WHITMAN AND THE MAGAZINES:
SOME DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

By
ROBERT SCHOLNICK

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Repeated attempts to secure a small income by writing for the magazines during his illness have been utter failures. The Atlantic will not touch his. His offerings to Scribner are returned with insulting notes; the Galaxy the same. Harper's did print a couple of his pieces two years ago, but imperative orders from head quarters have stopped anything further.

Such treatment, he charged, is one of the factors contributing to the "bleakness of the actual situation":

The real truth is that with the exception of a very few readers (women equally with men), Whitman's poems in their public reception have fallen still-born in this country. They have been met, and are met today, with the determined denial, disgust and scorn of orthodox American authors, publishers and editors, and, in a pecuniary and worldly sense, have certainly wrecked the life of their author.

These are serious charges.

In 1870 Edmund C. Stedman asked the editor of each magazine named by Whitman in the West Jersey Press to describe his magazine's relationship with the poet. Quoting Whitman's charges directly, he asked the editors to list both acceptances and rejections and to explain the "grounds" for any rejections. The responses of the editors, W. D. Howells of the Atlantic, J. G. Holland of Scribner's, W. C. Church of the Galaxy and H. M. Alden of Harper's, are contained in the Edmund C. Stedman Collection at Columbia University and previously have not been published. They warrant a reconsideration of Whitman's standing with these monthlies in the years before 1880. The evidence indicates that Whitman did indeed have just grounds for his complaint against Scribner's and that a harsh rejection note from Dr. Holland may well have been the precipitating factor for the important West Jersey Press article. However, Whitman fared remarkably well as a contributor to the other magazines, although critical understanding and appreciation of his work was slow in coming.

Before quoting the letters from the editors to Stedman, it is necessary to say a word about the West Jersey Press controversy and...
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80 Broadway, New York.
New York, April 26th 1880

Dear Sir,

It is my intention soon to write a critical article upon Walt Whitman. A few years ago Mr. Whitman sent me a "slip" copy of a leader in the West Jersey Press, which contains the following passage:

"Repeated attempts to secure a small income by writing for the magazines during his illness have been utter failures. The Atlantic will not touch him. His offerings to Scribner are returned with insulting notes; the Galaxy the same. Harper's did print a couple of his pieces two years ago, but imperative orders from headquarters have stopped anything further."

I have the impression that this is overstated. Will you have the kindness to inform me (1) whether any contributions by Whitman have ever appeared in your magazine? (2) whether he ever offered any poems that you rejected? (3) If so upon what grounds did you decline to use them?

This information is not desired for public use, but that I may rightly understand Mr. Whitman's position.

Very truly yrs,

Edmund C. Stedman

To/
The Editor of the Atlantic Monthly
Boston

While Stedman's interjection of his own opinion, that "Mr. Whitman's position" is "overstated," may disqualify this as a scientific questionnaire, the letter is a direct and straightforward attempt to learn the facts of the situation.

II

What is especially surprising about the West Jersey Press article is that Whitman indiscriminately attacked all four magazines. The fact is that the editors had widely different attitudes toward his

11 The letter is quoted by permission of the Harvard College Library.
12 Evidently Whitman hoped Stedman would publicize his plight. He also sent copies to Rudolf Schmidt and Edward Dowden. See Whitman, Correspondence, III, 21-22.
work. The two letters which I will print from Dr. Holland to Stedman give vivid illustration of the sort of insults which Holland was capable of delivering to Whitman. On the other hand, the *Galaxy* paid Whitman well for almost everything which he submitted and opened its columns regularly to John Burroughs, perhaps Whitman’s most articulate disciple. *Harper’s* and the *Atlantic* ranged between these two poles. With all the magazines a wide variety of factors were involved in the treatment of Whitman, and in printing the letters from the editors to Stedman, I will explore the relevant factors in each instance.

Holland alone determined the policy of *Scribner’s* toward Whitman, from the time of the first number in November, 1870, to his death in October, 1881. So successful was he that the magazine quickly rivaled *Harper’s* for the position of the most popular literary magazine in the country. In his monthly “Topics of the Time” column, Holland preached to the nation his exalted faith in the Puritan ethic, and he became, as Edward Eggleston observed in a memorial notice, “the most popular and effective preacher of social and domestic moralities in his age; the oracle of the active and ambitious young man; of the susceptible and enthusiastic young woman; the guide, philosopher, and school-master of humanity at large, touching all questions of life and character.” His “influence was so strong in the post-bellum decade that one of his critics bitterly conceded that the period should be known as ‘the Holland age of letters.’” Whitman recognized that the magazine’s strong opposition to him changed dramatically when Richard Watson Gilder assumed the editorship in 1881. As he told Traubel in May, 1888, after the magazine had changed its name:

The Century under Gilder has always accepted my pieces and paid for them. Gilder is quite a different man—noway of the Holland type. Holland is a dead man—there’s hardly anything of him left today: he had his strut and is passed on: he was a man of his time, not possessed of the slightest forereach.... But Holland was all right: he did his deed in the Holland way: why should we ask or expect him to do more?  

