Notes on the Correspondence

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

Copyright © 1991 The University of Iowa

Recommended Citation
"Notes on the Correspondence." Walt Whitman Quarterly Review 8 (Winter 1991), 34-42.
https://doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.1297

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.
NOTES

LETTER .01

This and the following eight recently rediscovered letters grant us insight into WW's brief career as a schoolteacher in 1840 and 1841. At this time he took a leave of absence as it were from journalism in which, given his age, he had enjoyed remarkable success, for the life of an itinerant teacher in elementary schools.

The salary was meager and there was little status attached to the position. An added condition of employment—WW would perhaps have said humiliation—was that he had to accept room and board in the home of one of the villagers and, worse from his viewpoint, the restrictions, ignorance, and surveillance of rural America, the same democratic society which only fifteen years later he was to glorify and idealize in Leaves of Grass, as he established his reputation as the poet of democracy.

In these letters he delighted in facile verbal abuse and sometimes sophomoric literary affectations which demonstrated his superiority to the villagers but which probably masked an inner restlessness and insecurity in his foundering to discover his identity and his voice.

Despite the seeming warmth of his bantering relationship with Abraham Paul Leech (1815-1886), it proved to be short-lived. WW, always alone, always the solitary singer, drifted down the open road while Leech lived out his life in Jamaica as a bookkeeper and a member of the Presbyterian Church. If he was later aware of Whitman's emergence as the great American original, there are no extant records or letters.

In the notes to these letters I have drawn heavily upon Arthur Golden's documentation accompanying their publication in American Literature. WW's recordings in his notebooks provide a compact account of the period between 1839 and 1842; see NUPM.

LETTER .02

The reference to "southern banks" may be, as Golden suggests, a private joke. As a result of the Panic of 1837 banks in the South and the East were forced to suspend payments.

LETTER .03
"Grahamite": a follower of Sylvester Graham (1794-1851), who advocated temperance and the consumption of whole wheat (hence graham flour).

LETTER .04
"Ipecachuana": WW probably intended to write "ipecacuanha." "Antimonial wine": an irreverent allusion to antimonial powder, an emetic, sometimes called James's powder. The anal allusions begin in the first sentence, "the bowels of compassion" and continue throughout the letter, "period of purgation," a graphic description of "the gripes," and a reference to a "dung boat."
"Little Matty": Martin Van Buren, a Democrat, opposed William Henry Harrison, a Whig, for the presidency in 1840.

34
“Choctaw language”: the language of the Choctaw people, in jargon the gibberish of a strange language.

“Loco-focoism”: a radical group among New York Democrats. After Charles King, a Whig, in the Long Island Farmer on October 6, 1840, branded WW a “loco-foco,” he replied to “this slanderous and contemptible scoundrel!” on the same day in the Long Island Democrat. WW was particularly incensed that King had accused Van Buren and the Democratic party of upholding the doctrine of a “community of goods, wives, and children.” In uttering this “lie,” WW declared, King “acted as no gentleman would act.” See Joseph Jay Rubin, “Whitman in 1840: A Discovery,” AL, 9 (1937):239-42.

LETTER .04.5

LETTER .04.20

“Magnificent fortification”: Fort Totten Battery was completed in 1846; see Golden, 356n.

“Great round face of the sun”: see “Song of Myself,” 1855 edition, 11. 552-63.

LETTER .06

Golden (357) argues convincingly that this letter was written from Whitestone in May 1841.

LETTER .07

WW wrote from New York City. Meeks has not been identified, and nothing is known of WW’s trip to Ithaca.

LETTER .08

LETTER 118.1

Mrs. Briggs, the wife of the pastor of the First Parish Church in Salem, Massachusetts, heard of WW’s work in the Washington hospitals through her brother, Dr. LeBaron Russell; see Corr., 1, 188.

In her letter of April 22 Mrs Briggs wrote: “I inclose seventy-five dollars, which I have collected among a few friends in Salem, and which I hope may be of some little service to our brave boys, who surely should not suffer while we have the power to help them. You have our warmest sympathy in your generous work, and though sad to witness so much suffering, it is indeed a privilege to be able to do something to alleviate it” (Hanley; Donaldson, 151-52; Dedmond, 546).

