



Petroleum V. Nasby, Poet of Democracy, and His "Psalm of Gladness"

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PETROLEUM V. NASBY, POET OF DEMOCRACY, AND HIS
'PSALM OF GLADNESS'

In December 1866, Boston's Lee and Shepard published *Swingin' Round the Circle*, a collection of political satire written by Ohio newspaper editor David Ross Locke (1833-1888) and illustrated by political cartoonist Thomas Nast (1840-1902). Locke was a staunch Republican partisan who distinguished himself by abusing the men and ideas of the Democratic party, which suffered heavily in the 1860 to 1868 period.¹ He wrote in the voice of an alter ego, "Petroleum Vesuvius Nasby," a whiskey-addicted Copperhead with offensive opinions. One of the "Nasby letters" from this collection presents Whitman as an inspiration for Nasby, a self-styled preacher and poet of the "Dimocrisy." It has not previously been collected as a Whitman parody.

A Psalm of Gladness.—The Veto of the Civil Rights Bill, and other Matters, occasioning a Feeling of Thankfulness in the Minds of the Democracy.

CONFEDRIT X ROADS }
(wich is in the Stait uv Kentucky), }
May 1, 1866. }

I am a canary, a nightengale. A lark, am I.

I raise my voice in song. I pour forth melojus notes.

I am a lamb, wich frisketh, and waggeth his tale, and leapeth, ez he nippeth the tender grass. I am a colt, wich kicketh up its heels exuberantly.

I am a bridegroom, wich cometh from his bride in the mornin feelin releevied in the knowledge that she wore not palpitators, nor false calves, nor nothin false, afore she wuz hizn.

I am a steamboat captin with a full load, a doggry keeper on a Saturday nite, a sportin man with four aces in his hand.

All these I am, and more.

For we sought to establish ourselves upon a rock, but found that the underpinnin wuz gone out uv it.

Even slavery wuz our strong place, and our hope; but the corners hed bin knocked out uv it.

The sons uv Belial hed gone forth agin it. Massachusetts hed assailed it, and the North West hed drawd its bow agin it.

Wendell Phillips hed pecked out wun stun, Garret Smith² another; and the soljers hed completed what they hed begun.

And Congris, even the Rump, hed decreed its death, and hed held forth its hand to Ethiopia.

It passed a bill givin the Niggers their rites, and takin away from us our rites:

Sayin, that no more shel we sell em in the market place,

Or take their wives from em,

Or be father to their children,

Or make uv em conkebines aginst their will,

Or force em to toil without hire,

Or shoot em, ez we wuz wont to do under the old dispensashun,

Or make laws for em wich didn't bind us as well.

And our hearts wuz sad in our buzzums; for we said, Lo! the nigger is our ekal; and we mourned ez them hevin no hope.

But the President, even Androo, the choice uv Booth, said, Nay.

And the bill wuz vetoed, and is no law; and our hearts is made glad.

And from the Ohio to the Gulf shel go up the song uv gladness and the sounds uv mirth.

The nigger will we slay, for he elevated his horn agin us.

We will make one law for him and another for us, and he will sigh for the good old times when he wuz a slave in earnest.

His wife shel be our conkebine, ef she is fair to look upon; and ef he murmurs, we'll bust his head.

His daughters shel our sons possess; and their inkrease will we sell, and live upon the price they bring.

In our fields they shel labor; but the price uv their toil shel make us fat.

Sing, O my soul!

The nigger hed become sassy and impudent, and denied that he wuz a servant unto his brethren.

He sheltered hissself behind the Freedman's Burow, and the Civil Rites Bill, and the soldiery, and he wagged his lip at us, and made mouths at us.

And we longed to git at him, but because of these we durst not.

But now who shell succor him.

We will smite him hip and thigh, unless he consents to be normal.

Our time uv rejoicin is come.

In Kentucky, the soldiers voted,—them ez wuz clothed in gray,—and we routed the Abolishnists.

