lincoln, the poet appears to suggest that the Union has at last found a general as devoted to its preservation as its president.

The degree to which Whitman trusted the new commander is evident in a letter the poet wrote home two weeks later:

Whether there is any thing in this story or not, I cannot tell—the city is full of rumors & this may be one of them—the government is not in receipt of any information to-day—Grant has taken the reins entirely in his own hands—he is really dictator at present—we shall hear something important within two or three days—Grant is very secretive indeed—he bothers himself very little about sending news even to the President or Stanton—time only can develope [sic] his plans—. (*Corr*, 1:219-220)

One would be hard-pressed to find Whitman using the word “dictator” in any other context without scorn,<sup>5</sup> but here it is simply used to suggest the degree to which Grant has things “in his own hands.” This letter was written on the day after the opening of the Battle of the Wilderness, the beginning of which was marked by considerable confusion and friendly fire in woods south of the Rapidan River. It is likely that Whitman and his mother were hearing as many tales of defeat as they were of victory, yet the poet kept his faith as the battle dragged on. He wrote again almost a week later, “Dearest Mother, I hope you & all are well—you must keep a good heart—still the fighting is very mixed, but it *seems steadily turning into real successes* for Grant—the news to-day here is very good—you will see it in NY papers—I steadily believe Grant is going to succeed, & that we shall have Richmond—but O what a price to pay for it” (*Corr*, 1:223). The price was high indeed; as James McPherson notes, “From May 5 through May 12 the Army of the Potomac lost some 32,000 men killed, wounded, and missing—a total greater than for all Union armies *combined* in any previous week of the war. As anxious relatives scanned the casualty lists, a pall of gloom settled over hundreds of northern communities” (McPherson, 732). As Whitman saw the consequences of Grant’s unshakeable determination and willingness to press forward in spite of casualties, the price of victory could never have been far from his mind, and it would continue to haunt him long after the war. The casualties, not the battles won—even the capture of Richmond—would become the focus of his post-war writings on the conflict, even as Grant’s nature more than his prowess would become the most important element in his remarks on the General.

In the hot summer of 1864, however, such re-appraisals were far in the future. For now, Whitman continued to follow Grant’s campaign closely, sending frequent reports home and to friends, as in a letter to Charles Eldridge on July 9, 1864: “As to me, I still believe in Grant, & that we shall get Richmond” (*Corr*, 1:237). As it had in May, Whitman’s expression of confidence came at a bleak time: Grant’s Army of the Potomac continued to suffer horrific casualties in battles like Cold Harbor—“Some 65,000 northern boys were killed, wounded, or missing since May 4” (McPherson, 742)—while Sherman’s army had been fought to a standstill in its march on Atlanta; in all, McPherson notes, “The months of July and August 1864 brought a greater crisis

of northern morale than the same months in 1862” (760). In the face of all of this death and doubt, Whitman’s continued faith in Grant and his refusal to criticize or second-guess him is noteworthy.

Following George’s capture by Confederate forces in September 1864, Whitman’s feelings about Grant may have changed for a time as a result of the Union’s unwillingness to pursue prisoner exchanges. He wrote a letter to the *New York Times* assailing the refusal to exchange prisoners and singling out the Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and General Benjamin Butler, although he did not set his aim specifically on Grant.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the poet tried to work through private channels to secure his brother’s release. In February 1865, he wrote a letter to John Swinton, the editor of the *New York Times*, “From the deep distress of my mother whose health is getting affected, & of my sister” (*Corr*, 1:252), asking him to write a letter to Grant seeking a special exchange for George. Swinton complied, and on February 13 Grant’s military secretary sent Swinton a reply stating that Grant had approved the exchange (253),<sup>7</sup> and George was finally freed February 22. While Whitman biographer Jerome Loving suggests that Whitman felt resentment towards Grant for Union policies on prisoner exchange, the speed with which he apparently had a letter sent in response to Swinton’s appeal—which included much of the language from Whitman’s own letter to the editor—may have also helped to cement his respect for the general.<sup>8</sup>

Certainly, following the Union victory several months later, Whitman’s feelings about Grant seem to have reached an apex that they would not reach again until much later, and his portrayal of him as the conquering hero is far different from his later image of Grant the politician. On May 23 and May 24 Grant’s Army of the Potomac marched with Sherman’s Army of Georgia in a Grand Review “200,000 strong [ . . . ] in a pageantry of power and catharsis” (McPherson, 853) that Whitman witnessed first hand. He wrote to his mother on May 25:

I saw Gen. Grant too several times—He is the noblest Roman of them all—none of the pictures do justice to him—about sundown I saw him again riding on a large fine horse, with his hat off in answer to the hurrahs—he rode by where I stood, & I saw him well, as he rode by on a slow canter, with nothing but a single orderly after him—He looks like a good man—(& I believe there is much in looks)—I saw Gen. Meade, Gen. Thomas, Secretary Stanton, & lots of other celebrated government officers & generals—but the *rank & file* was the greatest sight of all. (*Corr*, 1:261-262)

The description of Grant as the “noblest Roman of them all” is far different from “average-representing Grant” and is an exceptional moment in Whitman’s writings on the man. Quite likely the poet was still grieving the loss of Lincoln, assassinated a little more than a month earlier,

and was swept up in the pageantry of the occasion. While emphasizing Grant's looks—"(& I believe there is much in looks)"—he also contrasts Grant and the other leaders with "the *rank & file* . . . the greatest sight of all." His feelings about Grant in the future, however, would largely be driven by the extent to which he saw Grant as part of the "rank and file" rather than as a member of the elite.

### *The General as Candidate*

The post-Civil War political landscape in the United States was marked by considerable upheaval. While the Democratic Party was clearly in disarray following the war, the Republican Party was also split between its more radical and moderate members, and the failed impeachment of Andrew Johnson brought the fault lines into stark relief. As Whitman wrote to Moncure Conway in 1868, "Our American politics, as you notice, are in an unusually effervescent condition—with perhaps (to the mere eye-observation from a distance) divers alarming & deadly portending shows & signals. Yet we old stagers take things very coolly, & count on coming out all right in due time" (*Corr*, 2:15). In spite of Whitman's apparent nonchalance, he was watching events with considerable interest after the war, and his concerns were both national and personal. While the armed conflict was concluded, the fate of the restored Union still seemed very much in doubt with riots in the South, Johnson's pardon of a large number of Confederates and their prompt attempts to return to political power, and seething tension and animosity all around. In Congress, debates regarding impeachment of the president, enfranchisement, and amending the Constitution roiled the capitol. At the same time, Whitman's own career prospects were in at least some doubt: his position as a clerk in the Attorney General's office was now up in the air as he awaited the new appointments that would come with the change in administration. As numerous critics have noted, Whitman was highly attentive to all of these developments, and his correspondence bears this out, as his letters to family and friends make frequent reference to political developments and his employment situation.