LETTER 164.1.1
MS: Robert H. Taylor Collection, Princeton University.

This is the third appearance of this letter in the Correspondence. Parts of the letter were based on a transcription in The Overland Monthly and on a partial facsimile in The Flying Quill at Goodspeed’s Book Shop (March 1968); see 1: 270-71, and 5: 285-86. The third and fourth paragraphs appear here for the first time.

Apparently Anson Ryder, Jr., left Armory Square Hospital and, accompanied by another injured soldier named Wood (probably Calvin B. Wood; see NUPM, 6:673), returned to his family at Cedar Lake, New York.

On August 9 (LC: Feinberg) Ryder wrote to WW to apologize for leaving Washington hastily and to remind him of a “promised” photograph, which is the famous frontispiece to the first edition of Leaves of Grass in 1855.
On August 25 (LC: Feinberg) Ryder acknowledged receipt of WW's letter and photograph as well as a letter from Dr. Smith, who may be Thomas C. Smith, a Washington physician.

Sergeant Hiram W. Frazee, Second New York Artillery, was wounded in "one of the last battles near Petersburg" (PW, 624). WW wrote to Ryder about Frazee in some detail on December 14, 1866 (see Corr., 5:290).

LETTER 276.4

Dr. Bowen, a "contract surgeon" with the United States Army, served at Armory Square Hospital. According to Westbrook, there is no way of determining whether he received the appointment he sought. Dr. Baldwin was a member of the Board of Health in Washington, D. C.

LETTER 674

Carter (1819-1879) was the editor of various Boston newspapers and co-editor with Charles A. Dana (1819-1897) of the New American Cyclopaedia. While editor of the New York Sun Dana had permitted WW to print without authorization Emerson's famous letter of 1855.

LETTER 684.5

LETTER 697.5
This thank-you note was written on a white card about the size of a nineteenth-century calling card, and appeared in an auction at Swann Galleries, New York, on October 11, 1990.

LETTER 713

The "true statement," as Golden suggests, refers to "Walt Whitman's Actual American Position"; see also Corr., 3:20-21.

LETTER 864.5

On May 5, 1878, Lanier informed WW that he had discovered a copy of Leaves of Grass in Bayard Taylor's library and had "spent a night of glory and delight upon it." Now "among your most earnest lovers," he ordered a copy of the book (Traubel, 1:208). Lanier's ardor was short-lived.

LETTER 869.5

WW went to New York to attend the funeral of William Cullen Bryant on June 14, 1878, and stayed with John H. Johnston, a jeweler and old friend. As the letter indicates, WW paid a visit to John Burroughs before he returned to New York, where he remained until July 10; see Corr., 3:120-28.
LETTER 930.5

On November 27, 1878, WW sent “Three Young Men’s Deaths” to John Fraser, editor of Cope’s Tobacco Plant, through Josiah Child, who was associated with the publishing firm of Trübner & Company; see Corr. 3:140-41.

LETTER 980.5
MS: Location unknown. FACSIMILE: Catalog of Charles Hamilton Auction, October 18, 1979.

Minot Judson Savage (1841-1918) was a Congregational minister in his early years, but when he found himself deeply influenced by the theories of evolution, he decided to become a Unitarian. He published such works as The Problem Attempted to be Solved by the Trinity and Science and the Church. See also DBN, 1:209.

LETTER 1021.5

“No. 2” was part of a series of six articles entitled “How I Get Around at 60 and Take Notes.” WW’s lengthiest comment on the writings of Hugo appeared in the New York Daily Graphic in 1874; see PW, 2:759.


LETTER 1021.6
MS: Feinberg.

Although no envelope is now with the card, WW sent books on April 6, 1881, to Albert D. Shaw (1857-1947), who at the time was the United States Consul in Manchester, England; see DBN, 1:237. He was the founder and editor of the American Review of Reviews from 1891 to 1937 and author of Abraham Lincoln (1929). Shaw’s letter to WW on March 26, 1881, is apparently lost.