Less than a decade after Holland’s death, Whitman was able to view his antagonist with remarkable objectivity.

In the seventies, however, he was deeply affected by a rejection letter from Holland.

I sent a poem, which was rejected—not rejected mildly, noncommittedly, in the customary way, but with a note of the most offensive character. I was sick and blue at the time: the note provoked me: I threw it into the fire. I was always sorry I destroyed it: had I been well I should not have done so: it was a good specimen insult for the historian....

Whitman dated the letter offering the poem only “12/12.” If, as seems probable, the year was 1875, it is likely that Holland’s letter was the precipitating factor, the provocation, for the *West Jersey Press* article which appeared on January 26, 1876. Six weeks would be more than enough time for Holland to return the poem and for Whitman to compose and place the article. Receiving the letter at a time of illness and concern over lagging creativity, Whitman may very well have been led to strike out against his “opponents.” Such a letter from Holland would definitely explain Whitman’s statement that “His offerings to *Scribner* are returned with insulting notes.”

Both of Holland’s principal editorial assistants, Richard Watson Gilder and Robert Underwood Johnson, were sympathetic to Whitman, and it appears that neither objected to Stedman’s plan to include an essay on Whitman in the projected series on American poets. Holland had other ideas.

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15 Ibid., p. 184.

16 Whitman, *Correspondence*, III, 66. Miller, in footnote 5, suggests 1876, but it is unlikely that Whitman would offer Holland a poem less than a year after the appearance of the *West Jersey Press* article. Further, the poem, “Eidosons,” appears in the New York *Tribune* (February 19, 1876) and in *Two Rivulets*, published early in 1876. Miller himself notes that “it is strange that W. W. submitted poems after Holland’s hostile criticism in the May issue of *Scribner’s Monthly*, XII (1876), 133–135.” But he justifies the 1876 dating as “almost certain” because “Eidosons” was composed in 1876.” This seems doubtful since *Two Rivulets* was “nearly ready” for distribution on December 17, 1875, as Whitman told Burroughs (*Correspondence*, III, 344).

17 Century Magazine, XIII (Dec., 1881), 164.


March 22, 1879

Editorial Rooms
of Scribner's Monthly
743 Broadway
New York

My Dear Stedman:

I was delighted to hear from Johnson that you propose to begin upon the long contemplated enterprise. You are the man for it. You will do it for the literary class as well as Lowell, and for the popular reader a great deal better.

You will do me a great kindness now, if you will tell me frankly how much you think I ought to pay you for your work. You know I am generously disposed. It is simply a question of how much I can afford to pay. I would like to get at your ideas, and then I will hold myself free to take or leave them. I do not hesitate to be frank.

The taking any notice whatever of Whitman in Scribner's Monthly will be to me, of course, a bitter pill. If he ever gets a notice here it will be solely out of respect to you. How can you touch the wretched old fraud? His personal character is disgusting. Much of his work is too nasty to be taken up into a respectable house—work that he has never repented of—and refuses to [take] out of his books—and he has not yet a single follower. Now for a man to make a new and bold departure in verse, and in a whole life fail to secure one follower or imitator, to say nothing of founding a school—is to stand self-exposed as a failure. He has been the author of a certain sort of eloquence, but I am sure the world will never agree that he is a poet.

He has offered me his stuff for publication, but it has seemed to me to be my duty to American literature to discomfit him entirely. He seems to me to be utterly a pest and an abomination.

Yours always truly,
J. G. Holland

The strategy Holland uses in attempting to dissuade Stedman reveals much about the strong impact which Whitman's poetry made upon him. As a powerful editor, he might simply have explained that Whitman was hardly an important writer and that he should be treated, if at all, in one of the chapters reserved for minor poets. But clearly, Whitman is not a "minor" poet to him and he is not capable of dealing with the question calmly. There is, after all, a "certain sort of eloquence" which he finds attractive. But Whitman, in his open treatment of sex and the "new and bold departure in verse," is a threat to everything which the "Holland age" represented. The complex of explosive emotions involved, such as attraction, threat and repulsion, could easily result in the sort of rejection slip which Whitman claimed to have received.

Holland's anger bursts to the surface again in his response to Stedman's questionnaire.

April 27, 1880

Editorial Rooms
Scribner's Magazine
743 Broadway
New York

My Dear Stedman:

Yes, Whitman sent me "Eidolons," and I returned it to him, with a frank and courteous note. You know me pretty well, and ought to know whether it is in me to be discourteous to anybody. Nobody but Whitman himself could have been responsible for the statement that I sent him an "insulting" note, and the statement is like him, and in the line of his constant policy. He plays the role of the suffering literary genius—the great unappreciated—and has so far seemed to find his account in it.

