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“It might be us speaking instead of him!”: Individuality, Collaboration, and the Networked Forces Contributing to “Whitman”

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“IT MIGHT BE US SPEAKING
INSTEAD OF HIM!”:
INDIVIDUALITY, COLLABORATION,
AND THE NETWORKED FORCES
CONTRIBUTING TO “WHITMAN”

KENNETH M. PRICE AND JANEL CAYER



HABITUALLY ENLISTING FRIENDS as he navigated the complex media landscape of his time, Walt Whitman was anything but the author as solitary genius. In the years since Gay Wilson Allen’s biography *The Solitary Singer* and the steadfastly author-centered edition of *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman* Allen helped compile, postmodern theory and digital technology have both contributed to a gravitational shift away from the sole author to a greater appreciation of networked forces. If scholars once strove to discover the true Whitman, we now are more inclined to recognize how we both find and create “Whitman,” adhering to the records of the past even as we inflect them with our own personal and cultural preoccupations. In our era, Whitman is emerging less as the sole creator of his various publications than as an extraordinary writer engaged in innumerable collaborative acts. Throughout his career Whitman shaped the initial reception of his key writings, most famously in 1855 when he acted in concert with his journalistic friends to seed the world with three anonymous reviews of the first *Leaves of Grass*.¹ Whitman turned again to his associates in the newspaper business to influence his reception in 1859, with the appearance of “A Child’s Reminiscence” (ultimately titled “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking”) and the exchange of reviews he apparently orchestrated between the *New York Saturday Press* and the *Cincinnati Commercial*;² in 1875, he took a slightly different tack, again with the *Cincinnati Commercial* by placing selections of the soon-to-be-published *Memoranda During the War* in the newspaper (an arrangement marked “Private” in Whitman’s letter to the editor).³

This essay establishes that he also jump-started the critical conversation about the 1881 *Leaves of Grass* by contributing to the first known review of that edition: “‘Leaves of Grass’. The Complete Poems of Walt Whitman. As Published by a Famous Boston House. A Friendly Characterization of the Poet’s Work,” Boston *Sunday Herald* (October 30, 1881: 3). In what follows, we discuss Whitman’s collaborations with his friend Sylvester Baxter of the *Herald* and also two key contexts: first, Edmund Clarence Stedman’s essay “Walt Whitman” (*Scribner’s Monthly*, November 1880) and, second, the correspondence between Whitman and Thomas W. H. Rolleston, an Irishman living at this time in Germany.

Baxter was a long-time employee of the *Herald*, a versifier who published two books of poetry, an urban planner in the Boston area, and, later in life, author of a book on Spanish colonial architecture in Mexico. He had first come to know Whitman when the poet visited Boston to give one of his lectures on Abraham Lincoln on April 15, 1881. Baxter published an unsigned piece for the *Herald* on April 18, “Walt Whitman. His Second Visit to the New England Metropolis,” praising Whitman and taking issue with Stedman’s important essay.⁴ When the poet decided to return to Boston that autumn to oversee printing of the 1881 edition, he asked Baxter to help him find a “plain boardinghouse or good furnished room.”⁵ In a short period of time, then, Baxter and Whitman had become friends and Whitman regarded him then and later as a key ally as he made clear to Horace Traubel: “certainly, Horace, Sylvester is our man—I am sure of it—ain’t you?—he belongs to us, we to him.”⁶ On another occasion he described the rapidity of their developing friendship: “Baxter jumped right in: was enthusiastic from the start—was what they have called a Whitmaniac.”⁷

One day after the appearance of the *Sunday Herald* review, Whitman sent a letter to Baxter, responding with “thanks & love” for his “fervid and stirring criticism.”⁸ He did not mention his own help with the review. However, a manuscript in the Charles E. Feinberg Collection of the Papers of Walt Whitman, Library of Congress, suggests that Whitman had provided Baxter with draft language (see Figure 1) and perhaps further instructions.⁹

^{A ~~good~~ reading of German}
^{most thoughtful} ^{birth and education}
^{but do, in U.S.}
 One of the most ~~dearest~~ ^{dearest} readers of
 some the poems of has said that ~~the~~ ^{the}
 main ~~themes~~ ^{features are} ~~and~~ ^{and} ~~cases~~ ^{and} ~~themes~~
 appear to be ~~may~~ ^{be} ~~be~~ ^{designated}
 as Individuality - Americanism
 Inevitable Law Democracy,
 Physical health Comradeship
 the Indivisible Union
 Good will to
 other lands
 Modernness Respect to the Past
 Open air Nature Grandeur of Labor
 The old Perfect State Equality

With the ~~idea~~ ^{idea} of Modernness ^{like a canopy}
^{an assumption of} ^{over}
 all, and the old Greek ~~and~~
^{and the spirit of} ^{the} ^{ideas}
 ideas of ~~unity~~ ^{unity} and the Hebrew
 sacredness of ~~paternity~~ ^{paternity}.

