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Volume 27

Number 1 (2009)

*Special Double Issue*

pps. 66-71

# Tolerance and Elimination in Whitman's "Land of all Ideas": A Complex Prose Manuscript and a Previously Unknown Letter Fragment

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ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)  
ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

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#### Recommended Citation

Price, Kenneth M. "Tolerance and Elimination in Whitman's "Land of all Ideas": A Complex Prose Manuscript and a Previously Unknown Letter Fragment." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 27 (Summer 2009), 66-71. <https://doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.1903>

## NOTES

### TOLERANCE AND ELIMINATION IN WHITMAN'S "LAND OF ALL IDEAS": A COMPLEX PROSE MANUSCRIPT AND A PREVIOUSLY UNKNOWN LETTER FRAGMENT

Located in the Charles E. Feinberg collection at the Library of Congress is a fascinating and previously unpublished document: on one side are two prose paragraphs that contribute to the first installment of "'Tis But Ten Years Since," a six-part series that appeared in the *New York Weekly Graphic* beginning in January 1874; and on the other side is a fragment of a previously unknown letter. This manuscript, with its two separate intellectual units, illustrates the complexity of Whitman's methods of composition, highlights his fears about extremism, and illuminates his thinking about race. At another level, the document clarifies the challenges confronting the *Walt Whitman Archive* as we edit Whitman's writings.<sup>1</sup> Even with a writer as thoroughly studied as Whitman, we regularly encounter gaps in knowledge and in the published record.

As suggested above, the recto and verso of the manuscript have no clear intellectual connection uniting them. The verso reads:

¶ tThe nNorth too will get rid of eliminate (or rather has eliminated) from itself a hot,  
fierce, unreas[on]ing set squad men & women, with but a single  
idea,—in this land, of all the world the land of all ideas—also screaming in  
falsetto, as welcome a release, and elimination, in its way, as that the so—the  
^  
disappearance of the sSouth from its fire-eaters.

The second paragraph, pasted onto the page, reads:

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¶ [The fact is any theory of politics or statesmanship fit for the U.S. must  
be composite, tolerant— must be be very large.]  
^

~~The North too will get rid of from~~  
~~itself a hot, fierce, unceasing <sup>squad</sup> of~~  
~~men & women, with but a single idea—in~~  
~~this land, of all the world the land of~~  
~~all ideas—also screaming in falsetto,~~  
~~as welcome a release <sup>and elimination</sup> in its way, as that~~  
~~the ~~so the~~ disappearance of the South from~~  
~~its fire-eaters.~~

H [The fact is any theory of  
politics or statesmanship  
fit for the U. S. must be com-  
plete, tolerant <sup>must be</sup> be very large.]

Interestingly, in drafting this post-Civil War document, Whitman reuses language first employed in “The Eighteenth Presidency!” (1856)—“screaming in falsetto”—only to strike out the phrase. In “The Eighteenth Presidency!”, Whitman complained that the North and East had “swarms of dough-faces, office-vermin, [and] kept-editors,” but he was disgusted with the South, too, where he found

no end of blusterers, braggarts, windy, melodramatic, continually screaming in falsetto, a nuisance to These States, their own just as much as any; altogether the most impudent persons that have yet appeared in the history of lands, and with the most incredible successes, having pistol'd, bludgeoned, yelled and threatened America, the past twenty years into one long train of cowardly concessions, and still not through, but rather at the commencement. Their cherished secret scheme is to dissolve the union of These States.<sup>2</sup>

After associating those “screaming in falsetto” with the South in 1856, Whitman reverses himself in the newly-discovered Reconstruction-era manuscript to associate them with the North. Yet, curiously, when this manuscript reaches print in “Tis But Ten Years Since” (1874), Whitman reverses himself yet again when he restores “screaming in falsetto” as a phrase but also restores its association with the South:

The North and West have had, and still have, their full share of bladder humanity, but in the old Slave States there seemed to exist no end of blusterers, braggarts, windy, melodramatic, continually screaming in falsetto, a nuisance to the States, their own just as much as any; altogether the most impudent persons that have yet appeared

in the history of lands, and, up to 1860, with the most incredible successes, having pistol'd, bludgeoned, yelled and threatened America into one long train of cowardly concessions.

The North, too, has now eliminated, or is fast eliminating from itself, a fierce, unreasoning squad of men and women, quite insane, concentrating their thoughts upon a single fact and idea—(in the land, of all the world the land of all facts, all ideas)—full as welcome a release here as the riddance there. By that war, *exit* Fire-Eaters—*exit* Abolitionists.<sup>3</sup>

Whitman's oscillating remarks about "screaming in falsetto"—a slur on the South, then North, then South again—indicates that he was less concerned with blaming a region and more intent on attacking extremism wherever it was found: he saw fanaticism in both North and South as ruinous, and he characterizes both regions, interchangeably and negatively, via the falsetto. (The "falsetto"—at times in the nineteenth century literally a castrato—lacked the wholesome sanity and "manliness" that Whitman valued.<sup>4</sup>) Whitman's conclusion—"By that war, *exit* Fire-Eaters—*exit* Abolitionists"—says good riddance to both groups, the parallelism of his sentence suggesting they were equally unwelcome.