I do not expect or wish that anything I may say to you about Whitman will change your attitude toward him, but I confess to regarding him with complete antipathy. He seems to be a heathen in his morals and a barbarian in his art. His "Leaves of Grass" ought to be under the legal ban of all obscene publications; and the remarkable thing is that the old wretch, after having outlived his passions, cannot see that this book merits expurgation. I have no faith whatever in the sincerity of his method—that is, I don't believe his theory of poetry demands his style of work, and I am sure that all he does is simply to make himself notorious. He will found no school because there is nothing in his thought or art to found it upon. To me he stands in the category of curiosities, and is not a particularly interesting one at that.

Yours truly
J. G. Holland
There is little doubt that Holland’s rejection letter was far more “frank” than “courteous.” The very length and intensity of his response to Stedman, calling Whitman a “heathen,” “barbarian,” and an “old wretch,” belies his claim that the poet was “not . . . particularly interesting.”

Further, he devoted portions of three “Topical of the Times” columns to Whitman, making Scribner’s the only one of the four magazines to attack him in the years before 1880. The increasingly bitter tone of these notices, May, 1876, October, 1878, and October, 1881, reflects a rise in Whitman’s reputation and, conversely, the ending of the “Holland age.” In the first of these columns, Holland responds to the West Jersey Press article. He is smugly confident while disposing of Whitman’s claims. He assures his readers that he has “none but the kindliest feelings toward him, and the heartiest wishes for his good fame.” As evidence, he remarks in concluding, “we have refrained from citing, or even alluding to, those portions of his early book which are most open to criticism, and especially those portions of which, in the subsidence of his grosser self, he must now be ashamed.” No, it is simply a matter of verse technique, and Holland devotes most of the essay to proving that Whitman just is not a poet. His argument, developed by means of long excerpts, is that Whitman’s verse is no more poetic than lines from Emerson and Carlyle written out as prose. But in keeping with the “friendly” tone of the article, he cites approvingly “To a Locomotive in Winter,” noting that the last three lines “are good, honest decasyllabic verse.”

He is willing to accept only the Whitman most in tune with the new era of machinery and power, the poet as celebrator of the new industrial age.

But in the next reference, the bitterness is overt. Whitman has received some favorable attention, and in an essay on “Our Garnered Names,” Holland wonders

How an age that possesses a Longfellow and an appreciative ear for his melody can tolerate in the slightest degree the abominable dissonances of which Walt Whitman is the author, is one of the unsolved mysteries. There is a morbid love of the eccentric abroad in the country which, let

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us hope, will die out as the love of nastiness has died out. At present we say but little about our immortals, and give ourselves over to the discussion of claims of which our posterity will never hear, or of which they will only hear to wonder over, or to laugh at.29

Poe and Thoreau joined Whitman on Holland’s list of unhealthy writers, but clearly Whitman is the chief villain.

In fact, the “Whitman problem” continued to plague him until his death in October, 1881. In “Literary Eccentricity,” printed in the October Scribner’s of that year, he correctly recognizes that Whitman represents the most formidable challenge to his concept of an American literary tradition based firmly on English models, a tradition of definite “limitations, outside of which no one can go without convicting himself of eccentricity and bad taste.” He had counted upon the English critics to condemn out of hand the claims of the American literary nationalists, and was baffled by their recognition of Whitman.

Our cousins on the other side of the water are a little unreasonable in expecting from us a literature cast into some new form. They threw up their hats when Walt Whitman appeared, but Walt Whitman is a more egregious blunderer than Carlyle was, with a smaller supply of brains. We believe we appreciate all the vitality of Walt Whitman’s literary performances, but his productions, in their forms, are simply abominable. They are literary eccentricities . . . Even those who praise him and his barbarisms would scorn the use of his forms in any production whatever.30

The knowledge that his own magazine, in printing Stedman’s “Walt Whitman,” did much to further that poet’s reputation, must, indeed, have been a “bitter pill.”

III

The conflict between Stedman and Holland over the publication of “Walt Whitman” has a definite bearing on Whitman’s standing with the Atlantic. For Howells, in responding to Stedman’s letter, invited him to print the paper in the Atlantic:

19 Scribner’s Monthly, X (May, 1876), 123-125.
20 Ibid., X (Oct., 1878), 896.
21 Ibid., XXII (Oct., 1881), 945-946.
Editorial Office of
The Atlantic Monthly
47 Franklin Street
Boston

My dear Stedman:

How extraordinary that my old friend should address me as the Editor of the Atlantic Monthly, and not even write me in his own hand! I ought to answer you in kind:

_The Editor of the Atlantic Monthly presents his compliments to Mr. Stedman, and begs to note that he has no recollection of ever declining or receiving any poems from Mr. Whitman._

Yours ever,

W. D. Howells

P.S. Do you care to print your paper in the Atlantic?

