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NOTE

WHITMAN AND THE PROSLAVERY PRESS: NEWLY RECOVERED 1860 REVIEWS

A previously uncollected review of the 1860 *Leaves of Grass* appeared in the *New York Day Book* on June 9, 1860. Nathaniel R. Stimson founded the *Day Book* in 1848 to "promote the proslavery cause among New York City's commercial interests."[1] The periodical billed itself as the "White Man's Paper" and even briefly changed its name to the *Caucasian* while under the control of John H. Van Evrie and Rushmore G. Horton. As Thayer & Eldridge were promoting the third edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Van Evrie was preparing and advertising his most notorious work, *Negroes and Negro Slavery: The First an Inferior Race: The Latter its Normal Condition* (1861), which championed the notion of "subgenation," a term Van Evrie coined for the "natural or normal relation of an inferior to a superior race."[2] As Martin Klammer notes, Van Evrie's writings appealed "to part of the same audience that Whitman was always hoping to reach: socially insecure whites in search of a sense of identity that could help make the existing social and economic systems more tolerable."[3] When Whitman's radical abolitionist publishers turned to Van Evrie's copperhead newspaper for a review of the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*, they knew a warm reception was unlikely, despite the fact that Whitman and the *Day Book* targeted some of the same readers.

In their May 24, 1860, letter to Whitman, Thayer & Eldridge notified the poet that they had distributed review copies of *Leaves of Grass* (via Henry Clapp Jr.) to New York's "Editorial Fraternity," a politically diverse group of periodicals which included Clapp's *Saturday Press*, Van Evrie's *Day Book*, James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald*, Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune,* and J. Warner Campbell's *New York Illustrated News*.[4] Earlier in March, Clapp had suggested exactly this plan: distribute *Leaves of Grass* to New York's most popular newspapers regardless of their likely responses.[5] Thayer & Eldridge eventually took Clapp's advice, expressing their hopes to Whitman that *Leaves of Grass* would have a "strong effect" upon the editors of these periodicals, "readers who command the Press." The "effect" on the *Day Book* was indeed "strong": *Leaves of Grass* was denounced as the "maddest folly and the merest balderdash that ever was written." Van Evrie's disgust in the *Day Book* over Thayer & Eldridge's new volume would have been fairly predictable considering both parties' respective political allegiances. The *Day Book*'s attack on Whitman channels these acute political differences, incorporating proslavery rhetoric aimed at abolitionists like Thayer & Eldridge who defended what Van Evrie argued was a degraded and animalistic negro population. Thus, Van Evrie's Whitman is a poet "disfigured by the most disgusting beastiality [sic]," a "great strong, filthy bull, delighting alike in his size and his strength,

and his filth." If Van Evrie's appraisal of *Leaves of Grass* fails to astonish, Thayer & Eldridge's attempt to drum up publicity for Whitman by soliciting hostile critics like the *Day Book* should likewise come as no surprise given the publishers' unorthodox promotional strategies. For example, *Leaves of Grass Imprints*, Thayer & Eldridge's ambitious, 64-page pamphlet advertising the 1860 edition, reprints several vitriolic reviews of Whitman and his poetry, the same kind of material an appeal to the *Day Book* was apt to produce. Here is the review as it appeared in the *New York Day Book*:

LEAVES OF GRASS. Boston: Thayer & Eldridge. Year 85 of the States—(1860-61)

This is a new edition of the work of Walt Whitman, which some years ago created so great a sensation both in this country and abroad, and it seems now destined to renew the former effect. It is very much discussed and criticized, and is indeed a singular production. Distinguished by power of a certain sort, by bursts of originality, by occasional undoubted cleverness, it is also disfigured by the most disgusting beastiality we remember ever to have seen in print; a beastiality which is the most prominent feature of the book, which is utterly animal, and so marked that it not only gives tone to the work, but indicates the character of the writer. Vigorous, coarse, vulgar, indecent, powerful, like a great strong, filthy bull, delighting alike in his size and his strength, and his filth; full of egotism, rampant, but not insufferable, fully believing himself to be a representative man and poet of the American people; persuaded that he is the great poet whose advent the world is waiting for, and that his errand is to sing his own individuality, his own peculiarities, whether physical or spiritual, but particularly physical; his own idiosyncracies, whether little or great; his own characteristics, whether noble or mean; and all these not so much because they are his individualities and characteristics and idiosyncracries, as because he thinks they typify those of other Americans—this is Walt Whitman's character and notions, as they seem to be developed in his Leaves of Grass. The measure in which he writes is his own, and is often no measure at all, but a sort of alliteratives [sic] style, with a certain rough music in it; his style is outside of all rules, transgresses, grammar and rhetoric, it jumbles up slang and vulgarity with choice language, huddles together English and scraps of French and Latin and Spanish in the absurdest fashion, and yet at times has a certain terseness that is telling. The book is, in many respects abominable; in many respects the maddest folly and the merest balderdash that ever was written; but it unfortunately possesses these streaks of talent, these grains of originality, which will probably preserve the author from oblivion. We should advise nobody to read it unless he were curious in literary monstrosities, and had a stomach capable of digesting the coarsest stuff ever offered by caterers for the reading public, and yet those who are catholic enough to appreciate two grains of wheat hid in two bushels of chaff, will not be uninterested in the volume.