The war The South
 The sea Poem of Death
 The Night
 are also frequently recurring
 themes

Figure 1. Facsimile of Whitman's notes (Charles E. Feinberg Collection of the Papers of Walt Whitman, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.).

Whitman followed a similar pattern a year later: his October 8, 1882 letter provided Baxter with a paragraph for a review of *Specimen Days*. Whitman wrote: "(don't fail to copy this—can't it conclude your notice?)," and Baxter, as instructed, used the language verbatim in

the penultimate paragraph of the *Specimen Days* review.¹⁰

Our discovery of Whitman's contribution to the October 30, 1881, *Sunday Herald* review came through the efforts of the *Walt Whitman Archive* to create catalogs of his literary manuscripts. With NEH grant support, we are making available facsimile images of Whitman's manuscripts and attempting to identify, whenever possible, the connection between draft versions and published writings. The language of Whitman's prose jotting is so close to the final paragraphs of the unsigned *Sunday Herald* review as to confirm that the review should be jointly attributed to Baxter and Whitman.¹¹ No direct evidence has been found of Whitman's contribution to other parts of the review, and it seems likely that Baxter wrote most of it since the style of this lengthy review, and especially the extended extracts from various sections of *Leaves of Grass*, are unlike Whitman's approach in other anonymous reviews of his own work. Whitman had described his bodily attributes and discussed the themes and importance of *Leaves of Grass*, but rarely quoted himself extensively. In contrast, this review provides thirteen extracts totaling 150 poetic lines. Baxter seems to have believed that the best way to review Whitman was to let the poet speak for himself. His practice of extensively quoting from *Leaves of Grass* and other published writings reached its apogee in his final review of "Whitman's Complete Works" (*The Boston Herald*, January 3, 1889: 4). Shortly after this last review appeared, Whitman said in conversation with Horace Traubel:

"Baxter has been doing us up in fine style: . . . so sound, it might be us speaking instead of him! . . . Evidently Sylvester recognizes the true function of a reviewer—to state what the writer purports to say—as far as possible to let him state it for himself."¹²

Baxter did more compiling than writing (in the sense of generating new thoughts): the review consists of a string of quotations from various writings published by Whitman with little commentary by Baxter himself. We do not know if Whitman contributed to the few passages in which Baxter appears to speak in his own voice.

Given Baxter's readiness to present Whitman through his own words, it may not be surprising that he let Whitman ghostwrite part

of his 1881 review. In this initial review of the Osgood edition, a paragraph near the end repays attention because of its intrinsic interest and because the passage is directly based on the poet's notes:

Face to face with lines which approach the grave with such classic nobility of step, who can say that Walt Whitman is not a poet? A thoughtful writer of German birth and education, but living today in America, has said that some of the main features and themes of "Leaves of Grass" may be designated as individuality, inevitable law, physical health, modernness, open air nature, democracy, comradeship, the indissoluble union, good will to other lands, respect to the past, grandeur of labor, perfect state equality, with modernness like a canopy over all, and a resumption of the old Greek ideas of nudity and the divinity of the body, with the Hebrew sacredness of paternity, while the war, the sea, the night, the south and poems of death are also frequently recurring themes. His treatment of the last mentioned theme is specially notable in the "Memories of President Lincoln."

The opening gambit, "A thoughtful writer of German birth and education, but living today in America"—in Whitman's manuscript: "A reader of German birth and education but long in the U.S."—was perhaps designed to throw the reader off the trail of any assumption of the poet's involvement. Whitman was trying to decide which (imagined?) figure might have the most impact: he started in the manuscript with "One of the deepest readers" and then revised to "a thoughtful reader of German birth," testifying to the lingering importance of European validation even for a writer like Whitman who made a practice of emphasizing American accomplishments. The claim also serves to underscore Whitman's growing international visibility, a point he and his publisher, James Osgood, were at pains to emphasize.¹³ It is possible that the person of "German birth" is wholly fictional, but typically Whitman's claims have some connection to facts, even if they are facts creatively redeployed. Two possible candidates come to mind for this "person of German birth"—Dr. Rudolph Doehn and Thomas W. H. Rolleston—and it seems to us most likely that Whitman merged their characteristics in imagining this German commentator. Whitman learned of Doehn through a September 17, 1881, letter from Rolleston who explained that Doehn had written a book of about 300 pages, *Aus dem Amerikanischen Dichterwald*. An attempt

at a comprehensive historical and philosophical account of American literature, the book left Rolleston “much disappointed” because of its “great lack of intelligence.” Rolleston observed that, nonetheless