With so much at stake, one might expect the poet to have been a fervent supporter of Ulysses S. Grant, the candidate whose heroism and campaign slogan "Let Us Have Peace" would seem to have made him an ideal subject for Whitman's loyalty and enthusiasm. While not wholly lacking in his correspondence during the 1868 election, his enthusiasm is muted, however, and he occasionally hedges his bets, as in his letter to Conway: "According to present appearances the good, worthy, non-demonstrative, average-representing Grant will be chosen President next fall. What about him, then? As at present advised, I shall

vote for him non-demonstrative as he is—but admit I can tell much better about him some five years hence” (*Corr*, 2:15). Given that his assessment came during the same month that the New York Republican Convention nominated the general for the presidency, one would expect Whitman might express his strongest support for the candidate. His relative reticence and willingness to withhold his own opinion until well after a first term of office is noteworthy. Perhaps Whitman took his cue from Grant himself: “The movement for his nomination was becoming irresistible even without any word from Grant.”<sup>9</sup> No doubt the poet would have found such humility admirable in a national figure like Grant, and, when speaking of the general, he would later express his admiration for Grant’s “plain” nature, a key factor in his growing appreciation for the man as the years went by.

Still, given Whitman’s high opinion of Grant at the war’s end, the poet’s relatively lukewarm endorsement of him as a candidate is rather surprising. Grant himself did little actual campaigning, of course, so, while his opponent Horatio Seymour sought to build his national profile through public appearances, Grant largely stayed above the fray, leaving his reputation and the newspapers to do the work for him. This seems to have been enough for Whitman and his mother. As the poet wrote to her in June of 1868, “So you like the ticket, Grant & [Schuyler] Colfax, do you, mother? Well, I do, too” (*Corr*, 2:35). Of the Democrats, he observed, “How do you all like the nomination of Seymour and [Francis] Blair? It is a regular old Copperhead Democratic ticket, of the rankest kind—probably pleases the old democratic bummers around New York and Brooklyn—but every where else they take it like a bad dose of medicine” (*Corr*, 2:36). Whitman’s willingness to separate the larger Democratic Party from its standard bearers is noteworthy, but, given his confidence in the general during the war, his support of Grant seems a foregone conclusion. What is lacking is any kind of intensity or excitement. As election day approached, he wrote to his friend Peter Doyle from New York where he had traveled to visit family and friends while on leave:

There is great excitement here over the returns of yesterday’s elections, as I suppose there is the same in Washington also—the Democrats look blue enough, & the Republicans are on their high horses. I suppose Grant’s success is now certain. As I write, the bands are out here, parading the streets, & the drums beating. It is now forenoon. To-night we will hear the big guns, & see the blazing bonfires. . . . I have been debating whether to get my leave extended, & stay till election day to vote—or whether to pair off with a Democrat, & return (which will amount to the same thing.) Most likely I shall decide on the latter, but don’t know for certain. (*Corr*, 2:58-59)

For a poet who repeatedly celebrates American pageantry, this seems a rather tepid response to an important political moment. His ambivalence about going to the trouble to cast his own ballot only heightens the impression that Whitman felt no true excitement at the prospect of a Grant presidency. Indeed, a few days later he wrote Doyle to inform him that he had resolved “to pair off with a friend of mine here who was going to vote for Seymour, and return on time” (*Corr*, 2:67).<sup>10</sup>

Of course, for all of his confidence in Grant as a general, Whitman had some clear policy differences with the Republican platform. He disagreed with Grant on one of the key issues of the time, the tariff. For Whitman, ever a proponent of free trade and enemy of monopoly, the Republican Party’s unwillingness to roll back tariffs established in 1860 could certainly have been a barrier to his full endorsement. As one Grant biographer describes the situation after the war, “Politicians of the Republican school sought to secure control of the Southern votes, and industrial magnates laid dark plots to preserve the war-created tariff. Eventually, the marriage of the protective tariff and the bloody shirt enabled the industrial areas to dominate and control.”<sup>11</sup> While this is putting the matter rather dramatically, it indicates how the issue of tariffs was of a piece with discussions of economic reconstruction and the political debate over how to rebuild the South. While the Democratic Party platform of 1868 emphasized tariff reform, the issue is not even mentioned in the Republican platform prior to the election. Whitman was suspicious of the emerging labor movement and the portents of class struggle increasingly linked to the Democrats,<sup>12</sup> but he was no proponent of trade restrictions, and the obstacle that these appeared to pose for reunification would have been an additional reason for his disapproval.

Even more pressing for Whitman was the subject of African-American suffrage and the fate of the freed slaves. In writing of the election, he commented to Conway, “The Republicans have exploited the negro too intensely, & there comes a reaction. But that is going to be provided for” (*Corr*, 2:15). In his careful reading of Whitman’s post-war writing and its relationship with the debates over amending the constitution, Luke Mancuso has noted this phrase and suggested that Whitman was ambivalent about the division being stoked by the political unrest and the question of state and federal sovereignty. This may be true, but it is difficult to place too much blame on the Republicans in a campaign where the Democrats employed the slogan “This Is a White Man’s Government”<sup>13</sup> in what historian David W. Blight has called “one of the most explicitly racist presidential campaigns in American history.”<sup>14</sup> Betsy Erkkila has suggested that Whitman’s reference to “good, worthy, non-demonstrative, average-representing Grant” in his letter to Conway about the presidential campaign indicates that



“like many in the country, Whitman hoped for a retreat from the more radical premises of Republican reconstruction and a restoration of balance through the election of Ulysses S. Grant.”<sup>15</sup> This may indeed have been the case, but Whitman’s hesitation regarding Grant in the same letter suggests that he was not certain that Grant’s election would produce this sort of outcome, and press reports from the time may have added to his doubts.