If Holland resisted arguments on the appropriateness of an article on Whitman, Stedman might have threatened to take the article, as well as his other work, to the Atlantic. William Sloan Kennedy touched upon this matter in the course of a _Conservator_ article in November, 1866.

The significance and bravery of Stedman's article on Walt Whitman, published in that citadel of orthodoxy, the old _Scribner's..._ is perhaps not fully weighed by the younger men of to-day. That black-maned athlete, J. G. Holland, was cast too narrow a mold to appreciate Whitman, and Stedman told me, I remember, that he had a serious time with him, and had to threaten him that he would altogether stop the series he was writing if his article on Whitman was not admitted to the columns of the magazine. The immediate results of that article and its influence from that time on in book form have been great.21

If Stedman had published the article in the _Atlantic Monthly_, Whitman would have benefited from the dramatic shifting and the consequent recognition by the impeccable Brahmin periodical. Of course, Holland knew this and could not allow it. But that the _Atlantic_ went out of its way to solicit Stedman's article indicates that, at least


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in the closing years of Howells's editorship, it was not so totally opposed to Whitman as has been thought.

I will consider first Whitman's acceptance record and then the magazine's critical treatment of his work. Howells served as J. T. Fields's assistant editor from 1866 to 1871 and held the editorship from 1871 to 1881. His letter to Stedman indicates that Whitman did not submit anything during the 1870's.

In the 1860's his acceptance record with the magazine, as far as I can determine, was good. He submitted poems on three occasions and was accepted twice. The first editor, James Russell Lowell, accepted "Bardic Symbols," later titled "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life." The poem occupied over two pages in the issue for April, 1860.22 Portia Baker, whose article on the subject paints a picture of distinct coolness on the part of the magazine toward Whitman during his lifetime, theorizes that "this triumph was achieved during the editorship of Lowell, as a result, one surmises, of the fact that the third edition of the _Leaves of Grass_ was being brought out by a respected Boston House," Thayer and Eldridge.23 This may be so, although there is no indication that the fastidious Lowell felt it a part of his job as editor to give a hearing to every poet published by a reputable Boston house. The fact is that the _Atlantic_ published the poem and paid Whitman for it. The poet, as Holloway has written, "was proud of having appeared in such a magazine."24

In October, 1861, Whitman submitted "1861," a poem on the War, and two others, which have not been identified. Fields had succeeded Lowell as editor, and it was evidently from him that Whitman received a rejection slip stating that the poems could not be used "before their interest,—which is of the present,—would have passed."25 I see no reason to accept Portia Baker's claim that this rejection "may be taken as support for a theory of hostility on the part of the magazine." She herself notes that "Holloway does not regard it so," and concedes that "it is easy enough to find records of rejections sent to persons whose literary status was much more
secure than Whitman's could have been." Further, at the beginning of the Civil War there was a pervasive feeling in the North that the rebellion would be suppressed in short order. The incident cannot in itself be read as a reflection of hostility.

In a letter of November 30, 1868, Whitman asked Emerson to act as his agent in offering "Proud Music of the Storm" to Fields. He specified, "If available at all, I propose it for about the February number of the magazine. The price is $100 & 30 copies of the number in which it may be printed—and I will ask Mr. Fields to do me the favor to send me an answer within a week from the time he receives the piece. . . ." This seems like a prescription for a rejection slip. But on December 5, Fields accepted the poem, enclosing the one hundred dollars which Whitman requested, even though it was the policy of the magazine to pay only after a piece appeared in print. It was published in February, 1869.

As regards the critical attention given Whitman in the magazine the picture is different. The Atlantic did not, like Scribner's, attack him actively. But it was not until December, 1877, that it attempted anything like a full critical analysis; a limited but favorable discussion appeared in the "Contributor's Club." The only review Whitman received was a brief dismissal of the minor pamphlet After All Not to Create Only (1871) as "one of his curious catalogues of the American emotions, inventions, and geographical sub-divisions." One would think that a literary magazine of the Atlantic's reputation would feel bound to say something substantive about a writer of Whitman's importance before 1877. In this sense Portia Baker is right in concluding that "the Atlantic Whitman record from 1860 to 1877 gives support to the poet's statement that in the early days respectable critics generally ignored him."

The reasons for this are not entirely clear. Before the establishment of the "Contributor's Club" in 1877, there were two possible ways for the Atlantic to treat Whitman critically: in a feature article or through reviewing his books. There were distinct problems with each. Since all but two of his works during the period were privately printed, it is not at all certain that the magazine actually received review copies. The Boston firm of Roberts Brothers brought out the previously mentioned After All Not to Create Only. The 1861 Thayer and Eldridge Leaves was listed in "Recent American Publications" for July, 1860, but evidently Lowell chose not to review it. However, if the Atlantic editors had wished to review the privately printed books, a way could have been found to obtain copies.