On June 25, 1860, Whitman's name reappears in the *Day Book* in an excerpt from the New Orleans *Daily Delta* (1845-1863), a newspaper that paid considerable attention to Whitman in the summer of 1860. Following Clapp's insistence, Thayer & Eldridge made sure copies of *Leaves of Grass* penetrated the offices of New York's most prominent papers—even Van Evrie's *Day Book*—but Whitman's publishers were reluctant (perhaps even unable) to engage a Southern readership in the same way. As Ted Genoways has shown, Thayer & Eldridge—

constricted by laws banning anti-slavery literature and suspected in Alabama of disseminating abolitionist propaganda through their book agents—were plagued by a "near-total inability to sell books in the South."[6] The following previously undocumented review from the *Daily Delta* criticizes Thayer & Eldridge for refusing to introduce *Leaves of Grass* to the South and assaults Whitman with thinly veiled racist invective. Here is the article as it first appeared in the *Daily Delta* on June 17, 1860:

WALT WHITMAN

There is an unkempt, uncouth poet of New York, or rather of Brooklyn, whose name on earth, in secular parlance, is Walt Whitman. The Cincinnati Commercial calls him the "Yahoo of American literature."[7] Judging from specimens of his jargonic poetry, which we have seen, (his publishers have not sent the lately published volume of his "Leaves of Grass" to the South;) we think the Commercial scarcely does justice to his peculiar merits in calling him a Yahoo. We think rather that he can claim a comparison with the gorilla, one of the peculiarities of which is to pile up chunks of wood, in rude imitation of the house-building of his Ethiopian neighbors, but without having the slightest idea of making a house or any other rational object in view. Just so does Walt Whitman seem to pile up words. If they mean nothing, it is all the same. Something and nothing are one, according to the Brahmic theory which this nondescript poet appears to have borrowed from the mystic sage of Concord, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson says that Leaves of Grass gave him "great and unspeakable inward joy." We can almost envy the sage's vegetarian appetite, and can find no limit to our admiration for his powers of digestion. We don't object to salad, indeed, rather affect it, when served up according to true gastronomic art. But we confess that we can't readily take to grass, literal or metaphorical, when pulled up by the roots and tossed to us with a pitchfork as if we were a hungry herbivorous beast.

Walt Whitman has evidently fallen into the mistake of many strong-natured, egotistical and unbalanced men, of supposing that to despise the graces, amenities, and conventions of art is the more fully to place themselves in sympathy with nature. They forget that there is only a verbal, not an unverbal distinction between nature and art, and that the grandest and the most trivial things done by man in the way of art are as natural as falling dew or blooming flowers.

The connections the *Daily Delta* draws among the "Ethiopian," "the gorilla," and Whitman would have appealed to readers of the *Day Book*, especially those sympathetic with Van Evrie's pseudo-scientific theories of race. Though Van Evrie would insist that God created "the Negro" and "the Caucasian" separately, the *Delta*'s racist parody shares with the author of *Negroes and Negro Slavery* a discourse that placed the Ethiopian—what Van Evrie calls "the isolated negro of Africa"—at the base of humanity, the "last and least, the lowest in the scale but possibly the first in order of Creation."[8] For crude comedic effect, the *Delta*'s lampoon of Whitman ostensibly allows Van Evrie's "lowest" to occupy the most sophisticated position in the brief prose sketch, though the African's proximity to the gorilla insures that readers will not confuse the Ethiopian for a more "civilized" species. Whereas the Ethiopian can build a house with a "rational object in view," the gorilla can only perform

a "rude imitation" of his neighbor. Whitman and his "jargonic poetry," in imitating the gorilla (whose base instincts mimic the Ethiopian), rest at the bottom of the *Delta*'s evolutionary scale. The *Day Book* racializes Whitman through repeated references to his "beastiality," but the *Delta* makes literal Van Evrie's implication, subordinating Whitman to both the Ethiopian and the gorilla, coloring all three with a culturally legible black-face.[9]