In keeping with tradition, Grant himself did not campaign, but his actions as General of the Army during Johnson’s administration had led the *Hartford Courant* to note in August 1867, “Grant is a Radical all over.”<sup>16</sup> As one biographer notes,

Grant and Stanton took an active interest in [the First Reconstruction Act]. [ . . . ] The Reconstruction Act reflected Grant’s view that more effort was required to protect Southern blacks. Military government seemed the only solution. It was deplorable to consider such a possibility, he told Stanton, but the failure of local authorities in the South to investigate and punish crimes against the freedmen “constitutes what is practically a state of insurrection.” Grant said military rule would provide relative security “to all classes of citizens without regard to race, color, or political opinions, and could be continued until society was capable of protecting itself.” (Smith, 432)

This put him significantly at odds with President Johnson, although it would be a few more months before events in the South brought their disagreement into the open. Grant opposed the president’s attempts to replace commanders in the South with men more in line with his pro-Southern views on Reconstruction and on the way to deal with the freed slaves. By the time he became candidate for president, then, Radical Republicans were convinced that the former Democrat shared their views. For Whitman, whose own views on suffrage were conflicted, Grant’s strong advocacy and alignment with the Radicals in Congress may have presented another obstacle to a whole-hearted endorsement of the man he had praised as a military leader.

### *The President and Employer*

Whitman’s interest in the next President of the United States was of personal importance at this time as it meant that he was going to gain a new employer. The details of his employment in Washington are well known. With his friend William O’Connor’s help, he had begun working for the Lincoln administration’s Department of the Interior in January 1865.<sup>17</sup> Following his dismissal at the request of Interior Secretary James Harlan,<sup>18</sup> Whitman was re-hired in the Attorney General’s office in July. He served under three different Attorneys General during the Lincoln and then the Johnson administrations, and, when the time came for the

election, he was carefully evaluating his job prospects, as his most recent employer, William Evarts, who defended Johnson during impeachment proceedings, had been the disappointment the poet expected when he wrote to his mother in July 1868: “We have a new Attorney General, Mr. Evarts, as I suppose you have seen by the papers—He hasn’t made his appearance here yet—but is expected soon—I only hope he will be as agreeable for a boss as the others have been—but somehow I don’t believe he will” (*Corr*, 2:37). Regardless of his cautious hopes concerning what Grant would do for the nation, he was hopeful about the more immediate changes the election would have for his situation: “I shall be glad when Grant comes in, & a new Attorney Gen’l appointed—if I weather it out till then—though I am well enough off, at present, & probably safe—I don’t think there is any show for Mr. Evarts remaining here after Grant comes in” (*Corr*, 2:70-71).

When Grant finally announced his appointments, a process that he kept more secret than was customary, thus angering party officials in Washington, the poet’s response was mixed. On the one hand, the pick for Attorney General obviously pleased him and suggested that his situation would improve tremendously. He wrote his friend Abby Price on April 7, 1869, “My situation in the office continues the same—The new Attorney General, Mr. Hoar, treats me very kindly—He is from Concord, Mass. & is personally intimate with Emerson” (*Corr*, 2:80). The connection to Emerson was clearly an unexpected bonus, and historians generally see the appointment of Ebenezer R. Hoar as a true bright spot in what has generally been perceived either as a tremendously flawed cabinet, or, more recently, as a generally mediocre one. One biographer notes: “A genial New Englander, Hoar was a social and literary delight. He was also a close friend of Senator Charles Sumner’s and a member of Harvard University’s board of overseers. Hoar brought a world of erudition and learning to the cabinet” (Smith, 469); while another describes him as “a distinguished lawyer and a figure of exemplary rectitude” (Perret, 385).

Grant’s other selections were not so unquestionably positive, a fact that Whitman noted. In the same letter to Price, he asks: “*What do you think of Grant—his doings—especially some of his diplomatic appointments—Washburn, for instance?*” (*Corr*, 2:81). The circumstances surrounding Elihu Washburn’s incredibly brief tenure as Secretary of State are murky at best. His name was submitted to Congress on March 5, and he stepped down on March 10, claiming poor health. The next day he was appointed Minister to France, a position he held for more than eight years (Smith, 470-471). It seems clear that Grant never intended Washburn to remain Secretary of State, but scholars disagree regarding the motives for the entire episode. While Grant’s

cabinet generally provoked criticism, in part because he had assembled it without consultation with Washington insiders, his appointment of Washburn was held up to particular scorn: “his nomination was a signal for bitter attacks. He was coarse and illiterate—a demagogue unfit for the position!” (Hesseltine, 146). Such critiques were prominent in the Democratic *New York World*, and the fact that Whitman was still pondering the implications of Washburn’s appointment a month later suggests that, for the poet, it raised significant questions regarding the president’s judgment.

Grant had selected his cabinet by trusting his own instincts and seeking out those with whom he felt comfortable, not by consulting traditional political power-brokers (Smith, 468). Whitman appears to have been uncomfortable with this approach in 1869, and he maintained that feeling for twenty years; in a discussion regarding the recently deceased postmaster of New York, Whitman asked his friend Horace Traubel, “I don’t know why, anyhow, such offices do not always go to men simply for moral, business reasons,” and, when Traubel suggested that such concerns were “secondary,” Whitman “responded indignantly: ‘Secondary? They do not enter at all. It is not a question of fitness but of whether the fellow who is appointed is a good friend of the fellow who appoints him. Even General Grant would appoint men simply on the ground that he liked them! I think Washington and Jefferson—especially Jefferson—looked above all at the necessities of the service, and sought for those necessities the best man to be found. But the period of such ideals is past.’”<sup>19</sup> Whitman’s language here suggests that Grant’s approach to appointments is a comedown from what might otherwise be a lofty position. Despite his later appreciation for the general, his distrust of Grant’s political nominees from his time as president stayed with the poet, a sign that the “period of . . . ideals” represented by the Founders has passed.