Three great capchers hev we made: New Orleans we capcherd, Kentucky we capcherd, and the President—him who aforetime strayed from us—we capcherd.

Rejoice, O my soul! for yoor good time, wich wuz so long a comin, is come.

We shel hev Post Offsiss, and Collectorships, and Assessorships, and Furrin Mishns, and Route Agencies, and sich; and on the proceeds thereof will we eat, drink, and be merry.

The great rivers shel be whisky, the islands therein sugar, the streems tributary lemon joose and bitters, and the faithful shel drink.

Whisky shel be cheap; for we shel hold the offsiss, and kin pay; and the heart uv the barkeeper shel be glad.

The Ablishnist shel hang his hed; and we will jeer him, and flout him, and say unto him, "Go up, bald head!" and no bears shel bite us; for, lo! the President is our rock, and in him we abide.

Blessed be Booth, who give us Androo.

Blessed be the veto, wich makes the deed uv Booth uv sum account to us.

Blessed be Moses³, who is a leadin us out uv the wilderness, into the Canaan flowin with milk and honey.

Lait Paster uv the Church of the New Dispensashun.⁴

The letter is dated May 1, 1866, but it was not published until it appeared in *Swingin' Round the Cirkle*.⁵ At this time, the Nasby letters were at the height of their popularity.⁶ As Nasby follows the events of American party politics, he reacts with a comic instability that makes the letters a series of “alternate jubilations and lamentations,” as one reviewer described them.⁷

To be sure, the satire’s primary target is the racist Democratic partisan who rejoiced, as Locke imagines it, in unexpected admiration of President Johnson after his surprising veto of the Civil Rights Act of 1866.⁸ Locke attacks his political opponents by pretending to speak for them in the voice of Nasby, whom he presents as their representative and leader. Locke distorts, exaggerates, and invents Democratic opinions through Nasby, and he further mocks the partisans of the Democratic Party by embedding additional jabs in Nasby’s unfortunate diction and orthography.

Drunk with pleasure, Nasby, at the start, flies like a few birds. His excessive happiness about the veto of the Civil Rights Bill is a ridiculous response to a complicated and sensitive political moment. And Locke further insults Nasby, his imagined Democratic partisan, by having Nasby express himself with comically self-damaging incompetence. For example, in 1866, “canary” denotes a kind of wine as well as a dance or frolic. A high-flying bird, the “lark” nests low to the ground; this word also denotes a spree of levity. So Nasby’s attempt to enlarge himself reinforces his reputation as a drunken, shiftless man.

This letter associates Nasby’s style of “jubilation” with the poetry of Walt Whitman. For starters, “lark” and “canary” intimate some of the qualities—intoxicated, frolicsome, high-flying, and low-living—that Whitman’s critics associated with his verse. And here “nightengale” might also suggest Whitman. At this time, his reputation as a “staunch patriot” rested on works such as *Drum-Taps* and *Sequel to Drum-Taps* and, as the reviewer in the February 24, 1866, number of the *Boston Commonwealth* noted, on “his services to our soldiers in camp and hospital.” In an April 1868 review, the London *Sun* noted that “throughout the Great Civil War,” Whitman was “to the Northern Army, what Miss Nightingale was to the British Army at Scutari throughout the War in the Crimea.”⁹ Thus Nasby suggests that the Whitman/Nightingale comparison was also evident a few years earlier. Though English, Florence Nightingale was enormously popular in America. Through her work, leadership, and medical writings, she reformed the English-speaking world’s view of nursing during and after the Crimean War (1854-1856).¹⁰ This allusion to “nightengale” can be read as an emasculating sneer at Whitman’s new reputation for hospital work and nursing verse.