LETTER 1073.5

“No. 5” of “How I Get Around at 60, and Take Notes” appeared on December 3, 1881. The “proof slips” were sent to William Michael Rossetti, Mrs. Franklin B. Sanborn, and Emerson’s son Edward; see DBN, 1:272.

LETTER 1139.5

Talcott Williams (1849-1928) was associated with the New York Sun and World as well as the Springfield Republican before he became editor of the Philadelphia Press in 1879. His newspaper vigorously defended the poet in news articles and editorials after the Boston censorship of 1882; see Corr., 3:296-97n.

Rees Welsh became WW’s publisher after Osgood & Company could not stand up to the scurrilous and sanctimonious blasts of Anthony Comstock and his associates. It is not often noted that WW’s friendship with newspapermen in New York, Philadelphia, Washington, Boston, and elsewhere, to whom he offered “suggestions” as well as complete articles, permitted him to answer vituperative critics and to keep his case and name before the public. WW had learned early in life the usefulness of publicity and the power of print. No other American poet has excelled him in manipulating the media to create his image.
LETTER 1181.5
MS: Robert H. Taylor Collection, Princeton University.
About November 10, WW received a letter from Edward Dowden which he characterized as “like a kindly living talk and hand clasp” (Corr., 3:313), and then forwarded it to William D. O’Connor, who was to send it to Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke and John Burroughs. The letter is apparently lost.
Dowden’s review of Specimen Days appeared in The Academy on November 18, 1882, as he informed WW on November 21 (Traubel, 2:363).
WW sent “Robert Burns” to Jeannette L. Gilder, of The Critic, on December 7, and it appeared on December 15 (Corr., 3:318).
On April 28, 1882, after WW decided to purchase the plates of the Osgood edition of Leaves of Grass, he asked Burroughs for a loan of $100 (Corr., 3:274), which he repaid on January 17, 1883 (DNB, 2:310).

LETTER 1230.5
MS: Archives of Charles Scribner’s Sons, Princeton University.
WW’s reply appears at the conclusion of the letter on August 22 from Scribner’s requesting his “kind consent to include your two poems ‘Pioneers’ and ‘the Soldier’s Letter’ [“Come Up from the Fields Father”] in “a very excellent and comprehensive collection of English Verse.”

LETTER 1260.5

LETTER 1262.5
MS: University of Iowa. FACSIMILE and CT: WWQR, 1, no. 1 (June 1983): 20 and 18, edited by Ed Folsom.
WW’s letter is on the verso of Gentry’s request to print “The Man-of-War-Bird.”
Gentry (1843-1905) was an ornithologist whose Nests and Eggs of Birds of the United States appeared in 1882, only to be termed “unreliable and worthless . . . trash,” the few admirable parts having apparently been plagiarized. Gentry and his son Alan visited the poet on December 30, 1885; see DNB, 2:371.

LETTER 1269
This was the first house that WW owned and as it turned out the last. Johnston, the New York jeweler, had on a recent visit to Camden arranged for the purchase of Charles Hine’s portrait of the poet for $200; see Corr., 3:368-69n.

LETTER 1279.5
MS: University of Iowa. FACSIMILE and CT: WWQR, 1, no. 1 (June 1983), 24, 23, edited by Ed Folsom.
Charles Aldrich (1828-1908) was an ornithologist, a member of the Iowa House of Representatives, an infantry captain in the Civil War, and founder of the Iowa Historical Department. He was also an avid autograph collector, especially of WW’s. He was so eager that the poet termed him “a very hungry man . . . never satisfied—is always crying for more and more” (Traubel, 5:444). See Folsom’s excellent discussion of this colorful Iowa figure (23-28).

LETTER 1463.1
This letter replaces the transcription from an auction record in Corr., 6:35, and identifies the previously unknown correspondent.

Probably the "nice gift" was payment for the two-volume edition, consisting of *Leaves of Grass* and *Two Riuvelts* (1876).