On the question of a feature article, it must be remembered that the Atlantic, despite its literary prestige, was not financially successful. One of the "obstacles" which its editors had to face was the "moral censorship required by certain segments of the reading public. Especially explosive, of course, were references to religious orthodoxy and suggestions of sensuality." In this climate, an article on Whitman would be extremely risky. In September, 1869, during Fields's absence, Howells published Mrs. Stowe's "The True Story of Lady Byron's Life," which vaguely suggested that Byron had an incestuous relationship with his half-sister. The article created such a sensation that circulation dropped from 50,000 to 35,000. Certainly, the editors had to be especially careful in considering any feature or "stated" article.

Nevertheless, there is evidence that the Atlantic considered running such an article on Whitman in 1866. John Burroughs recalled a letter from the Atlantic, in answer to one of mine, in which they stated they were quite ready to see an article on W. W., though their editors were not prepared to champion him in so unqualified a manner as Mr. Emerson had, led me to prepare an article on "Drum Taps." Hearing that Howells was going there on the editorial staff, I hurried it off, but not in time—"Willie, dear" was there ahead of me, and of course it was not accepted. This shows the interest of the Atlantic under Fields in addressing itself to the "Whitman problem." It is difficult to say exactly why

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27 Whitman, Correspondence, II, 72.
28 Fields's letter may be found in Traubel, II, 211. Howells reports on the payment policy of the magazine in "Recollections of an Atlantic Editorship," Atlantic Monthly, C (Nov., 1907), 563.
30 Baker, p. 293. For Whitman's statement, see Traubel, I, 127.
this article, which Burroughs published in the *Galaxy* for December, 1866, was rejected.

Of course, Howells may have exerted a veto. Shortly before joining the *Atlantic* staff, he had treated *Drum Taps* unfavorably in a review for the *Round Table*, published on November 11, 1865. His argument was directed against Whitman’s “artistic method,” which he felt was “mistaken.” But clearly he had not closed his mind.

There are such rich possibilities in the man that it is lamentable to contemplate his error of theory. He has truly and thoroughly absorbed the idea of our American life, and we say to him as he says to himself, “You’ve got enough in you, Walt; why don’t you get it out?” A man’s greatness is good for nothing folded up in him, and if emitted in barbaric yaws, it is not more filling than Ossian or the east wind.

Perhaps the sensitive Whitman did not submit anything to the *Atlantic* during the seventies because he was aware of Howells’s critical opinion. But there was a clear need for a technical article on Whitman’s verse technique, one demonstrating the legitimacy of his metrical principles. I can hardly think that Howells would be biased against such a paper. Burroughs’s article, however, is neither technical nor critical, but eulogistic. Whitman is presented as a nearly flawless human being, and the article concludes by asserting that “Walt Whitman possesses almost in excess, a quality in which every current poet is lacking. We mean the faculty of being in entire sympathy with nature, and the objects and shows of nature . . . .”

Though he protested that in making this statement “we mean discredit to none,” the *Atlantic*’s readers could interpret it only as a criticism of such writers as Emerson, Lowell and Longfellow. Whitman’s position with the magazine’s readership was already delicate. A case for him could not be made at the expense of other writers. Whatever the predilection of the editors, the *Atlantic* could not risk committing its prestige by featuring such an article.

It was not until the founding of the “Contributor’s Club” in January, 1877, that the magazine had the flexibility which made it possible for informal essays to be tucked away unobtrusively. Within a year of its founding, the “Club” contained a sympathetic article on

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86 Atlantic Monthly, XL (Dec., 1877), 751.
87 Whitman, Correspondence, I, 296. See footnote 63.
88 *The Nation*, II (April 26, 1866), 534.
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O'Connor, recognizing the opportunity for Whitman, brought his name to the attention of the Churches. 40

Until the magazine ceased publication in January, 1872, Whitman was considered a "regular contributor," as W. C. Church explained in responding to Stedman:

New York, April 27, 1880

Dear Sir

I cannot understand Walt Whitman’s making himself a party to the false statement concerning the Galaxy which you quote from the West Jersey Press and which, you tell me, Whitman sent you, for he knows perfectly well that he was treated with entire courtesy from first to last by the Editors of the Galaxy.

In the second volume of the Galaxy we published an eulogistic article upon "Walt Whitman and his Drum Taps" by John Burroughs (see the number for December 1st, 1866, page 607). This was followed at intervals by three poems and two prose articles written by Whitman and signed with his name. These articles in the order of publication were as follows:

1. "A Carol of the Harvest for 1867" (poem) Sept. 1867, p. 605. 41
2. "Democracy" (prose article) published Dec. 1867, p. 919.
4. "Brother of All with Generous Hand" (poem) January 1870, p. 75. 42

If we ever declined any of Walt Whitman’s contributions, which I do not now recollect, it was certainly done in terms of entire courtesy and such as we should use to a contributor to whose articles our pages were ordinarily open.