Nasby then “raises [his] voice in song,” jocund and strong, echoing “So long!” the conclusion to the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*.¹¹ He continues with signature elements of Whitman’s diction as he “pour[s] forth melojus notes.” Whitman often uses the word “melodious” to describe the outpourings he

likes best. As he writes in "Chants Democratic": "At night, the party of young fellows, robust, friendly, clean-blooded, singing with melodious voices, melodious thoughts" (LG 1860, 193). Or later, in the same work: "Do you think it would be good to be the writer of melodious verses? / Well, it would be good to be the writer of melodious verses" (LG 1860, 208). In "Chants Democratic," Whitman can also be found "pouring forth." "Where fierce men and women pour forth," he writes, "as the sea to the whistle of death pours its sweeping and unript waves" (LG 1860, 133).

The second, third, and fourth lines more explicitly invoke Whitman. Nasby, fancying himself a lamb and a colt, nips "the tender grass"—a sure allusion to Whitman's tender book—and kicks "exuberantly."¹² In the third stanza, Nasby turns "bridegroom" to parody one of the more notorious passages of *Leaves of Grass*. No lusty poet turns this bridegroom out of bed as Nasby enjoys the wedding night without competition. He does not speak of tightening his bride to his thighs and hips; instead he relates a more banal discovery: his bride does not wear "false calves" or beauty-enhancing breast pads ("palpitators," as they were known in 1866).

Nasby soon offers a litany of lines beginning "I am" to identify himself with men of various occupations, and he structures his "Psalm of Gladness" by repeatedly beginning lines with ors, buts, and ands. Whitman never wrote "Sing, O my Soul," but he is well-known as a singer, and he can be found sounding an apostrophe to his soul ("O Soul!") in, to cite one example, the 1860 poem, "To My Soul" (LG 1860, 449).

The satire does not attack Whitman's verse so much as it condemns it by association with the style of Nasby. The letter could be more devoted to Whitman parody. The many full stops within lines, for example, deny Nasby the fluidity of Whitman's verse. Nasby's are halting, almost stammering with his semi-literate struggle to express his "poetic sole." And this Nasby letter moves further from Whitman's style as it develops into mock preaching. Whitman, for example, never appended the "-eth" suffix to verbs. Regular readers of Nasby would recognize this mode of "Democratic preaching" as one that often characterizes Nasby's overenthusiastic delivery of stupid political opinions.

It is worth noting that the Nasby letters can be nasty and insensitive to the feelings and opinions of all but the most calculating of Republican partisans. While it is easy to imagine how readers might laugh while reading this Nasby letter in 1866, it is hard to see how such parodies did justice to the real ethical questions underlying the debate over reconstruction policy. Some were offended that Lincoln read these letters aloud before cabinet meetings, and others were glad to see the popularity of the Nasby letters abate after 1867. It is possible that this disgust with Nasby was the result of more than a stuffy sense of propriety. Even if we remind ourselves that the Nasby letters were not meant to be read literally, and even if we doubt that many Americans did so in 1866, still we must acknowledge their capacity for brutishness. Locke was generally on the right side of the important political questions of his day, but his methods may not have served his cause, in the long run, so well as they could have. The letters too heavily indulge in language and arguments that shock and repulse more than they educate and persuade.

This particular Nasby letter suggests that Whitman's writings were sufficiently well-known to be referenced in this popular series of letters. But this remains a mystery: why would David Ross Locke drag Whitman into this attack on partisan Democrats and Andrew Johnson's reconstruction policy? Perhaps Locke regarded Whitman's poetic style as comically exaggerated; perhaps this is enough to explain how a parody of Whitman's verse could fit seamlessly into one of Nasby's signature Democratic-preacher exaltations. On the other hand, perhaps Locke also regarded Whitman, the self-styled poet of democracy, as insufficiently Republican. The letter does read like an attack on Whitman. The Nasby Letters could playfully attack important men that Locke regarded favorably; for example, after Lincoln invited Locke to the White House in the late fall of 1863, to meet the man who helped him carry the recent Ohio elections, Locke wrote a Nasby letter in which Nasby describes his meeting with Lincoln. Here Lincoln appears as "a goriller, a feendish ape," and "a thirster after blud."¹³ Locke's parody of Whitman and his verse is not so kind; the characterization of Whitman and his verse is not so obviously incorrect. Expressed as part of a seething contempt for Andrew Johnson and the men who might celebrate his erratic leadership, this parody of Whitman's verse looks much more mean-spirited than Locke's shocking, comical, and slyly boasting jokes about his interview with the President. It is impossible to know what Locke's readers thought of this melding of Whitman and Nasby, but it seems likely that some would infer that Whitman, like Nasby and Andrew Johnson, somehow fell short of Locke's popular standard for political right-thinking.