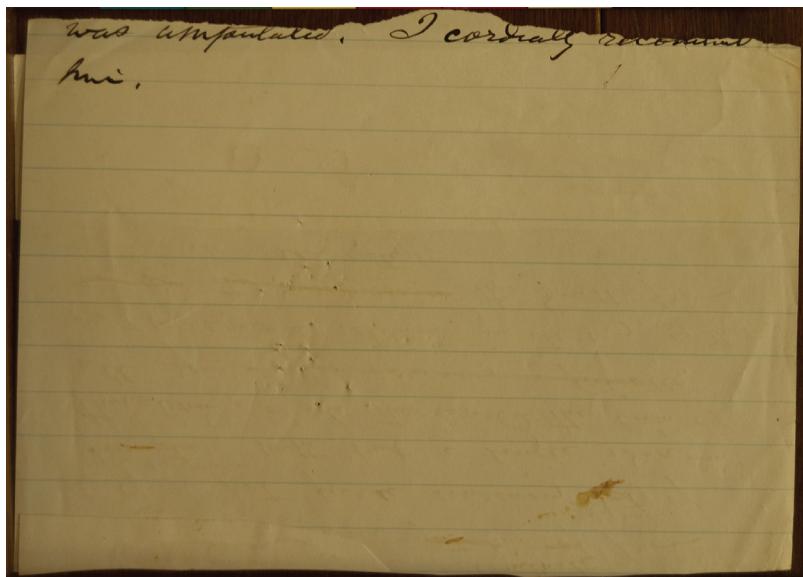
One of Whitman's assertions from "'Tis But Ten Years Since" is especially curious: his claim that the North "has now eliminated, or is fast eliminating from itself, a fierce, unreasoning squad of men and women, quite insane, concentrating their thoughts upon a single fact and idea" [emphasis added]. The manuscript source for this line had put this into the future tense, "will . . . eliminate," only to add the parenthetical claim made in the past perfect: "(or rather has eliminated from itself.)" But by the time of publication in 1874, Whitman has altered it to an equivocal choice/combination of present perfect and present progressive: the North "has now eliminated, or is fast eliminating from itself." This groping for the right tense underscores the oddity that Whitman would be worried about ridding the U.S. of abolitionists well after the Emancipation Proclamation and Northern victory in the War had made abolitionism a non-issue. It seems likely that Whitman was thinking about Radical Republicans and their extension of the logic of the abolitionist movement into the agenda of black suffrage and civil rights. This effort was already failing by 1874 and would effectively be dead two years later.

Whitman's declining sympathy for black people and reluctance to support black suffrage remain disturbing aspects of his career, and they are all the more puzzling because of the importance of cross-racial sympathy in fueling his early poetic development. For whatever reason, Whitman occasionally wished that problems he associated with black people would just vanish. He rarely used the word *eliminate* in his writing (he never used the word in his poetry—instead the focus there is on what can be encompassed, absorbed, included), yet curiously *eliminate* is present in his unpublished prose meditation "The problem of the blacks." There he asserted: "the blacks must either filter through in time or gradually eliminate & disappear, which is most likely, though that termination is far off, or else must so develop in mental and moral qualities, and in all the attributes of a leading and dominant race, (which I do not think likely)."<sup>5</sup> Usually he wished to conceive of the meaning of the Civil

War absent of racial slavery. Stunningly, in “‘Tis But Ten Years Since” Whitman notes: “To me, the war, abdicating all its grand historical aspects, and entirely untouched by the Slavery question, revolves around these miniature pages [his hospital notebooks], and what is designated by them. They are the closest; they are not words, but magic spells. Out of them arise yet active and breathing forms. They summon up, even in this silent and vacant room as a [sic] write, not only the sinewy regiments and brigades, marching or in camp, but the countless phantoms of those who fell and were hastily buried by wholesale in the battle-pits, or whose dust and bones have been since removed to the National Cemeteries, all through Virginia and Tennessee.”<sup>6</sup>

With the paste-on that he attached to the manuscript, Whitman moves from images of purging and screaming to loftier thoughts of a theory of statesmanship “composite, tolerant . . . *very large*,” with the final two words underlined in red for special emphasis. The ideas here undergo some modification and seem to shape the prose notes in the “Two Rivulets” section of *Two Rivulets*: “Of a grand and universal Nation, when one appears, perhaps it ought to have morally what Nature has physically, the power to take in and assimilate all the human strata, all kinds of experience, and all theories, and whatever happens or occurs, or offers itself, or fortune, or what is call’d misfortune.” The sentiments in the “land of all ideas” manuscript are also consistent with the immediately following note in *Two Rivulets* on “Nationality—(and Yet).”<sup>7</sup> By the time of *Two Rivulets*, the image has shifted from an emphasis on what needs to be eliminated in order to achieve the “composite, tolerant” whole, to an image of what needs to be “taken in and assimilated” to achieve the same thing (the paradox Whitman has to expunge from his own theory is that something needs to be eliminated in order to achieve composite wholeness). The manuscript thus allows us to see Whitman grappling with one of the major philosophical problems he considered throughout his career—America needs to be large enough to contain all its multitudes, yet he knows that at the margins, fanatical, hot, fierce, unreasoning groups will never tolerate their opposites (the Civil War is the proof of that) and will thus keep America from its composite wholeness, its willingness to accept all ideas.<sup>8</sup>