The plates of the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, printed by Thayer & Eldridge, were sold to Richard Worthington, who for many years printed them without WW's authorization. The plates were purchased after WW's death by his literary executors, Richard Maurice Bucke, Thomas B. Harned, and Horace Traubel; see Corr., 3:196-97.

O'Shea's check for $10 is with WW's letter. The records of gifts (or book purchases) in Corr., 6:xxxi (for 1886) should now include O'Shea's.

LETTER 1499.1

John Hay (1838-1905), Abraham Lincoln's private secretary and biographer as well as Theodore Roosevelt's Secretary of State, was an early admirer of WW's poetry. The copy of "O Captain! My Captain!" is dated by WW March 9, 1887, as is a Gutekunst photograph. WW read "As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free" at Dartmouth College on June 26, 1872; see Corr., 2:178-80.

LETTER 1524.1

This is Harry Stafford's family, which included his father George, his brother Edwin, his sister "Debbie" and her husband Joe Browning. Debbie was visiting her sister Ruth Goldy in Kansas.

WW presented his Lincoln lecture in New York on April 15, 1887, before a distinguished audience including Mark Twain, James Russell Lowell, John Hay, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, and Andrew Carnegie, who contributed $350; see Corr., 3:82-85.

LETTER 1534.4

Mrs. Margaret Goodenough took care of WW's young brother Ed, whose board cost $16 monthly, an expense which WW shared with his brother George and his wife Lou; see DNB, 2:510.

When WW's sister Hannah wrote to him, he was in New York for the Lincoln speech and the reception on the following day at the Westminster Hotel.

LETTER 1557.2
MS: Location unknown. FACSIMILE: catalog of Swann Galleries, February 8, 1990, item 220.

The postcard was sent to his brother Jeff, whose family now consisted of himself and his daughter Jessie. *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* paid WW $50 for "November Boughs," and published the cluster in November 1887.

Boston friends were soliciting funds for the purchase of a summer cottage. As always, WW insisted that the money be under his control, with no accountability to the donors. His actions irked some of his admirers when it became clear that he had no intention of purchasing a cottage. The money made it possible for him to arrange for the erection of an elaborate mausoleum. Again some admirers were somewhat shocked by the extravagance of the structure.
LETTER 1724.1

MS: Location Unknown. TRANSCRIPTION: 1980 “Leaves of Grass” at 125, edited by William White, 73.

In an unpublished article titled “I Knew Walt Whitman,” Hunter’s daughter Sarah Hunter Walker (1864-1933) recorded her contacts with the poet after her arrival in the United States from Scotland. It is a charming account of a woman who retained her childish naiveté as she observed in reverence the democratic camaraderie a great poet established with neighbors, friends, and her family. According to the daughter, her father and WW discussed “questions of philosophy, religion, biology and the humanities . . . Sometimes we understand what we are talking about, and again we don’t. But . . . there is nothing wrong in that” (72).

LETTER 1764.5


The engraving by Samuel Hollyer (1826-1919) of WW as a laborer appeared in the first edition of Leaves of Grass. On January 17, 1888, WW sent Hollyer the photograph of the so-called “Lear” portrait; see Corr., 6:47 and 4:197. In a notebook (DBN, 2:467), WW declared, “I rather like it,” but on August 12 he observed to Traubel (2:131): “I do not think it good enough to be good—this is especially true of the eyes—they are too glaring: I have a dull not a glaring eye.”

LETTER 2076


This replaces the transcription based on an auction record printed in Corr. 4:358.

Eldridge had recently informed WW that he had returned to the Internal Revenue Service in Washington. Their friend, William D. O’Connor, died on May 9 after a protracted illness. John Burroughs observed: “it is sad to me to think that he has left behind him no work or book that at all expresses the measure of his great powers”; see Corr., 4:335n.

LETTER 2142.1

MS: Louis Szathmary. FACSIMILE: WWQR, 3, no. 2 (Fall 1985): [48], 29.

Lou was the wife of WW’s brother George; Warren Fritzinger, his male nurse; and Mrs. Mary Davis, his housekeeper.