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NOTES

1 A brief and reliable biography of Locke, with a useful bibliography, is David E. E. Sloane, "Locke, David Ross." American National Biography Online. (<http://www.anb.org/articles/16/16-01007.html>). The most recent and useful scholarly biographies of Locke are John M. Harrison's books, *The Man Who Made Nasby*, *David Ross Locke* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1969) and *The Blade of Toledo* (Toledo: Toledo Blade Company, 1985). Hereafter *Man* and *BT*.

2 Nasby's "Democratic" hatred of abolitionists can be seen in the "Psalm of Gladness" which alludes to several notable abolitionists including Wendell Phillips, the preeminent Garrisonian orator, and to Gerrit Smith, who used the wealth he gained as a partner of John Jacob Astor to generously support the American Bible Society, the American Tract Society, and the American Sunday School Union. Both Phillips and Smith supported the Republicans while criticizing Lincoln for his reluctance to make the Civil War a war for slave liberation.

3 In the 1864 presidential campaign, Johnson appeared before a crowd of recently-freed slaves in Tennessee and promised, "I will indeed be your Moses, and lead you through the Red Sea of war and bondage, to a fairer future of liberty and peace." For a copy of this speech from the *Nashville Times and True Union*, see Andrew Johnson,

“The Moses of the Colored Men’ Speech,” National Park Service website (<http://www.nps.gov/anjo/historyculture/moses-speech.htm>).

4 David Ross Locke, *Swingin Round the Circkle by Petroleum V. Nasby* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1867), 138-142. See also David Ross Locke, *The Struggles of Petroleum V. Nasby* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), 70-72. In the Beacon Press edition the letter appears as “Veto of the Civil Rights Bill: ‘Sing, O My Soul!’” In presenting this material, the annotated Beacon Press edition does not mention Whitman.

5 Stephen M. Charter, Reference Archivist, Center for Archival Collections, at the Jerome Library of Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio, searched the files of the *Blade* and of Locke’s old paper, the *Jeffersonian*, and discovered that, of all the letters published in the Lee and Shepard *Swingin’ Round the Circkle*, only the Whitman parody—in which Nasby celebrates Andrew Johnson’s veto of the Civil Rights Bill—was not published first in the newspaper. (The *Blade* ran the letters first, and the *Jeffersonian* ran them, reliably, a few days later.) Charter found an older letter re-appearing in its place. The search function for the Gale Group’s database, 19th Century U.S. Newspapers (<http://www.gale.cengage.com/DigitalCollections/products/usnewspapers/index.htm>, hereafter U.S. Newspapers) generally finds at least one copy of every Nasby letter from 1865, somewhere. It finds no example of the “Psalm of Gladness” in a newspaper. Either Locke wrote the “Psalm of Gladness” and withheld it from newspaper publication because the *Blade* continued to support the President, or Locke wrote the letter later, to fill that place in the weekly series that makes up the structure of the collection. Locke did select, edit, and revise the Nasby letters before publishing them in collections. John Harrison discusses a similar example of this practice in *Man*, 148-149.

6 Sales were primed by the publication, in late August, of Frank B. Carpenter’s *Six Months at the White House*, which described President Lincoln as an habitual and enthusiastic Nasby reader. An analysis of the dismal book sales of 1866 identified *Swingin’ Round the Circkle* as the single great success scored by any Boston publisher. See “Boston Books,” *Boston Daily Advertiser* 16 (January 18, 1867), col. E, as reproduced by U. S. Newspapers.

