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Recchia, assoc. eds. The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman: The  
Journalism, Volume 1, 1834-1846 [review]**

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## REVIEWS

HERBERT BERGMAN, ed.; DOUGLAS A. NOVERR and EDWARD J. RECCHIA, assoc. eds. *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman: The Journalism*. Volume I: 1834-1846. New York: Peter Lang, 1998. 1xx + 590 pp.

The publication of Whitman's journalism has been delayed again and again. The delays apparently led New York University Press to abandon the projected volumes, under the editorship of Herbert Bergman, as part of the plan to publish the complete *Collected Writings of Walt Whitman*. Now, in the preface of this long awaited first volume of journalism, Bergman is silent about its publication history. While he may fail to satisfy our curiosity, however, Bergman and his associate editors must be commended for locating in Peter Lang a publisher willing to take on this expensive project and produce a fine book, carefully edited and handsomely designed to match the other volumes in the *Collected Writings* with red cover, gold print, and green title frame on the binding.

In the time it has taken to bring the volume out, much has happened in Whitman scholarship, so that Bergman and his associates Douglas A. Noverr and Edward J. Recchia have had to work hard to update as they go. Reading the introduction and the notes, we may wish they had worked a bit harder on this score, especially in contextualizing Whitman's work as a journalist. They might have offered, for example, more about the history of political and literary journalism in the period, which would help us to measure, among other things, the boast of the newsman Whitman that Americans of his time were "a newspaper-ruled people" (lxvi). While the preface and introduction admirably detail the methods of textual editing employed, moreover, the editors could be more explicit about principles of selection. Questions remain about how much, if anything, is left out. We are told that some selection was necessary for the materials from the Brooklyn *Eagle*, which Whitman edited under two slightly varying titles from March 1846 to January 1848. This volume covers only the first four months of this editorship and includes writings from almost every day, taking up over half of the total pages of the book. What (besides long passages that Whitman had quoted from other papers, which are indicated where omitted) has been left out? Then there is the question of genre. Some poems are included from Whitman's freelance work, as well as at least one item of fiction, "The Fireman's Dream: With the Story of His Strange Companion: A Tale of Fantasie by Walter Whitman," from the 1844 *Sunday Times and Noah's Weekly Messenger* of New York. Why are these items included as "journalism"? There are possibly good reasons, but the editors do not discuss their rationale for including such works.

The delays in publication are understandable, and the omissions perhaps forgivable, if we consider the sheer amount that Whitman wrote as a journalist, the variety of papers he worked for, and the difficulties of identifying and se-

lecting items from these sources, most of which are hard to locate and access. As the editors tell us, by the time he published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, “Whitman, at the age of thirty-six, had edited eight newspapers, co-edited one paper, and helped edit another; and he had contributed to over twenty other journals” (lxx). For those of us who have never perused the wealth of primary sources included here, who know the journalism only through the biographies and previous volumes of selected work (every one now out of print), this new volume offers marvelous revelations about Whitman’s career. The poet-to-be was not, as some biographers and critics have suggested, a failed journalist or a political hack who finally gave up and found his true calling in poetry. The writings in this volume show him to have been a committed political journalist well established on the New York scene by his mid-thirties—a success in everything but income (which, as he argues in his own editorials, was typically low for American journalists compared to their European counterparts). For this enlightening perspective on Whitman’s life and work, we owe the hard-working editors of this volume not criticism (no matter how constructive this criticism might be in light of the promise of future volumes, the second one due for publication in 1999) but simple thanks.

The scope of Whitman’s journalism and its very bulk reveal the intensity with which Whitman undertook this work, how productive he was, indeed how journalism may have been for him the first “language experiment” in communing (not only communicating) with the American masses, an experiment he perfected in his poetic work. This volume makes clearer than ever before the connections between the journalism and the poems. The degree to which his writing is concerned with political and civic issues—most notably the issues of public education, democratic party politics, and crime and punishment—is remarkable. By comparison, he is relatively silent on matters that, at least since the New Criticism, we usually associate with “Literature.” When he does mention literature, it is in connection with politics. Always the young journalist Whitman foreshadows the “political poet” that Betsy Erkkila and others find him to be in *Leaves of Grass*. He mentions Hawthorne, but only to commend the principle of appointing literary men to public office. He mentions attending a lecture by Emerson, but spends more copy describing the appearance and behavior of the audience (notably the competing journalist Horace Greeley) than in praising the Concord sage. He mentions Longfellow, but only briefly in a discussion of democratic music in America. (In the 1840s, he had not yet developed his taste for Italian Opera, but preferred folk singing by family ensembles, choosing “heart-singing” over “art-singing,” as he put it.) He defends Dickens against the critics, but focuses on the English writer as a champion of democracy. By 1846, he had begun to develop his life-long theme of the need for a “‘home’ literature” and his critique of the “perfect cataracts of trash [that] come to us at the present day from abroad” as well as the American writers who imitate such models: “those—their name is legion—Misters and Madams who write tales, (does any body ever really read them through?) for the monthly magazines, have quite as much genuine ability as these coiners of unwholesome reading from abroad!” (463). But overall, the amount of copy he devotes to the arts and to culture can be measured by the sentence, whereas the attention he gives to local politics expands to columns and pages.