As proof that they are not "exaggerating Walt Whitman's oddities as a poet," the *Daily Delta* then reprints "Poemet" from the *New York Saturday Press* as an example of "the least rhapsodic and ragged, and least unintelligible" of the poet's compositions.[10] Following "Poemet" is the *Delta*'s own parody of Whitman reprinted below:

If Walt Whitman had occasion to put forth his notions of poetry and poets in dithyrambic form, we can well imagine the strain to run in this wise:

If a great poet thinks he sings, and sings not,[11]
Very good!
Or if a great poem thinks it's sung, and the great poet
    who sung it never lived nor loved, nor was married
    to immortal verse or to a human female, nor
    drank brandy, nor chewed tobacco, nor stimulated
    his brain with coffee,
Very good also!
Or if the great poem is sung, but thinks it's not sung,
    let it be content.
Any way and every way, these are all dreams and all facts;
These are all facts and all dreams;
As dreamy and as factual as the mill between Heenan
    and Sayers, the Common Council, the Chicago
    Convention, the Great Eastern, John Brown and
    the "irrepressible conflict."[12]
All these things are equally something and nothing,
Nothing and something.
Let them alone!
Come away!!
Pshaw!!!
But, to speak the truth that is in me, and in you, too,
    who are only a shadow of me, it is the sublime
    nihility of these things that inflates me with poetic
    emptiness—
Inflates me, myself, and not you, or Thomas, Richard
    or Henry—
Inflates me, I mean, and Emerson, who is only another
    mood of me—
Inflates us both, who are one, I say, and causes us to
    riot in a chaos of uninterpretable lingo, and to shout
    from empyrean height of unspeakable joy
Whoop-de dooden-doo!

The *Delta* concludes its critique of Whitman with excerpts from the *New York Albion* which again parody the poet and attack his work as "monstrous beyond belief."[13] In the following weeks the *Delta* would return to Whitman again and again as a target of derision. On June 24, 1860, the *Delta* featured "A Specimen from Walt Whitman," which reprinted Whitman's "Manahatta," introduced by the following two paragraphs:

Last Sunday we gave some inklings of Walt Whitman's style of poetry, the peculiar merit and charm of which, say the critics who have espoused his claims to unlimited Parnassian honors, consist in its lusty naturalness. There is a huge deal of cant and nonsense babbled about nature—some things being condemned summarily because unnatural, and other things approved unhesitatingly because natural. We would like to know, to begin with—and that involves the whole question—what is nature, or rather what, in the whole range of human thought and experience, is *not* nature. But we will not pause here to investigate the question.

We will only say, for the benefit of those who are disposed to put inestimable store by Walt Whitman's lusty naturalness, that an alligator floundering in a slough, a hog wallowing in the mire, a buzzard plunging its beak into carrion, and many other objects of similar dignity, may all be lusty and natural, but not particularly sublime, beautiful, captivating, or even pleasant. We have no disposition to assert that Walt Whitman may not be lusty and natural. At least we are willing for his admirers to make the most of the proposition. It is not the thing itself—lusty naturalness—that is the subject of either esthetic or moral consideration, but the quality of the thing. And what is the quality of the thing, let the reader judge from one other specimen: ["Manahatta" is then reprinted followed by a missing passage.]

The *Delta*'s final appraisal of "Manahatta" remains a mystery—all available copies of the newspaper on microfilm are reproduced from an original which is missing the final paragraph.

Regardless of what that paragraph had to say about Whitman's work, the *Delta* did not dismiss the poet for long. The paper returned to Whitman again on July 15, 1860, in the appropriately titled "Walt Whitman Again." The bulk of the article consists of a lengthy *Vanity Fair* reprint, but the *Delta*'s short prose introduction to "The Torch-Bearer" is noteworthy as a record of Whitman's increasing public visibility in the heart of the South.[14] The *Delta* writes:

Whenever a promising vein of nonsense is opened, it is worked most industriously by the wags of literature. We all remember how, upon the appearance of Longfellow's Hiawatha, the papers were filled with parodies of it; and how the intellectual ribs of the public were tickled with the innumerable burlesques that appeared.

Walt Whitman is at present the rage. He is celebrated by many vagrant pens. Like Falstaff, he is not only funny himself, but the cause of fun in others.