The facsimile of this letter is part of an article by Szathmary, Chef Louis at the Bakery Restaurant in Chicago and collector of dining ephemera.

LETTER 2174.5

MS: Location unknown. CT: Traubel, 6:237.

Felix Adler (1851-1933), the founder of the New York Society of Ethical Culture and a professor at Columbia University, had asked Traubel in December 1889 whether WW would be willing to write a letter of introduction to Burroughs. On January 8, 1890, Adler in a letter to Traubel inquired whether WW “has any scruples, no matter what they may be,” and WW immediately “took up a writing pad and pencil and on his knee wrote” his reply; see Traubel, 6:170, 179, 237.

In June 1890 WW praised Adler’s “tenement-house experiment in New York—W. saying of Adler and his kind: ‘They are our pole-stars—they sweeten our way’ ” (Traubel, 6:471).

LETTER 2260.5


Entries in DBN (2:608, 564) record a gift of $5 to “Mrs. Colkitt” on this date and the visit of “the baby Ethel Colkitt” on August 5, 1891.
LETTER 2278.1
The fifty copies are of the Complete Poems and Prose of Walt Whitman, 1855-1888. Authenticated and Personal," which White characterizes as "a reissue, with new matter, made from older plates."

LETTER 2365.1
Since Jeannette Gilder was the editor of The Critic at this time and an old friend, it is strange that WW did not address the postcard to her.

On November 29 the following paragraph appeared in The Critic (282):
Walt Whitman is putting the later touches to a volume called 'Good-Bye My Fancy,' containing his old age songlets, and intended as a 'second annex and completion' to 'Leaves of Grass.' The publication will contain his prose essays and shorter bits and speeches of the last two years; also, in an appendix (partly to fill out, as the book is a small one) translations from the French of Gabriel Sarrazin's Paris review of 'Leaves of Grass,' besides another from the Dresden (German) address by Rolleston, and also Col. Ingersoll's late lecture in Philadelphia. Walt Whitman is now well along in his seventy second year, quite completely paralyzed in body (a legacy from the Secession war), but with normal mentality and good right-arm power. He yet lives in his cottage, with housekeeper and nurse, in Mickle Street, Camden, New Jersey, retains buoyant spirits, sells his own books to purchasers, and gets outdoors in good weather, propelled down to the Delaware River shores in a wheel chair. Mr. Whitman is to furnish a brief preparatory note to a volume containing 'The Brazen Android,' an unpublished tale by the late Wm. D. O'Connor of Washington, together with 'The Carpenter' and other stories, some of them still in manuscript.

LETTER 2405.1
MS: Location unknown. CT: Auction catalog of Swann Galleries, #1507, September 28, 1989, item 291.
WW wrote similar notes at the same time to Bucke and his niece Jessie; see Corr., 5:142. In a notebook (DBN, 2:583), he wrote: "Jan 1 '91 glum and dark & wet & foggy middling cold the grip (cold & stopt in head)—bladder trouble ¼ after 4—have eaten a hearty good meal, turkey &c: half light evn'g."

LETTER 2408.1
Hezekiah Butterworth (1839-1905) was associated with The Youth's Companion from 1870 to 1894, during which time the circulation increased from 140,000 to 400,000. A prolific writer of juveniles and religious works such as The Story of the Hymns, Butterworth was motivated "to make my readers better in heart and life and richer in spiritual knowledge" (DAB).


LETTER 2535.5
there is a photograph of the desk which WW could not “authenticate.” An unverified report has it that the desk collapsed in 1892, the year of the poet’s death.

Black’s predecessor at the Brooklyn Times, Charles M. Skinner, was the first to publish an account of the battered desk in “Walt Whitman as an Editor,” The Atlantic Monthly, 92 (1903): 679-86. Although Skinner met WW “once, and for a moment only” (681), he recorded in a charming essay anecdotes of the poet’s conduct as editor and man: WW’s “work for the daily press... confirmed him in his frank, ungilded style, his homely figures, his avoidance of buncombe and fustian. Whatever else may be charged against newspaper work, it cannot be accused of literary Nancyism” (380). O virility!