The incomplete recto of this newly discovered Reconstruction-era document reads simply, “was amputated. I cordially recommend him.” Based on the generic distinctions we are using for the *Whitman Archive*, one side is a prose manuscript, and the other is a fragment of correspondence, a letter of recommendation from Whitman for a soldier who suffered injury and amputation during the war. These six words *feel* unmistakably like a letter, somehow. And they serve to remind us that we are making judgments all the time when we encode documents and declare them to be one thing rather than another. What is the essence of correspondence? Does it require salutation or signature? Must it be mailed? Does a note to a printer on a proof sheet, addressing that printer and signed by name or initial constitute a letter? What about a lengthy inscription in the front of a book, addressed, for example, “Dear Pete” and signed “Walt”? And finally what is the status of documents entirely in Whitman’s hand but with closing signatures showing names different from Whitman’s own? These scribal documents, now coming to light, are certainly Whitman-aided correspondence if not exactly Whitman’s correspondence. All



but entirely ignored thus far, these scribal documents are part of Whitman's biography and intellectual life, and so should be included in an expansive treatment of his writings.

The overall physical artifact, in the case at hand, defies any single generic description, and as we transcribe and encode the document and position it as part of the larger project, other editorial questions will certainly arise. Further, the physicality of the document—an amputated document about an amputated soldier—serves as a stark reminder of Whitman's personal, yet national and social, record of the Civil War. Whitman was haunted by what would be lost in all accounts of the War—he knew how much would be eliminated, amputated, even abdicated. The real war would never get into the books. Instead we get fragments and suggestions, documents that in their torn and partial condition bear eloquent testimony to the power of loss. On one side of the manuscript, Whitman notes a soldier has lost a limb; on the other side, perhaps accidentally, he grapples with what needs to be amputated in America in order to make it whole again.

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## NOTES

1 Thanks go to the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, and the American Council of Learned Societies for supporting this editorial work.

2 *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, ed. Edward Grier (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 6:2122.

3 Whitman, *Prose Works 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 1:311-312.

4 Whitman's ideal, as expressed in "The Eighteenth Presidency!" and elsewhere, was for "a single bold, muscular, young, well-informed, well-beloved, resolute American man, bound to do a man's duty, aloof from all parties, and with a manly scorn of all parties" (NUPM 6:2122). Whitman, a lover of opera, might well have admired a falsetto singing voice, but not one screaming. Here the connotation of falsetto is decidedly negative and suggests something false and contrary to what is natural or healthy. The 1876 Webster's in fact defines *falsetto* first as "a false or artificial voice" and tracks the etymology to the Latin *falsus*, false.

5 I quote directly from a copy of this manuscript held in the Trent Collection of Walt Whitman Manuscripts, Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library. For a more extended discussion of this manuscript, see my "Whitman's Solutions to 'The Problem of the Blacks,'" *Resources for American Literary Study*, 5 (1985), 205-208.

6 Whitman, "'Tis But Ten Years Since," *New York Weekly Graphic* (January 24, 1874), 3.

7 Whitman, *Two Rivulets* (Camden: Author's Edition, 1876), 22-25. In particular, this passage is of a piece with the "land of all ideas" manuscript: "There are two distinct principles—aye, paradoxes—at the life-fountain and life-continuation of The States; one, the sacred principle of the Union, the right of ensemble, at whatever sacrifice—and yet Another, an equally sacred principle, the right of Each State, consider'd as a separate sovereign individual, in its own sphere. Some go zealously for one set of these rights, and some as zealously for the other set. We must have both; or rather, bred out of them, as out of mother and father, a Third set, the perennial result and combination of both, and neither jeopardized. I say the loss or abdication of one set, in the future, will be ruin to Democracy just as much as the loss of the other set. The problem is, to harmoniously adjust the two, and the play of the two.....[Observe the lesson of the divinity in Nature, ever checking the excess of one law, by an opposite, or seemingly opposite law—generally the other side of the same law.].....For the theory of this Republic is, not that the General government is the fountain of all life and power, dispensing it forth, around, and to the remotest portions of our territory, but that THE PEOPLE are, represented in Both, underlying both the General and State governments, and consider'd just as well in their individualities and in their separate aggregates, or States, as consider'd in one vast Aggregate, as the Union. This was the original dual theory and foundation of the United States, as distinguish'd from the feudal and ecclesiastical single idea of monarchies and papacies, and the divine right of kings.....(Kings have been of use, hitherto, as representing the idea of the identity of nations. But, to American Democracy, *both* ideas must be fulfill'd, and in my opinion the loss of vitality of either one will indeed be the loss of vitality of the other.)" (25).

8 Email exchanges with Ed Folsom contribute to my analysis here.