Events during Grant’s first term could only have confirmed Whitman’s views. One historian notes:

In contrast to his wartime determination and resourcefulness, as president he often appeared to lack leadership and vigor. His appointments, with but few exceptions, were nondescript; tested incompetence was frequently rewarded, whereas excellence brought suspicion and often dismissal. . . . Nor did Grant’s policies enjoy success. The enactment of a new tariff in 1870 alienated reformers. The plan to annex Santo Domingo during 1870 was ill-conceived—the nation had enough problems without annexing more territory. Also, Grant disappointed many southerners in their hope that reconstruction would cease.<sup>20</sup>

Whitman’s disapproval of tariffs has already been discussed, but Grant’s policy decisions were the least of his problems during this period. Even-

tually Grant's vice president, Schuyler Colfax, would be implicated in one of the greatest political scandals of the period, the Credit-Mobilier case, involving kickbacks from the Union Pacific Railroad in exchange for favorable policy decisions (Smith, 552). Grant's own brother-in-law became embroiled in a conspiracy to corner the gold market in 1869, and Grant himself was often seen together with the two main conspirators, Jay Gould and Jim Fisk (Smith, 483-485). While Grant acted to stop the conspiracy, the result of the "Gold Panic" was an economic slump that lasted several months, well into 1870 (Smith, 490). Loving notes that the poem "Nay, Tell Me Not To-Day the Publish'd Shame" expresses dismay and disappointment over the main topic of the day, the Credit Mobilier scandal" (Loving, 353). While scholars have begun reassessing the legacy of Grant's presidency, there is no doubt that at the time his performance was a disappointment given the (perhaps unrealistically) high expectations that greeted him. There is a reason that the fact that Whitman "liked and defended Grant" was considered newsworthy to a correspondent for the New York *Evening Mail* in October of 1870 (qtd in *Corr*, 2:116n).

In spite of the scandals, Whitman stuck with Grant and, while in Washington, seems to have worked to cultivate the kind of nodding familiarity with the president that he had with his beloved Lincoln. He wrote to his mother in December of 1871, "I saw Grant to-day on the avenue walking by himself—(I always salute him, & he does the same to me.)" (*Corr*, 2:147). He would remember these meetings much later in life in conversations about Grant with Traubel, but by then he had already revised his assessment of Grant significantly. In these years, his salute seems more an attempt at connection than verification of the man's democratic nature. Such a connection had implications for Whitman's job prospects as well as his vision of a president who tipped his hat to the people. In 1874, he sent copies of some of his Civil War writing for the *New York Weekly Graphic* to the president. A draft of the letter reads: "I take the liberty of sending (same mail with this) some reminiscences I have written about the war, in Nos. of the N. Y. Weekly Graphic, & thinking you of all men can best return to them, in the vein in which they are composed. I am not sure whether you will remember me—or my occasional salute to you in Washington. I am laid up here with tedious paralysis, but I think I shall get well & return to Washington" (*Corr*, 2:280-281). Whitman was still recovering from the effects of a stroke more than a year before, and, although he had hired a replacement to cover for him in Washington, he had been out of the office almost the entire time other than occasional brief visits after the initial paralysis.

While it is unclear exactly which essays he sent to Grant, one selection that was published only a month earlier contains this swelling tribute to Grant:

The present! Our great Centennial of 1876 nigher and nigher at hand—the abandonment, by tacit consent, of dead issues—the general readjustment and rehabilitation, at least by intention and beginning, South and North, to the exigencies of the Present and Future—the momentous nebulae left by the convulsions of the previous thirty years definitely considered and settled by the re-election of Gen. Grant—the Twenty-second Presidentiad well sped on its course—the inevitable unfolding and development of this tremendous complexity we call the United States—our Union with restored, doubled, trebled solidity seems to vault unmistakably to dominant position among the governments of the world in extent, population, products, and in the permanent sources of naval and military power. (*PW*, 1:310-311)

Given the nature of Grant's presidency and the 1872 campaign which saw Republicans split in their support of the incumbent, Whitman's declaration that his re-election has "definitely considered and settled" all of the difficulties of the previous thirty years is hard to take. And, as he points out, Grant's second term was already "well sped on its course" by the time he refers to it here, so it is strange that he reaches back to the election as a turning point. The overall tone is more reminiscent of his praise for the general following the Union victory than of anything he had written of Grant in the years since, and, taken in the context of his letter to Grant a short while later, it is hard not to see in this piece a degree of self-interested puffery.

Subsequent events seem to confirm this, or at the very least provide another example of the poet employing a newspaper article in an effort to shore up his position. Whitman did get a response to his first letter to Grant, but it was likely not the kind of personal connection he sought. A little more than a week later, the president's secretary wrote that Grant "wishes me to assure you of the appreciation of the polite attention, and his best wishes for your speedy recovery" (*Corr*, 2:280-281n). An even more striking example of Whitman's apparent attempts to gain the good graces of the President is his poem "A Kiss to the Bride." Published a little more than two months later in the *New York Daily Graphic* on May 21, 1874, the same day that the paper reported the wedding of the President's daughter Nelly, and again two days later, the poem is a strikingly specific occasional poem for the marriage, and it was not reprinted again until 1897 in "Old Age Echoes." While the poem begins with relatively innocuous "salutations" and warm wishes for the future, Whitman's poetic persona can't seem to resist taking part in the nuptials, and one can only imagine what Nelly or her father might have thought upon reading the poem's final lines:

Dear girl—through me the ancient privilege too,  
For the New World, through me, the old, old wedding greeting:  
O youth and health! O sweet Missouri rose! O bonny bride!  
Yield thy red cheeks, thy lips, to-day,  
Unto a Nation's loving kiss. (*LG*, 578)

In demanding that the “bonny bride” present her “red cheeks” and lips to the speaker for the nation’s channeled kiss, Whitman may not have aided his efforts to build a rapport with the President.