Doehn is rather celebrated in Germany & has lived 12 years in America. He must be a rather wide-minded man, for he is not very greatly offended at you. . . . He treats of you in a page, together with Stedman, Holland, Halpine, Winter. Here is what he says (I translate, as you mayn't be familiar with German).

. . . his *Leaves of Grass* [are] a set of mystic-democratic poems which are rough and wholly without art, but not without strength and content (Inhalt, substance). W.W. often pays no regard whatever to the ordinary rules of morality and propriety (Anstand), but he does this, not from attenuated deficient moral sense (sittliche Verkommenheit), but because he regards the traditional observances of morals and propriety as contemptible and hypocritical formalities. . . . Of decided poetic worth is his monody on Lincoln's death, beginning “When Lilacs” (&c).¹⁴

Another likely candidate is Rolleston himself, an Irishman living then in Dresden who was already beginning to plan the first book-length German translation of Whitman.¹⁵ It seems possible that Whitman created a composite figure—a person who had Doehn's German birth and years in the U.S., along with Rolleston's much more favorable opinion of Whitman. Certainly Rolleston, in his correspondence with Whitman, spoke to issues directly treated in the review—particularly E.C. Stedman, the ever-controversial issue of sexuality in *Leaves of Grass*, and ultimately the question of Whitman's standing as a poet.

In fact, after receiving Rolleston's letter of November 11, 1880, Whitman scrawled at the top—“Nov. '80 Splendid letter from Rolleston, Dresden—answer to Stedman—can be used.” Rolleston's letter is brief enough to quote nearly in full:

I have just been reading an essay on ‘Walt Whitman’ in Scribner, which, beautifully written as it is, rather reminds me of that proverbial representation of Hamlet, with the part of Hamlet left out. The supreme value of your works, to me, is that they have given me unspeakable religious certitude and confidence, have opened my eyes to the realities within and around me, and made me see in them something far grander and more assuring than any traditional dogmas. And this work I think no poet has hitherto approached, though the great metaphysicians have opened the path.—I rather suspect from the essay that Stedman is an orthodox Christian? His paragraph on the “Children of Adam” seems to me to show either animus or a real want of perception, for obviously the method of Nature which he praises so well is just that which is followed in those po-

ems—poems for which I, for one, am unreservedly thankful.¹⁶

In Baxter and Rolleston both, Whitman found supporters who shared his view regarding the inadequacies of Stedman's essay.¹⁷ In response to prudishness, Whitman stood ready to defend his work, but Stedman landed a blow where Whitman was vulnerable when he charged the poet with being intolerant toward other American writers. Even a fan such as Rolleston acknowledged that Whitman was often unduly harsh ("To say the truth, I never could quite accept your utter condemnation of all American authors, expressed both in prose & poetry").¹⁸ Whitman changed course directly in response to Stedman's criticism (while denying anything of the kind) in "My Tribute to Four Poets," included in *Specimen Days*.¹⁹

After thanking Baxter in his October 31, 1881, letter, Whitman added: "if convenient mail me three or four copies here (see above)—please mail one to *E C Stedman 71 West 54th Street New York City*—one to *Dr R. M. Bucke, London, Ontario, Canada*—and one to *John Burroughs, Esopus-on-Hudson, New York*—." Stedman is clearly a top concern, being mentioned even ahead of Whitman's long-term allies Bucke and Burroughs. Who was Stedman, and why did he matter? Stedman enjoyed a dual critical and poetic standing that was unmatched by anyone in late nineteenth-century America. His stature as a poet was brought home to Whitman, in a personal way, when Franklin Sanborn invited Whitman to attend the "Concord Summer School of Philosophy" in a letter of July 21, 1881. Many notables had specific roles, including F. Hedge, Julia Ward Howe, Elizabeth Peabody, and Bronson Alcott. Whitman was invited to attend but was offered no official role whereas Stedman was featured as the poet invited to open the session with a reading.²⁰ Moreover, independently, various letters from devoted friends such as John Burroughs and William Sloane Kennedy and from strangers, too (Hatch & Foote, bankers, and Amelia Bates, a well-informed woman from Wisconsin who wrote the poet to explain how she came to "Walt Whitman worship"), all in their different ways confirmed for Whitman the significance of Stedman's opinion.²¹