I find a letter from Whitman acknowledging the receipt of a check for $60 for his first contribution "A Carol of the Harvest." In it he alludes to a "piece," "Ethiopia Commenting" which we did not publish, apparently for the reason that we preferred the article "Democracy" which we did publish, & which he offered us in the same letter.

Whitman put his own price on his contributions, and, so far as I can recollect, it was paid. In reference to his article "Democracy" he says "it is partly provoked by, and in some respects a rejoinder to Carlyle’s Shooting Niagara."

41 Retitled "The Return of the Heroes."
42 Retitled "Outlines for a Tomb."

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I recall the fact that we were beset by a variety of contributors who wished to burn incense to Walt Whitman as a sort of demi-God, and it is to our failure to appreciate some of these contributors that the statement which appeared in the New Jersey paper is to be ascribed, I presume. One of these contributions was, I remember, written by a cultivated English woman, and though we could not use it, it interested me very much as offering a sort of psychological study of the effect produced by Whitman upon a woman of earnest nature who had been hedged about all her life by English conventionality, & to whom his voice came as that of one who had awakened her from the dead "Fabiña Cuisí." 43

There are many things I might tell you of Whitman, and which enter into an estimate of his personal character but I presume they are already known to you.

Very Truly Yours,

W. C. Church

To,

Mr. E. C. Stedman

71 W. 54 St.

Whatever the personal matters to which Church refers, the important point is that he was able to separate his impression of Whitman’s personal character from his professional judgment of his work. In this he was unlike T. B. Aldrich, who wrote Stedman, “There is something unutterably despicable in a man writing newspaper puffs of himself. I don’t believe a charlatan can be a great poet. I couldn’t believe it if I were convinced of it!” 44

Church’s listing of Whitman’s record should be corrected in the following way: the Galaxy did reject “Oribic Literature,” the third and last section of Democratic Vistas. 45 It printed an additional poem, “A Warble for Lilac-Time” (May, 1870). Also, Burroughs praised Whitman’s work in the course of several of the magazine’s articles. 46 In 1871, "Lucy Fountain,” noting that Whitman is “greatly admired by all but his own countrymen,” quoted Swinburne’s opin-

43 Possibly Mrs. Anne Gilchrist, “An Englishwoman’s Estimate of Walt Whitman,” Radical (Boston), VII (May, 1870), 345–359.
45 See Grier, pp. 347–348.
ion that Whitman is "one of the great geniuses of our time." In January, 1877, "To Walt Whitman," an eulogistic poem by Joaquin Miller, was published. Whitman was not modest in placing price tags on his work and yet the Galaxy, financially the weakest of the four magazines, paid what he asked.

Colonel Church's letter resolves doubts about the magazine's treatment of Whitman which have been raised in two previous articles on the subject. Portia Baker concludes that the Galaxy's favorable treatment extended only until 1871. She feels that the unfavorable reviews of the first two sections of Democratic Vistas led to the rejection of the third and that, as the magazine became more conventional, Whitman became "a figure of little consequence." There is nothing in Church's letter to indicate that this had been the case. On the contrary, Whitman remained "a contributor to whose articles our pages were ordinarily open," but evidently, he did not submit anything after 1871. I have not found any contradictory evidence. The rejection of "Orbic Literature" may simply have been the result of its "extreme length." Finally, if Whitman had become a figure of "little consequence" to the magazine, it would be hard to see why it would print "To Walt Whitman." The poem comments on Whitman's slighting remarks in the West Jersey Press. It advises the poet to forget the entire, demeaning business:

O titan soul, ascend your starry steep
On golden stair to gods and storied men!
Ascend! nor care where thy traducers creep.
For what may well be said of prophets when
A world that's wicked comes to call them good?
Ascend and sing! 

Edward F. Grier, noting that Whitman's "position as a Galaxy author was important to his personal fortunes and his literary reputation," argues that the "most significant" aspect of the relationship is that the Galaxy published the first two sections of Democratic Vistas, the "most important prose statement of his idealism." But in concluding his account of Whitman's relationship with the Galaxy, he finds two later references to the magazine which, "instead of rounding off the story neatly, leave it in confusion." There is the West Jersey Press charge that the Galaxy insulted Whitman and a letter of January 24, 1877, to John Burroughs about the manuscript of Birds and Poets, Burroughs' fourth book. After suggesting a change in the order of the constituent essays and approving the title, he remarked in passing that he had not yet received a manuscript from Church. What this manuscript was and why Whitman was expecting a manuscript from either of the Churches a year after he had publicly accused them of insulting him, are, barring the appearance of more letters, more difficult to discover than what song the Sirens sang.