While there is no record of a response from Grant to the poem, almost exactly a month later, when Whitman apparently learned that Congress had ordered the Department of Justice to make substantive cuts to staff, he wrote the president again, appealing directly that he be allowed to keep the position that he himself had not filled for almost two years: “Would it be convenient to the President to personally request of the Attorney General that in any changes in the Solicitor Treasury’s office, I be not disturbed in my position as clerk in that office—all my duties to the government being & having been thoroughly & regularly performed there, by a substitute, during my illness. I shall probably get well before long” (*Corr*, 2:306). Along with his letter he included a newspaper clipping that provided Whitman’s own anonymous remarks on his health, which one critic suggests might have been published to sway the President (*Corr*, 2:306n). His appeal fell upon deaf ears, and he was terminated at the end of the month. Later, Whitman cut the passage about the re-election of Grant and the “Twenty-Second Presidentiad” both from the re-printed essay in *Memoranda During the War* published in 1875-1876, and in its interpellation into *Specimen Days and Collect* in 1882, leaving his tribute to Grant’s second term to languish. As Loving notes, Whitman was scarcely well enough to take up his work in Washington at any rate (358), so it is hard to blame the Grant administration for the change, but the episode seems to represent a low moment in Whitman’s feelings about the president, one that would linger until his final re-assessment of his feelings regarding the man who helped to save the Union.

“*The Unwavering Democrat*”

“There was Grant, I think him the best—he typifies so many things—towers, tops, stands ever alone!”

—Whitman to Traubel, 1891

Perhaps because he did not return to Washington to work or live, or perhaps because he became consumed with attention to his various publishing ventures in 1875 and 1876, including his *Memoranda* and

the Centennial Edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman does not appear to have taken a great deal of interest in the presidential politics of 1876. Still wrestling with illness, he may also not have been personally inclined to comment on these matters in his correspondence or writings; Loving suggests that Whitman in fact might have seen his works of this period, the 1876 edition and his collection of poetry and prose, *Two Rivulets*, as “deathbed editions” (373). By 1879, however, the poet had recovered enough to travel West to see the country and to visit his brother Jeff, and his journey coincides with a renewed interest in current events. In September of that year, he wrote a laudatory essay on the former president, and, although the work was not published until its inclusion in *Specimen Days* in 1881, after the campaign was over, the date on which he wrote it suggests that it might almost be seen as an endorsement of Grant’s run for a third term in office. The language of the piece also demonstrates how Whitman was reconciling his two views of Grant—as the “average” man and the national leader and legend. Originally entitled “A Very Utilitarian Hero,” Whitman seems to have felt that the title went too far in emphasizing the former, for he re-titled the piece “The Silent General” (*PW*, 1:226n). Because it reveals a great deal in terms of the poet’s evolving attitude, it is worth examining in its entirety:

So General Grant, after circumambiating the world, has arrived home again—landed in San Francisco yesterday, from the ship City of Tokio from Japan. What a man he is! what a history! what an illustration—his life—of the capacities of that American individuality common to us all. Cynical critics are wondering “what the people can see in Grant” to make such a hubbub about. They aver (and it is no doubt true) that he has hardly the average of our day’s literary and scholastic culture, and absolutely no pronounc’d genius or conventional eminence of any sort. Correct: but he proves how an average western farmer, mechanic, boatman, carried by tides of circumstances, perhaps caprices, into a position of incredible military or civic responsibilities, (history has presented none more trying, no born monarch’s, no mark more shining for attack or envy,) may steer his way fitly and steadily through them all, carrying the country and himself with credit year after year—command over a million armed men—fight more than fifty pitch’d battles—rule for eight years a land larger than all the kingdoms of Europe combined—and then, retiring, quietly (with a cigar in his mouth) make the promenade of the whole world, through its courts and coteries, and kings and czars and mikados, and splendidest glitters and etiquettes, as phlegmatically as he ever walk’d the portico of a Missouri hotel after dinner. I say all this is what people like—and I am sure I like it. Seems to me it transcends Plutarch. How those old Greeks, indeed, would have seized on him! A more plain man—no art, no poetry—only practical sense, ability to do, or try his best to do, what devolv’d upon him. A common trader, money-maker, tanner, farmer of Illinois—general for the republic, in its terrific struggle with itself, in the war of attempted secession—President following, (a task of peace, more difficult than the war itself)—nothing heroic, as the

authorities put it—and yet the greatest hero. The gods, the destinies, seem to have concentrated upon him. (*PW*, 1:226-227)

Grant's tour of the globe was a sensation. He traveled for more than two years, departing Philadelphia in May 1877 to return where he started in December of 1879, and, according to one biographer, "He visited more countries and saw more people, from kings to commoners, than anyone before" (Smith, 606-607). This seems like grandiose overstatement, but even if it is a claim that is difficult to verify, it likely appeared true at the time, thanks in no small part to the constant companionship of a reporter for the *New York Herald*.<sup>21</sup> His frequent dispatches were welcomed by American readers, who watched as their former president walked the world stage as a military hero.

The image clearly captured Whitman's imagination as it did the rest of the nation's. Yet even as he pictures the president making "the promenade of the whole world," likening him to Greek heroes, he insists that at bottom there is nothing special about him. Instead he merely symbolizes the "capacities of that American individuality common to us all." This was to be Whitman's new formula for encompassing Grant. During the military parade at the conclusion of the war, he had praised Grant as "the noblest Roman of them all," only to then assert that the "*rank & file* was the greatest sight of all" (*Corr*, 1:261-262). Now, rather than a contrast, the poet saw the former president as fulfilling both roles: "A common trader, money-maker, tanner, farmer of Illinois . . . nothing heroic, as the authorities put it—and yet the greatest hero." And although Whitman alludes to his failings, it is his average nature in extraordinary circumstances that ultimately carries the day: "A more plain man—no art, no poetry—only practical sense, ability to do, or try his best to do, what devolv'd upon him." In his capacity both to stand for the "plain" man even while performing the work of heroes, moving in the orbit of world leaders with his cigar in his mouth all the while, Grant truly contains multitudes. It is no surprise that Whitman asserts "I am sure I like it": the poet had long imagined himself in a similar fashion, bowing before no king or emperor as his words traveled the globe, lifting his hat to no one. In this context at least, Grant appears to have become "one of the roughs, a kosmos."<sup>22</sup> Truly, "The gods, the destinies, seem to have concentrated upon him," confirming both his metaphysical and "plain" appeal.