Whitman's argument in the anonymous review of the 1881 edition

about the “divinity of the body”—a phrase found both in the manuscript and in the published version—almost certainly has Stedman in mind. Stedman had claimed Whitman was too “anatomical and malodorous withal; furthermore, that in this department he showed excessive interest, and applied its imagery to other departments, as if with a special purpose to lug it in.”²² The review, in a passage probably written by Baxter but no doubt influenced by Whitman, asserted that:

The writer chances to know that . . . Mr. Whitman has the warmest personal regard for Mr. Stedman, . . . but he also felt that Mr. Stedman had failed to grasp the wholeness of the work . . . “Leaves of Grass” is a kosmos, and the leaving out of that which Mr. Stedman, in common with many, finds objectionable, would make it like an imperfect body. One of the greatest of living authors, in speaking with the writer about that passage in Mr. Stedman’s article, where it was stated that nature always covered up her bare and ugly spots, and that, therefore, such did not belong in the field of poetry, said that there were times when nature was bare and ugly, that it was the province of art to be truthful to nature, and that genius could treat these themes without offence. In all Walt Whitman there is no more evil thought than in the sprouting of a bud or the wafting of pollen on the wings of springtime.

From the beginning to the end of his career, then, Whitman was eager to set the terms of the critical discussion of his work, a goal he reached through his friendships with editors, through collaboratively produced writings, and through sifting through his correspondence and learning from and reacting to the letters he received from strangers and cronies, cranks and sages.

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NOTES

1 “Walt Whitman and His Poems,” *United States Review* 5 (September 1855), 205-212; “Walt Whitman, a Brooklyn Boy,” *Brooklyn Daily Times* (September 29, 1855), 2; and “An English and an American Poet,” *American Phrenologi-*

cal Journal 22 (October 1855), 90-91. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* (www.whitmanarchive.org).

2 “Walt Whitman’s New Poem,” *Cincinnati Daily Commercial* (December 28, 1859), 2, and “All about a Mocking-Bird,” *New York Saturday Press* (January 7, 1860), 3.

3 See Walt Whitman to the Editor of the *Cincinnati Commercial*, February 12, 1876 (*Walt Whitman Archive* ID: uva.00371). All correspondence cited in this essay is available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*. Letter-IDs from the *Archive* are given in parentheses. Selections from *Memoranda During the War* appeared in the paper on February 16, 1876.

4 Reprinted in part in Richard Maurice Bucke’s *Walt Whitman* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1883), 224-225.

5 Walt Whitman to Sylvester Baxter, August 8, 1881 (*Walt Whitman Archive* ID: ucb.00057).

6 *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 9 vols. (various publishers, 1906-1996), 5:327; hereafter, *WWWC*.

7 *WWWC* 4:187. In 1887 Baxter famously spearheaded an effort to get Whitman a government pension based on his work in the Civil War hospitals. Whitman declined to have the idea pursued.

8 Walt Whitman to Sylvester Baxter, October 31, 1881 (*Walt Whitman Archive* ID: nyp.00433). In notes to this letter, Edwin Haviland Miller speculated that the “concluding part of Baxter’s review, obviously inspired by Whitman himself, [was] perhaps written by the poet” (*The Correspondence*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller [New York: New York University Press, 1961-1977], 3:250). Miller’s hunch can now be confirmed.

9 Whitman may have conveyed the manuscript to Baxter in person while he was in Boston to oversee the printing of the 1881 edition, or he may have sent it via a now-lost letter of October 21, 1881. An envelope bearing this date and addressed by Whitman to Baxter is available in the Charles E. Feinberg collection of Walt Whitman at the Library of Congress.

10 In this letter Whitman feigned a mere casual concern with these matters: “I have dash’d off all this to help you—to use (incorporate) or not as you think fit—you will understand—Of course use whatever of this you want—incorporate it I mean in your article.” (Walt Whitman to Sylvester Baxter, October 8, 1882, *Walt Whitman Archive* ID: nyp.00446.)