The last effort to attain the height which this new author appears in the last number of Vanity Fair, and we reproduce it here in order that the lungs of our readers may be exercised by the moans of gentle and moderate cachination [sic]:

If Whitman was the laughing stock of the *Delta*, a source of "gentle and moderate cachination"—"not only funny himself, but the cause of fun in others"—he was so because his poetry was "the rage" in the summer of 1860. Thanks in part to Thayer & Eldridge's aggressive marketing strategy, which placed copies of *Leaves of Grass* in the hands of proslavery men like Van Evrie and comic journals like *Vanity Fair*, Whitman's notoriety was building in the South, an area his publishers were unable to access directly as the nation's "irrepressible conflict" became increasingly unavoidable.

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NOTES

1 C. Peter Ripley, *The Black Abolitionist Papers: The United States, 1859-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 402n.

2 Jennifer L. Weber, *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln's Opponents in the North* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 162.

3 Martin Klammer, *Whitman, Slavery, and the Emergence of Leaves of Grass* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 94.

4 Thayer & Eldridge to Walt Whitman, May 24, 1860, Charles E. Feinberg Collection of the Papers of Walt Whitman, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Available at the *Walt Whitman Archive* (www.whitmanarchive.org/).

5 Henry Clapp Jr.'s May 14, 1860, letter to Whitman is quoted in Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (various publishers, 1906-1996), 2:375. Available on the Walt Whitman Archive (www.whitmanarchive.org/).

6 Ted Genoways, *Walt Whitman and the Civil War: America's Poet during the Lost Years of 1860-1862* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 61.

7 "Walt. Whitman's New Poem," *The Cincinnati Daily Commercial* (December 28, 1859), 2. Available on the Walt Whitman Archive (www.whitmanarchive.org/).

8 John H. Van Evrie, *Negroes and Negro Slavery* (New York: Van Evrie, Horton & Co., 1861), 136; 148.

9 For further discussion of racialized depictions of Whitman in the press see Kenneth M. Price's chapter "Whitman in Blackface" in *To Walt Whitman, America* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 9-36; Eric Conrad, "Am I Not a Man and a Poet?: A Recently Recovered Whitman Caricature," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 27(Winter 2010), 159-164.

10 "Poemet" was first printed in the *New York Saturday Press* (January 28, 1860); it appeared as "Calamus 17" in the 1860 *Leaves of Grass* and was later entitled "Of Him I Love Day and Night" in 1867.

11 The *Daily Delta*'s parody alludes to Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Brahma" published in the *Atlantic Monthly* (November 1857), 48. Emerson's poem begins, "If the red slayer think he slays, / Or if the slain think he is slain, / They know not well the subtle ways / I keep, and pass, and turn again." The poem was often parodied; the *Delta* takes its first line ("If a great poet thinks he sings") from the popular parody "Brahmic" published in *Mother Goose for Grown Folks* (New York: Rudd & Carlton, 1860).

12 "Heenan and Sayers": American bare-knuckle boxer John Heenan and his English counter-part Tom Sayers. Heenan challenged Sayers to a highly publicized, international championship-match which was held in London in January 1860. After thirty-seven brutal rounds, the match was declared a draw. Dissatisfied supporters of both fighters debated the referee's decision to end the contest; eventually both Sayers and Heenan were awarded championship belts. "Chicago Convention": The 1860 National Convention of the Republican Party was held in Chicago, Illinois. Though Senator William Henry Seward was the heavy favorite entering the convention, Republicans ultimately nominated former U.S. Representative of Illinois Abraham Lincoln for President and Maine Senator Hannibal Hamlin for Vice-President. "Great Eastern": The SS *Great Eastern* was an English iron sailing steam ship designed by Isambard Kingdom Brunel. At the time of its launch in 1858, the *Great Eastern* was the largest ship ever built. In June 1860 the ship made its first voyage to the United States. "John Brown and the 'irrepressible conflict'": On October 25, 1858, Senator William H. Seward delivered a speech in Rochester, New York, in which he described slavery and freedom as being in "irrepressible conflict" with each other. Seward predicted that "the United States must and will . . . become either entirely a slave-holding nation or entirely a free-labor nation." Southerners often cited the polarizing rhetoric of speeches like Seward's as the catalyst for abolitionist John Brown's violent, failed attempt to seize control of the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia and to lead a slave rebellion.

13 *New York Albion* (May 26, 1860), 249.

14 [William Winter], "The Torch-Bearer. A Paean for the Fourth of July. (After Walt Whitman.)," *Vanity Fair* (July 7, 1860), 23.