Whitman's political views, as here represented, do little to damage his reputation as a champion of democracy. At times his writing for *Aurora* veers toward the Nativist movement with its unwelcoming position on immigrants, a viewpoint that the *Aurora* seems to have catered to, but such attitudes seem always related to local issues that are very complex and hard to understand in historical perspective. His ranting against the Irish and the Catholics, for example, is sometimes painful to read ("the villainous priests stir up the lower Irish" [62]), but is connected with the issue of public schooling, of which he was a steadfast advocate. He frequently visited schools and reported on the quality of the students and teaching. When Bishop John Hughes attempted to organize Catholics to change the system, he inspired some of Whitman's angriest editorials. The *Aurora* editor goes so far as to defend physical attacks on the Irish by rival political gangs. (The notes are not much help in explaining this stance. Whitman defends as "American" a certain Mike Walsh, the leader of the Spartans, whom Bergman et al. identify as "a charismatic, flamboyant, unpredictable Irishman" [493].) Clearly Whitman's passion for public education leads to such excesses of political heat, because more characteristically his journalism is pacific and inclusive in its democratic views. Whitman stands always on the side of the poor and the working class, welcomes immigration from abroad, steadfastly opposes corporeal punishment in the schools and in the armed services, and spends a great deal of copy in objecting to capital punishment.

As a journalist, Whitman cultivated ideas and rhetorical techniques that re-emerge in *Leaves of Grass*. We should not be surprised that he contradicts himself as freely (if not as intentionally) in these pages as in "Song of Myself," for he was working out his ideas and trying on various personae for different audiences or different elements of the mass audience. For example, the great theme of loafing gets treated inconsistently in his man-about-town observations on the New York scene, a genre in which he seems particularly at home. In 1840, he wrote (for a somewhat leisurely *Long-Island Democrat* audience, one imagines), "How I do admire a loafer!" (27); but in 1845, the more urbane journalist writes for the *Brooklyn Evening Star*, "The habit of loafing . . . is poison for a boy's energies, moral, mental, and physical" (223). He experiments with the rhetoric of direct address in his frequent excursions into the genre of "advice to youth": "Consider these questions as addressed," he tells his reader, "not to everybody in general, but to *you*, in particular" (223). His first experiments in enumerative rhetoric, which result in the famous catalogs of 1855, appear as early as 1842, in passages like this one, an observation of Saturday market day: "There comes a journeyman mason (we know him by his *limy* dress) and his wife—she bearing a little white basket on her arm. . . . A heterogeneous mass, indeed. . . . Widows with sons, boys of twelve or fourteen, to walk with them for company; wives, whose husbands are left at home to 'take care of the children;' servant women; old maids (these are the especial horror of every salesman in the market)" (55-56). A wonderful feature on "Dreams" from 1842 likewise foreshadows the great themes of the 1855 poem "The Sleepers." The journalist imagines the dream life of the "mother watching her tender babe," the "toiling aspirant for wealth," the "blooming maiden," and at some length, the "poor poet, with ashy cheek, but eye whose power discovers beauty in the

smallest thing of earth" (136). He practices his lifelong habit of journalizing about his own work in the third person, mentioning at one point the "author of the lately-published novel of 'Franklin Evans'" (164). He objects to the "mean vice of parading private letters" in public (335), a strategy he would himself find irresistible in later years when it came to promoting his own work with the famous letter from Emerson. We see him practicing some rhetorical tactics that he would ultimately abandon in his poems, such as the sharp-edged irony of "Hurrah for Hanging!" (300-01). Other ideas had staying power, such as the conviction that greatness must bear the stamp of public acceptance, which he would assert in the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, anticipated in an 1846 editorial criticizing Daniel Webster: "whatever may be a man's abstract talent, if he have not the *hearts of the people*, if he have not patriotism, if he prefer a reputation among diplomatists, and the good of foreign courts, to the wide dear love of his common country-men—the glory of the proudest office is but a shame, and all his gain is loss" (327).

This volume suggests that Whitman had a clearly definable career. He began as a teacher, and in that role, enjoyed the feel of imparting knowledge and wisdom and sharing his observations with others. In newspaper work, he saw the opportunity to extend his voice to the masses. His early newspaper work builds directly upon his experiences as a teacher. The first series of features he wrote for the Long-Island papers was titled "Sun-Down Papers . . . From the Desk of a Schoolmaster." In the *Aurora*, he argued that "the penny press is the same as the common schools among seminaries of education. They carry light and knowledge in among those who most need it" (74). In a *Daily Eagle* editorial on the responsibilities of the news editor, he wrote, "There are numerous reforms that have yet to be pressed upon the world. People are to be schooled, in opposition perhaps to their long established ways of thought" (392). This desire to bring "light and knowledge" to the world takes on an almost religious fervor, as it does later in his poems, complete with allusions to the Bible: "In politics, too, the field of improvement is wide enough yet; the harvest is large, waiting to be reaped—and each paper, however humble, may do good in the ranks" (392). No less than Whitman the poet, Whitman the journalist understood the power of the word to transform individual consciousness and thereby reweave the social fabric. He made an impressive career attempting to master that power and put it to work in the public domain.

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JAMES NOLAN. *Poet-Chief: The Native American Poetics of Walt Whitman and Pablo Neruda*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994. 270 pp.

Informed by anthropology, linguistics, ethnopoetics, and comparative literature, James Nolan offers a nuanced comparative study of two of America's most influential poets: Walt Whitman (U.S.) and Pablo Neruda (Chile). Although separated by a century and by half a hemisphere, by different languages and cultures, the two poets, Nolan shows us, can be linked fruitfully through a