11 The multiple cross-outs and interlineations eliminate the possibility that Whitman is taking notes on a previously published text written by someone else. It is unclear whether these notes serve as the first draft of a now lost fair copy draft of a more developed prose document Whitman shared or whether

these rough notes themselves were shared with Baxter. The former rather than the latter scenario is perhaps most likely.

12 *WWWC* 3:463.

13 One pre-publication flyer reproduces various comments and endorsements in eye-catching red ink. Five of the nine blurbs are from European sources, underscoring how Whitman and his publisher James Osgood wished to highlight the poet's international significance. See the proofs of the publisher's advertisement and the table of contents for the 1881–82 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, with corrections and deletions in Whitman's hand. Facsimile images of this item are available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*, via the "Catalog of Walt Whitman Literary Manuscripts in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library" at whitmanarchive.org/manuscripts/finding_aids/Yale.html (*Walt Whitman Archive* ID: yal.00035).

14 Thomas W. H. Rolleston to Walt Whitman, September 17, 1881 (*Walt Whitman Archive* ID: loc.05122)."

15 *Grashalme: Gedichte [Leaves of Grass: Poems]*, trans. Karl Knortz and T. W. Rolleston (Zurich, Switzerland: Verlags-Magazin, 1889).

16 Thomas W. H. Rolleston to Walt Whitman, November 11, 1880 (*Walt Whitman Archive* ID: loc.04576). Stedman's discussion of "Children of Adam" appeared in *Scribner's Monthly* 21 (November 1880), 54.

17 In one letter, Whitman said: "This month Scribner has a long criticism by E C Stedman on L of G & author, quite funny—'I would & I would not' style, with a bad portrait—Dr. B[ucke] is furious—Burroughs thinks it well enough & will do good—probably the truth between the two—" (*Walt Whitman to Anne Gilchrist*, November 10-16, [1880], *Walt Whitman Archive* ID: pml.00050]).

18 Rolleston went on to say: "I certainly see that tried by a right Democratic standard they fail. Longfellow, Whittier, &c. are just as much poets of Europe as poets of America, if not more. But then you do not condemn the non-Democratic European poets in that wholesale manner—for so far forth as they are poets, so far forth as they help to put ideas of beauty, nobleness, love, into our minds they help mankind, Democracy even included. And do not the Americans do this also, to a certain extent? I am not by any means a worshipper of Emerson, but can it really be said of him that he 'expresses nothing characteristic, suffices only the lowest level of vacant minds.' And Thoreau, surely he is something, very much. Shall we not thank these men for what they are? (though emphatically demanding something more)" (Thomas W. H. Rolleston to Walt Whitman, October 16, 1880, *Walt Whitman Archive* ID: loc.03539).

19 For discussion of this reversal, see Kenneth M. Price, *Whitman and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 79-95.

20 See letter from Franklin B. Sanborn to Walt Whitman, July 21, 1881, and

accompanying flyer advertising the School of Philosophy (*Walt Whitman Archive* ID: loc.05557).

21 On November 2, 1880, Burroughs informed Whitman of Stedman's difficulties in getting his article printed in *Scribner's Monthly* over the objections of Josiah Gilbert Holland, the editor, and observed: "The article is candid & respectful & that is all we can ask. . . . [I]t seems to me that the adverse criticisms in the paper are all weak & ineffectual, & that he is truly at home only when he is appreciative. How gingerly he does walk at times to be sure, as if he feared the ground underfoot was mined" (*Walt Whitman Archive* ID: tex.00459). Kennedy was more sympathetic to Stedman's tiptoeing ways. He told the poet he was "inclined to think with Stedman, that (to such poor limited and petty creatures as we bipeds are) there is something intrinsically disagreeable in the various grosser functions of the body" (January 20, 1881, *Walt Whitman Archive* ID: loc.02598). Amelia W. Bates "read with delight Edmund C. Stedman's article in the late Scribner, not as wholly satisfactory to me" but because it was destined to be "widely seen and read" (January 18, [1881], *Walt Whitman Archive* ID: loc.01083). Hatch & Foote [?] explained that they ordered a copy of *Leaves of Grass* because they read Stedman: "Will you please send to my address by Express the two volumes of your poems referred to so pleasantly, by your friend E. C. Stedman in [illegible]" (November 15, 1880, *Walt Whitman Archive* ID: loc.05773).

22 Stedman, "Walt Whitman," *Scribner's Monthly* 21 (November 1880), 54.