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Walt Whitman's Journalism

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NEW ON THE *WHITMAN ARCHIVE*



WALT WHITMAN'S JOURNALISM

Why edit Whitman's journalism at all? This question is similar to one I am often asked as an historian with an interest in the poet: why Walt Whitman? I suspect literary critics are asked this question less often since Whitman's reputation in US literary history still justifies itself. However, historians are sometimes required to defend the significance of a topic in its context and, frankly, Whitman's journalism, for the most part, was not very important in its context. While there are often discoveries of lost journalism (most recently of Whitman's series "Manly Health and Training," expertly edited and introduced in these pages by Zachary Turpin), the significance of this journalism lies in the retrospective projection of the poet's later reputation onto these sources. One of the reasons that journalistic series like "The Sun-Down Papers" (1840-41), "Letters from a Travelling Bachelor" (1849-1850) and "Manly Health and Training" (1858) remained "lost" for so long is that they were, first, often published pseudonymously or without a byline (which was common during this era) and, second, they were just not that significant to their times, or, frankly, to ours, except as part of Whitman's "long foreground."

In his famous letter to Whitman, Emerson compared *Leaves of Grass* to a sunbeam that forced him to rub his eyes in surprise; the poetry "must have had a long foreground somewhere . . ." It is this "somewhere" that justifies the publication of the journalism on the *Archive*. This has so far led to a prescribed method for choosing which writings appear on the *Archive*, as opposed to the publish-it-all approach of the *The Complete Writings of Walt Whitman*, begun by New York University Press in 1961, and now continued by Peter Lang Publishers, at least regarding Whitman's journalism. The "long foreground" approach has the benefit of easy justification: Whitman was in the newspaper business for nearly twenty years before *Leaves of Grass*; all those years of writing, all those thousands of words in newsprint, must include some

elements that foreshadow Whitman's sensibility and style. There is as much convenience as there is merit in this argument.

Starting with the "Civil War Journalism," the *Archive* framed Whitman's journalism by an historical event or an early style that ended up in *Leaves of Grass* or foreshadowed more well-known prose. For example, the *Archive* first published the "Brooklyniana" series (1861-1862) and Whitman's reports from Civil War Washington for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* and the *New-York Times* to give scholars and students access to the poet's first-person prose perspective on events that eventually shaped works like *Drum-Taps*, *Memoranda During the War*, and *Specimen Days*. Starting in 2012, the *Archive* began to edit four key series of Whitman's pre-*Leaves* journalism that represented some of his earliest attempts to create a persona in print. Funded by a National Endowment for the Humanities "Scholarly Editions" grant, editors and research assistants transcribed, encoded, and annotated four series—"Sun-Down Papers," "Letters from a Travelling Bachelor," "Letters from Paumanok," and "New York Dissected"—and published them alongside images of complete issues where the editorials appeared. The publication of these editions with images of full issues allows the user to interact with an editorial in its "natural habitat," surrounded by articles of local interest and contemporary color to give some sense of the context in which Whitman's words appeared. These issues, alongside the historical annotations provided with each edition, further illuminate the "foreground" of Whitman's better-known writing. A particularly compelling benefit of these editions is their searchability. Now, users can trace the life of well-known Whitmanisms like "loafer" and "to loafe," which first appeared in 1840 in "Sun-Down Papers," and continued throughout his career, in fiction ("Fortunes of a Country-Boy" from 1846), in verse (*Leaves of Grass* in 1855), in marginalia (regarding Diderot in 1856), and in letters (to Peter Doyle in 1868, among others), to the end of his life in *With Walt Whitman in Camden*.

Lately, the *Archive* has started to edit Whitman's *New York Aurora* journalism from the spring of 1842. This series contains some of Whitman's earliest street-level explorations of humanity, which most famously appeared in his catalogs of urban life, the "blab of the pave." The *Archive* already displays full-issue scans of the *Aurora* between

February and May 1842, which most likely covers the period when Whitman wrote for and edited the paper, but also includes a portion of the editorship of Thomas Low Nichols, the water-cure advocate and husband of the early marriage reformer and women's health advocate, Mary Grove Nichols. Nichols, before editing the *Aurora*, wrote for James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald*, thereby connecting Whitman to the penny press print culture of the period. Likewise, of some interest are Nichols' reports on Charles Dickens' visit to New York in 1842, and Whitman's editorials in defense of the British author. The *Archive* will publish editions of Whitman's editorials from the *Aurora* in the coming months.

But attribution is one of the longstanding and ongoing problems of editing Whitman's journalism. In an era when journalists published without a byline or under a pseudonym, how do we know what was written by Whitman and what wasn't? So far, the *Archive* has depended upon the work of previous editors of Whitman's journalism like that of Herbert Bergman, Douglas Noverr, and Edward Recchia, whose *Complete Journalism* (1998, 2003) so far collects Whitman's journalism to 1848. While this dependence on previous editions has proven convenient, the ongoing discovery of new Whitman journalism threatens to render these "complete" print editions incomplete. Fortunately, the digital medium of the *Archive* allows editors to revise, update, and incorporate newly discovered works by Whitman. However, controversial collections of Whitman's journalism, like the editorials from the *Brooklyn Daily Times*, where Whitman published in the late 1850s, present a particularly sticky problem. While Karen Karbiener has made a compelling case in these pages for attributing many or most of these editorials to Whitman, scholars hope to utilize the power of computational linguistics to more assuredly identify Whitman's journalism. Regarding the *Brooklyn Daily Times*, my research assistants and I at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville used a dataset of over 400 editorials from the *Times* that Douglas Noverr and I are editing for volume three of the *Complete Journalism*, to compare to contemporary journalism from the *New York Herald* and the *New York Tribune*, as well as known editorials by Whitman from the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (where there is ample historical evidence of Whitman as editor) and consulted

with Shlomo Argamon, a computational linguist at the Illinois Institute of Technology, to analyze the probability that Whitman authored the editorials in the *Times*.¹ Future editions of Whitman's journalism on the *Walt Whitman Archive* will benefit from the power of computational linguistics to lend further credence to attribution claims for Whitman's journalism.

The future of the journalism on the *Archive* presents at least two options. While publishing select series based on Emerson's "foreground" makes sense, the possibilities of editing and publishing complete corpuses like Whitman's *Aurora* or *Daily Times* editorials offer exciting opportunities. Does the *Archive* try to publish *all* of Whitman's journalism—a long-term, complex, and, considering the issues of attribution, fraught task? Or, does the *Archive* identify new key series—say, the journalism penned by Whitman about the time he was generating the third edition of *Leaves of Grass*—and thereby make choices for users as to what of the journalism is significant? The easy answer is for the *Archive* to attempt to do both, but, of course, each requires its own set of decisions which will require potentially different investments in finances and personnel. Luckily, the medium of digital editing allows the flexibility to adapt according to new scholarship and technology, which will no doubt continue to shape the ways in which Whitman's long foreground is realized in the digital format.

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NOTES

1 See Karen Karbiener, "Reconstructing Whitman's Desk at the Brooklyn Daily Times," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 33 (2015), 24. For more information on Argamon's methods, see Moshe Koppel, Jonathan Schler, and Shlomo Argamon, "Authorship attribution in the wild," *Language Resources and Evaluation* 45 (2011), 83-94. We plan to publish the results of Argamon's analysis in *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman: The Journalism*, Vol. III, 1848-1858 (Peter Lang, forthcoming).