The appearance of Church's letter to Stedman frees us from the complexities of the Sirens' song. Whitman was in the habit of assisting Burroughs with his work and it is likely, as Edwin Haviland Miller suggests, that he is referring not to his own manuscript but to Burroughs's "Our Rural Divinity," which appeared in the Galaxy in January. Church does not mention that Whitman had submitted anything at this time. And Church's letter should also help resolve any doubts about the Galaxy's treatment of Whitman raised by the West Jersey Press article. Clearly, as Grier suspects, the "insulting" letter came from Holland, not Church. There is no reason to doubt Church's statement that Whitman "was treated with entire courtesy from first to last by the Editors of the Galaxy."

Because of Harper's great popularity, its treatment of Whitman is a matter of considerable importance. Alden, who edited the magazine from 1869 to 1909, paid Whitman what he requested for "Song of the Redwood-Tree" ($100) and "Prayer of Columbus" ($60). Whitman, in the West Jersey Press article, admitted his early success with the magazine, but claimed that "imperative orders from head quarters have stopped anything further." This would have been an
obvious charge for Whitman to make. The close supervision of Fletcher Harper, who guided the magazine from the time of its founding in 1850 until his retirement in 1875, was well-known in the literary community. In writing to Stedman, Alden specifically denied Whitman’s charge:

Franklin Square,  
New York, April 27, 1880

Dear Sir,

I have yours of the 26th. Seven years ago I accepted two poems by Walt Whitman—"Song of the Redwood-Tree," & "The Prayer of Columbus"—which were published in Harper’s Magazine (February & March 1874). He has sent me, since then, poems which I felt obliged to decline, because they seemed to me not adapted to the magazine. I have never received any instructions from the Messrs. Harper respecting Walt Whitman’s contributions. It would certainly give us greater pleasure to accept than to decline them.

I have always been an admirer of Whitman’s poetry. In so far as imagination marks the poet, (if we define imagination as thinking through types [eitullal]), he has no equal in this generation.

Very truly yours,

H. M. Alden

Edmund C. Stedman, Esq.

I have not been able to determine the titles or dates of the poems Alden rejected. Whitman himself, in conversation with Traubel, gives this version of the relationship:

The Harpers once accepted a poem, which induced me to send them others, but five or six were rejected in succession, some of them accompanied on their return with palliating notes: then I saw I was not wanted; I shut the door and withdrew.64

Alden’s letter to Stedman expresses both a friendly attitude toward Whitman and a high regard for his work. From his denial that the management had given orders concerning Whitman, we might conclude that the poet was too hasty in shutting the door.

Alden, in stating that he rejected certain of Whitman’s poems because “they seemed to me not adapted to the magazine,” is refer-

64 Traubel, I, 185.

ring to Fletcher Harper’s broad editorial principles. As Charles Nordhoff learned, Harper insisted that his magazine carry material which would prove “intelligible, interesting, and useful to the average American.”65 Such a maxim is certainly not a commitment to literary excellence for its own sake. But it did allow Harper’s more flexibility and openness than its chief rival, Scribner’s, which was limited by Dr. Holland’s narrow Puritan moralism. Harper’s was not afraid of Whitman’s reputation. In printing “Song of the Redwood-Tree,” which celebrates the great westward migration of the American pioneers, “a swarming and busy race settling and organizing everywhere,” it published a poem in tune with the optimistic, expansionary tendencies of the age. But “Prayer of Columbus” is a different matter.66 One might not expect “the great successful middle-class magazine” to print such a poem.67 But it would appear that Fletcher Harper’s editorial principles were broad enough, and Alden’s perception was acute enough, to embrace the best of Whitman’s later work.

Two additional letters from Alden to Stedman testify to the fundamental seriousness with which he approached Whitman’s poetry. Three days after the first letter, he wrote to clarify his position.

Franklin Square,  
New York, April 30, 1880

My dear Mr. Stedman,

In speaking of Whitman’s imagination, I would not have you suppose that I use the term as I would if I were applying it to Coleridge. I limited it to the use of types (discovered by its own analysis); and in this sense it is really more applicable to a Master of Science than to a poet. In the poet the type is lodged in his own heart, and when the occasion comes—when the mystery within him is confronted by the corresponding mystery around him—it is felt, rather than seen nakedly as an intellectual image—& he is noticed by it, & he must sing.

I do not think that this may be said of Whitman. The type is not so much in his heart as in his thought; & its embodiment or outward expression has not the rhythm of the song. He has been called the most unconventional of poets but he seems to me one of the most conventional.