The poet's enthusiasm certainly seems fitted to the Presidential campaign that Grant became embroiled in soon after his return to the United States,<sup>23</sup> regardless of the fact that Whitman did not publish this piece until after the general election. He did, however, express many of the same sentiments in a poem entitled "What Best I See in Thee, [General Grant in Philadelphia, December—, 1879]" and later



addressed “To U.S.G. return’d from his World’s Tour” when published in the 1881 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.<sup>24</sup> The poem, first published in the Philadelphia newspaper *The Press* on December 17, “bears the characteristics of his genius,” according to the editors, and is only one small part of the paper’s extensive coverage of the general’s return for which “[n]o expense or pains have been spared to make it worthy of the occasion.”<sup>25</sup> Whitman’s poem is not particularly set apart on the page or placed next to other reportage on Grant, but instead is located between a selection of humorous headlines from regional newspapers and the obituaries. Such an unassuming placement is perhaps fitting the tone of the poem itself. Because its first appearance differs both in language, capitalization, and formatting from its revised form in the 1881 edition of *Leaves*, the following replicates how the poem first appeared in the newspaper:

What best I see in thee,  
Is not that where thou mov’st down history’s  
    great highways,  
Ever undimm’d by time shoots warlike vic-  
    tory’s dazzle;  
Or that thou sat’st where Washington, Lincoln  
    sat, ruling the land in peace;  
Or thou the man whom feudal Europe feted,  
    Venerable Asia swarm’d upon;  
But that in war and peace, and in thy walks  
    with kings,  
These average prairie sovereigns of the west,  
    Kansas, Missouri, Illinois,  
Ohio’s, Indiana’s millions, comrades, farmers,  
    soldiers, all to the front,  
Invisibly with thee walking with kings with  
    even pace the round world’s promenade,  
Were all so justified.<sup>26</sup>

The speaker of the poem quickly negates all of the standard measures of greatness, rejecting them as rationales for “what best” he sees in Grant. Yet even as he appears to rule out Grant’s military victories, his presidency, and the very world tour that is the occasion for the poem in the first place, he reinstates them. Grant’s greatness does lie in those episodes, but not solely; the speaker sees beside Grant “invisibly with thee walking” all of those “average” Americans, “comrades, farmers, soldiers.”<sup>27</sup> In rising to such heights of fame, Grant has simultaneously “justified” those who live and work unknown. The term is a crucial one for Whitman, emerging several times in his poems and signaling the

emergence of or proof of the true quality of America, as in “By Blue Ontario’s Shore”:

Rhymes and rhymers, pass away, poems distill’d from poems pass away,  
The swarms of reflectors and the polite pass, and leave ashes,  
Admirers, importers, obedient persons, make but the soil of literature,  
America justifies itself, give it time, no disguise can deceive it or conceal from it, it is  
impassive enough. (*LG*, 350)

In Grant’s “even pace” as he walks with kings, he embodies Whitman’s ideal of the democratic American.

Both Whitman’s essay and his poem effectively serve to recast Grant as a kind of poetic proxy. Grant was to politics and the military as Whitman was to poetry. While he had spoken in passing of the “average-representing Grant” in 1868, it was only in the waning days of the 1870s that he finally saw the full potential of what this could mean. As he remarked to Traubel not long before his death, “There was Grant, I think him the best—he typifies so many things—towers, tops, stands ever alone!” There is again the apparent contradiction: the general is clearly an encompassing figure who “typifies so many things”—he is literally a “typical American” for Whitman—yet at the same time he is eminent and alone.

Again and again when commenting on Grant, Whitman would emphasize the general’s democratic nature while simultaneously holding him up as superlative. In talking with Traubel, he adds an interesting detail to his story of saluting the president as he walked the streets of Washington, one that emphasizes not only the man’s humility but his “common” nature:

I was still in Washington while Grant was President. I saw a good deal of him about the city. He went quite freely everywhere alone. I remember one spot in particular where I often crossed him—a little cottage on the outskirts of Washington: he was frequently there—going there often. I learned that an old couple of whom he was very fond lived there. He had met them in Virginia—they received him in a plain democratic way: I would see him leaning on their window sills outside: all would be talking together: they seeming to treat him without deference for place—with dignity, courtesy, appreciation. (*WWC*, 1:257-258)

These exchanges between the president and the elderly couple<sup>28</sup> impressed the poet so much that he referred to them again three years later, only a few months before his death: “He cavorted the whole earth around, yet was as simple on his return as when he started. He must have taught those who met him, away from America, a lesson—a lesson of our life here. Perhaps of all there have been, Grant most expresses

the modern *simple*—is thoroughly unadorned. I have told you of the old folks, the old couple, I knew him to visit in Washington. It was a profound lesson to me, to others. And he never forgot them, however high his place. I have seen him three or four times, leaning at the doorsill, or into the window, talking—seeming to enter into their life” (*WWC*, 9:144). Here is the relationship between the president and the people that Whitman spoke of in the 1855 Preface: “the President’s taking off his hat to them [the citizens], not they to him” (*PW*, 2:436n). While in the first rendition of the story the poet emphasizes the “plain democratic reception” he received from the elderly couple, the second makes it clear that Grant’s “high place” never interfered with his “unadorned” nature. The last phrase is even more telling for the poet whose persona presents itself as moving in and out of private places and lives of Americans across the country: Grant not only speaks with these people, he “enter[s] into their life.”

Only once more would Whitman return to his vision of Grant primarily as the conquering hero, emphasizing his grandeur more than his simplicity, and that was the occasion of Grant’s final illness and death. As Loving details, *Harper’s Weekly* commissioned Whitman to write a poem in April 1885 when it appeared the general was dying. (He survived until July 23.) Eventually entitled “Death of General Grant,” this is only Whitman’s second poetic description of the man although, as we have seen, he wrote about him in prose articles during the 1870s. In his poem, Whitman seems to do all that he can to lift Grant up to the level of those other war heroes, “the lofty actors” who have left “that great play on history’s stage eterne” (*LG*, 519). Loving refers to the work as “one of Whitman’s better poems of occasion [that] captured the autumnal mood by which both the poet and his era were now defined” (434). This is an astute assessment, and it emphasizes why the poem ultimately is not an accurate gauge of the poet’s sentiments regarding Grant. In the version first published in *Harper’s*, “As One by One Withdraw the Lofty Actors,” the poet added a stanza in recognition of the fact that the general still lived, and there he references “the hero heart” (*LG*, 519). In the rest of the piece, however, the speaker emphasizes the times and the “part” that Grant played in them:

As one by one withdraw the lofty actors,  
From that great play on history’s stage eterne,  
That lurid, partial act of war and peace—of old and new contending,  
Fought out through wrath, fears, dark dismays, and many a long suspense;  
All past—and since, in countless graves receding, mellowing,  
Victor’s and vanquish’d—Lincoln’s and Lee’s—now thou with them,  
Man of the mighty days—and equal to the days!  
Thou from the prairies!—tangled and many-vein’d and hard has been thy part,  
To admiration has it been enacted! (*LG*, 519)

Without the historical context, this poem could refer to any number of Civil War generals. Beyond the title, of course—and even that was originally the first line of the poem, not a specific reference to the general—the only possible clue to Grant’s identity as the subject is the reference to “Thou from the prairies,” and while Whitman would often find great significance in Grant’s origins, here the speaker does nothing to elaborate upon it. And the poem almost completely obscures Grant’s two terms in office, the only possible, highly oblique reference being to “That lurid, partial act of war and peace.” More than a tribute to Grant upon his passing, the poem serves as a comment upon the passage of the Civil War into history.

In his personal recollections, Whitman would often forego the heroic language to instead repeatedly emphasize Grant’s humility rather than his greatness. In looking back, he would even revise his view of the great military parade after the Union victory. Grant is no longer the noble Roman, or not simply that:

No, no, Grant was quite another man. Even that day, where was he? Off in his corner—in his place, no doubt—but making nothing of it, at most. Probably going by some obscure way to rejoin them later on. Out of all the hubbub of the war, Lincoln and Grant emerge, the towering majestic figures. There were others: Seward, Sumner, Phillips—such—elegant, refined, scholarly—the gift of college, the past, book-keen, great men: these: then, by contrast, Lincoln, Grant! Don’t that tell everything . . . Grant savored of our soil—was Saxon—Sherman Norman. Grant hated show—liked to leave things unsaid, undone—liked to defy convention by going a simple way. (*WWC*, 8:6-7)

Whitman’s Grant lives in these conversational remarks much more vividly than in his poem of a few years earlier. The General that Whitman would come to embrace, even more than in those heady days at the event of the great cataclysm of the war, was the simple man who, like Lincoln, simultaneously towered above the rest.

*Grant the Creative Genius*

In coming to see Grant as the representative American, the one who towers in the world as a result of his simple, democratic nature, Whitman left behind his doubts regarding the man as president and his apparent resentment for his dismissal from the Justice Department to accept him fully into his pantheon of the greatest Americans. In doing so, he simultaneously came to identify with him in new ways. While Grant’s figure in the world tracks with Whitman’s poetic persona, in his final years Whitman himself would more and more come to see his own struggles and achievements as a writer paralleling the career of

the general. Like Grant, he was no “literary West Pointer,” following the accepted track to prominence, and he came to see his experience under the fire of critics comparable to the military criticism of Grant and even Napoleon:

Napoleon, as a general, came up against the same class [of critics]—yes, is a good case in point. When he set to and whacked away at the enemy, the tacticians, the traditionists, the canonites, all cursed him: ‘God damn him! he is violating all the laws, the customs, of soldiering we were taught in the schools!’ but then the fellow who was getting licked would come on and cry: ‘That’s true; that’s all true; but, God damn him, he’s knocking hell out of us anyway!’ The canon proves that the poet is not a poet—but suppose he *is* a poet anyway, what can be said for the canon? . . . And that’s the method of the critics everywhere. Why—there was Grant—see how he went about his work, defied the rules, played the game his own way—did all the things the best generals told him he should not do—and won out! Suppose the poet is warned, warned, warned, and wins out? (*WWC*, 1:445-446)

In spite of the emphasis on the military, the passage itself is, of course, only nominally about either Napoleon or Grant. Whitman himself is the subject, the general plotting his own course in defiance of canons (and cannons) only to “win out” in the end. As he remarked on another occasion, “All genius defies the rules—makes it own passage—is its own precedent. But I can see how all this is emphasized in Grant: it is part of him. I more and more incline to acknowledge him” (*WWC*, 8:12). This is the inevitable conclusion of Whitman’s evolving views on Grant: in defending his genius, and “acknowledging” him, a gesture that seems fraught with import as the poet describes it, Whitman upholds his own genius in defying the rules.

His good friend Traubel encouraged such a perspective. In a conversation regarding Whitman’s medical treatment, they had the following exchange:

“And in this, therefore, as in literary matters, in writing, I listen (listen intently) to all the critics have to say—then pursue my own convictions, ‘whim’ you may call it, after all.” I said: “You listen to your friends as General Grant used to hold his councils of war.” W.: “How is that?” “Out of politeness, merely, having determined upon a course of action before anybody has a chance to offer you any advice.” W. laughed. “Do they said [sic] Grant did that?” I said: “They don’t say it: Grant has said it himself.” W. was very merry over this: “Horace, I shouldn’t wonder but I’m treed: yes, I guess you’ve got the facts in the case.” (*WWC*, 4:376-377)

A keen observer of the poet, Traubel knew how to speak to him, and it is likely that his Grant reference was deliberately chosen to elicit precisely this reaction. The two men had an almost identical discussion more than a year later. Whitman states:

“And I like to hear what all the fellows have to say—all. It is a part of the scheme, to be heard, weighed, perhaps accepted. I like it all. Then at last I stand by my own stubborn guns, for somewhere in me is the last unbendingness which must have its way.” And when I laughed and said I had written something of this sort in my paper, and spoke of Grant as of similar habit, he assented, “Yes, I have heard it of Grant, too—and how much it explains which would otherwise be inexplicable!” (*WWC*, 7:253)

In the end, Grant offered the aging Whitman a way to look at himself, his unorthodox style, his trials, and his accomplishments. Of another occasion, Traubel writes, “I reminded him of a remark he made to me years ago one noon-day on the boat: ‘If Grant is not himself poet, singer, artist, he at least contains within himself the eligibility, the subject-force, of song, art.’ He listened intently. ‘Repeat that,’ he said. I did so. Then he said: ‘Yes, I should stand by that’” (*WWC*, 2:191). If the simple facts of the case precluded labeling Grant a poet, then Whitman was sure that he had the stuff of poetry: this could help explain him. In his essay “Walt Whitman at Date,” Traubel writes, “When I once asked Whitman what three or four names of absolute greatness he thought America had so far offered, he answered interrogatively: ‘What would you say to Washington, Lincoln, Grant, and Emerson?’” (*WWC*, 8:562). The list, like so many of Whitman’s catalogs, is revealing. There is the Founding Father and eminent aristocrat; the sweet, sad savior of the Union and its martyr; there is the nation’s intellect and its inspiration; and there is Grant, the towering plain man, Whitman’s General.