7 “Literary Review,” *The Congregationalist* 3 (January 18, 1867), 12, as reproduced by U. S. Newspapers.

8 The act was passed over Johnson’s veto. The debate about its effectiveness was followed by the proposal and ratification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, which were designed to insure the extension of civil and political rights implied by the Thirteenth Amendment.

9 “Literary Review,” *Boston Commonwealth* (February 24, 1866), 1, as reprinted in Kenneth Price, ed., *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 120. See “Walt Whitman’s Poems,” *London Sun* (April 17, 1868), 31490, as reprinted in Price, 149.

10 For a concise scholarly biography of Nightingale, see Monica E. Baly and H. C. G. Matthew, ‘Nightingale, Florence (1820–1910),’ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/35241>). Her fame among American readers, in the decade after the Crimean War, cannot be understated. When she appears in the January 1861 number of *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine*, for example, the editor notes, “Who has not heard of Florence Nightingale? who does not know her story in all its details? . . . every American woman is familiar with the picture of the noble English heroine, and her tender sympathy as she went from bed to bed in

those horrible hospitals where lay the wounded and suffering of the bloody Crimean war.” See “Editor’s Table,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine* (January 1861), 62, as reproduced by American Periodical Series Online.

11 *Leaves of Grass* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860), 451. Available at the *Walt Whitman Archive* (<http://www.whitmanarchive.org>). Hereafter *LG* 1860.

12 Nasby’s imagined consumption of Whitman-like grass echoes L.M. Sargent’s parody of Emerson in his 1861 pamphlet, “The Ballad of the Abolition Blunder-buss.” Here Emerson flogs his horse, “Pegasus,” who is lazily “indulging in ‘Leaves of Grass,’ by Walt. Whitman.” See Len Gougeon, “Whitman, Emerson, and ‘The Ballad of the Abolition Blunder-buss,’” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 3 (Fall 1985), 21-27.

13 David Ross Locke, *The Nasby Papers* (Indianapolis: C.O. Perrine & Co., 1864), 45-47.

A PREVIOUSLY UNKNOWN 1855 *ALBION* NOTICE: WHITMAN OUTHED AS HIS OWN REVIEWER

A previously unrecorded notice of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* appeared in the September 8, 1855, issue of *The Albion: A Journal of News, Politics and Literature*, a New York weekly that operated from 1822 to 1876.¹ The bulk of the *Albion* article, titled “A Pleasant Quiz,” is a reprint of the review of the first edition that appeared in the September issue of the *United States Review*, a review that in fact Whitman wrote himself and published anonymously. What is striking about the *Albion* article is the short paragraph introducing the reprinted review: “Under the title ‘Walt Whitman and his Poems,’ the *United States Review* recently published the following article. We take it to be a smart satire upon the present tendency of authors to run into rhapsody and transcendentalism; and therefore its main fault in a literary point of view—that it suggests the notion of a man reviewing his own work—is not of much importance.” The *Albion* notice thus becomes the earliest known outing of Whitman as a writer of his own reviews (and manages to accomplish the outing in a subordinate clause). The title of the *Albion* article, “A Pleasant Quiz,” invites the reader to test the self-reviewing hypothesis by reading the *United States Review* piece to see if it doesn’t in fact sound like “a man reviewing his own work.”

Previously, the earliest known outing of Whitman as an anonymous self-reviewer was in an unsigned review in the *New York Daily Times* in 1856 that called Whitman an “original thinker and blind egotist.” The *Daily Times* reviewer seems to have taken the *Albion*’s “pleasant quiz” and extended it to another review as well: “On subsequently comparing the critiques from the *United States Review* and the *Phrenological Journal* with the preface of the *Leaves of Grass*, we discovered unmistakable internal evidence that Mr. WALT WHITMAN, true to his character as a Kosmos, was not content with writing a book, but was also determined to review it; so Mr. WALT WHITMAN, had