66 Whitman, Leaves of Grass, pp. 209, 421.
67 Mott, II, 397.
He is conventional, but violates at the same time the law of conventional art. While the inward operation is so purely intellectual, it is outwardly expressed in the concrete—the absolutely real. In this way the conventionalism is disguised; it is as if, in decoration, the artist were to introduce real objects—birds, flowers, etc.—without conventionalizing them. Perhaps this comparison is not quite fair; but the point of it is that while Whitman is moved by thought, (often grand and elevating,) he does not give the intellectual satisfaction warranted by the thought; but a moving panorama of pictures. He not only puts aside his “singing robes,” but his “thinking cap” also, and resorts to the stereopticon. Considered as art, [sic] results, I do not think Whitman’s poems do full justice to his ability. They suggest greatness but do not adequately express it.

Pray excuse this long letter which I intended to be only a brief note.

Sincerely yours
H. M. Alden

Alden is bothered by Whitman’s cataloguing. How can a true poetry be simply a listing of objects? If this is an accurate indication of his method, must we not conclude that his powers of imagination are of a distinctly inferior nature? It is a pertinent objection, and Stedman quoted extensively from Alden’s letters in his “Walt Whitman” to illustrate the complaint. But Stedman goes on to explain the method, describing

a peculiar quality in these long catalogues of types—such as those in the “Song of the Broad-Axe” and “Salut au Monde,” or, more poetically treated, in “Longings for Home.” The poet appeals to our synthetic vision. Look through a window; you see not only the framed landscape, but each tree and stone and living thing. His page must be seized with the eye, as a journalist reads a column at a glance, until successive “types” and pages blend in the mind like the diverse colors of a swift-turning wheel. Whitman’s most inartistic fault is that he overdoes this method, as if usually unable to compose in any other way.86

While hardly a complete explanation of Whitman’s cataloguing technique, it is a perceptive start. What is important is that Stedman meets a theoretical objection with an appeal to experience.

Alden, in writing to Stedman on November 16, 1880, testifies to the need for just such practical criticism of Whitman’s poetic techniques.


Whitman and the Magazines: Some Documentary Evidence

Harper & Brothers.

Franklin Square, New York.

Nov. 16, 1880

My dear Mr. Stedman,

A miserable little notice that I find in the Chicago Inter-Ocean (copied from the N.Y. Sun) of your Whitman paper prompts me to do what I meant to do some days ago—viz. express to you my opinion regarding the paper.

The complaints which are made seem to me a justification of your work in one very important respect. A well-considered, discriminating judgment of Whitman must of necessity offend those who do not discriminate in either their praise or their blame.

My first thought after reading your paper was that I had under-rated Whitman. Seeing him on all sides as you presented him, my estimate was raised. It is the only essay on Whitman that has anything like completeness. It is not an easy thing to bring together within the compass of a magazine article all that is essential to a fair judgment concerning a subject about which there is so much variance of opinion.

Let temper the paper is a model of criticism. The strength does not depend upon the strain of extravagant expression.

I am glad that you exposed the delusion that it can ever be natural to put Nature herself “out of countenance.” As you point out, the Greek idea in this matter was the true one.

What pleased me most was the comparison between Whitman and Wordsworth: such comparisons throw more light upon such a subject than direct assertion.

In conclusion, let me thank you for the graceful way in which you quoted from my letters to you.

Yours Sincerely
H. M. Alden

Although slow in coming in the American press, such temperate critical work as Stedman’s “Walt Whitman” was essential for the broadening of Whitman’s reputation.

The new letters from the four editors to Stedman reveal a situation very different from that described by Whitman in the West Jersey Press article. Only in the matter of “insulting notes” from Scribner’s is there a firm basis for his charges. He may have overstated his situation purposely as a means of calling attention to his plight. If this was the case, he was definitely successful. On the
other hand, Holland’s angry letter may have affected him so deeply that he struck out against all of the major magazines—indeed, against the entire literary establishment.

Beyond disproving the *West Jersey Press* claims, these letters lead to the conclusion that Whitman’s position with the monthlies was remarkably good. It would be hard to quarrel with Stedman’s own interpretation. After receiving the letters from the editors, he wrote Howells on May 8, 1880:

I knew, of course, that Whitman would never have any just cause to complain of you—in any matter that might pertain to your official management. But I supposed, from his statement, that he at some time had endeavored to open relations with the *Atlantic*, and wished to know exactly what had occurred. The fact is that he has been well-treated by *Harper* and exceptionally favored by the *Galaxy*—and in my opinion never had any just claims to the honors of martyrdom. 69

Only Dr. Holland’s *Scribner’s* was closed to Whitman, but, ironically, this magazine, in printing Stedman’s “Walt Whitman,” did much to extend the poet’s reputation. Especially when we consider the radical nature of Whitman’s challenge to the literary and cultural standards of his time, the major American monthlies treated him well in the years before 1880.

69 Stedman and Gould, II, 106.