*Valparaiso University*

## NOTES

1 The exceptional reference work *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, edited by J.R. Le-Master and Donald D. Kummings (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1998), offers an interesting case in point. There are numerous references to Grant throughout the encyclopedia, yet Grant himself does not receive an independent entry, nor do any of Whitman’s writings about Grant.

2 James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 718.

3 *The Correspondence*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 1:211. Hereafter *Corr*.

4 Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 272, 280-81.

5 In thinking about Whitman’s later identification with Grant, however, it may be worth recalling the poet’s demand for “races of orbic bards, with unconditional uncompromising sway. Come forth, sweet democratic despots of the west!” *Prose*

*Works 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1964), 2:407. Hereafter *PW*.

6 See Loving, 282. In a letter to his mother, Whitman notes, “I see Gen. Butler says the fault of not exchanging the prisoners is not his but Grants[sic]” (*Corr.* 1:252), but he does not seem to put much stock in this claim, perhaps because, as Miller notes, the *New York Times* published an editorial on the speech describing it as “exceedingly able, defiant and mischievous” (252n). There is no reason to think that Whitman would have been inclined to side with Butler rather than Grant in the dispute.

7 It is unclear what role Swinton’s letter played in actually accomplishing this release since, as he wrote to Whitman on February 5, the general had apparently already agreed to a general prisoner exchange. Swinton did send the letter in any case. See Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, Inc., 1961), 2:426. Hereafter *WWC*.

8 Despite Swinton’s reply to Whitman referencing the published reports of an impending exchange, Miller notes, “Swinton endorsed the envelope: ‘W.W. 1865 Asking me to help his captured brother. Successful’” (*Corr.* 1:253n). Despite this notation and the letter from Grant’s secretary, it is likely that George was part of a general prisoner exchange that did occur on February 22, 1865, as Loving observes (283).

9 Geoffrey Perret, *Ulysses S. Grant: Soldier and President* (New York: Random House, 1997), 378.

10 Loving remarks that Whitman did not vote at all in the 1884 election and that the poet commented to Traubel, “I always refrain—yet advise everybody else not to forget” (quoted in Loving 430).

11 William B. Hesseltine, *Ulysses S. Grant, Politician* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1935; rpt. 1957), 48.

12 In *Democratic Vistas*, the poet writes of “The Labor Question,” noting “the immense problem of the relation, adjustment, conflict, between Labor and its status and pay, on the one side, and the capital of employers on the other side—looming up over These states like an ominous, limitless, murky cloud, perhaps before long to overshadow us all” *PW* 2:753. Whitman removed this passage when he enfolded *DV* within *Specimen Days and Collect* in 1882.

13 Eric Foner and Olivia Mahoney, *America’s Reconstruction: People and Politics after the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 88.

14 David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 101.

15 Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 245.

16 Quoted in Jean Edward Smith, *Grant* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 442.

17 Dixon Wecter notes that while the official records indicate the January 1 starting date, “he did not set to work until several weeks later.” “Walt Whitman as Civil Servant,” *PMLA* 58 (December 1943), 1094.

18 This is an infamous episode in Whitman’s life and career. For a full account, see, among other places, Loving, 290–292.

19 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), 5:61-62. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* ([www.whitmanarchive.org](http://www.whitmanarchive.org)). Hereafter *WWC*.

20 William Gillette, *Retreat From Reconstruction, 1869-1879* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 56.

21 The reporter, John Russell Young, sent Whitman a letter from China in 1883 noting that he had heard the poet was in poor health and wishing him well. Whitman called him “the higher type of newspaper man” (*WWC*, 3:311).

22 *Leaves of Grass*, Comprehensive Reader’s Edition, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 52n. Hereafter *LG*.

23 Two of Grant’s most recent biographers take almost diametrically opposed positions regarding the question of whether or not Grant actually wanted to be president again. Smith suggests that he did (614-615), while Perret takes Grant’s frequent assertions that he did not desire the presidency to be definitive (462-463).

24 Walter H. Eitner notes, “Taken, apparently, as drum-beating for the ‘Grant boom,’ the poem was satirized by the Democratic *New York Star*.” The fact that a satirical rejoinder appeared in the papers only three days after the poem’s appearance suggests that, whatever Whitman’s intentions, the piece was seen as a kind of campaign document. The satire features supposed footnotes explaining the poem’s terminology, including the following: “‘WERE ALL SO JUSTIFIED’—an expression used by printers.” Whitman likely would not have entirely objected to this reading. See Eitner’s *Walt Whitman’s Western Jaunt* (Lawrence, KS: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1981), 81-82.

25 *The Philadelphia Press* (December 17, 1879), 8. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* ([www.whitmanarchive.org](http://www.whitmanarchive.org)).

26 In revising this poem for inclusion in the 1881 edition of *Leaves*, Whitman removes the reference to Lincoln, perhaps to remain consistent with the idea of Grant sitting where “Washington sat, ruling the land in peace,” a claim that obviously cannot be made about Lincoln. At the same time, this change denies Grant the metonymic link of his presidency to that of Whitman’s most beloved hero.

27 In another interesting revision, the version in the 1881 *Leaves* removes the word “average” from the description of the “prairie sovereigns of the West.” See *LG*, 485.

28 In his biography of Peter Doyle, Martin G. Murray describes Peter Doyle’s recollection of how he and Whitman observed Grant as he “strolled from the White House to visit Mrs. Magruder, widow of a well-respected local physician” (11). Perhaps this is one of the visits that Whitman is recalling. See “Pete the Great: A Biography of Peter Doyle,” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 12 (Summer 1994), 1-51; also available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* ([www.whitmanarchive.org](http://www.whitmanarchive.org)).