

## “Plainness is Purity”: Leaves of Grass, Free Religion, and Boston’s Morals Campaign



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In most accounts of the censorship controversy surrounding the 1881-2 edition of Leaves of Grass, the Boston establishment is depicted as a priggish, hypocritical lot conspiring to spoil Walt Whitman’s last, best chance for literary respectability. These accounts always begin with the warm reception Whitman received in Boston in the spring of 1881, when he delivered his Lincoln lecture before the city’s Papyrus Club and signed a book contract with James Ripley Osgood, heir to the backlist and middle-brow prestige of Ticknor and Fields.<sup>1</sup> They track the brisk sales of the Osgood edition in early 1882, and the strong popular notices Whitman was finally enjoying after twenty-seven years of commercial failure. They detail the outrageous demands of Oliver Stevens, Boston’s district attorney, who threatened to suppress the book if Whitman did not excise dozens of allegedly obscene lines, as well as a few complete poems. And they recount Whitman’s stubborn refusal to edit his work under duress, prompting a city-wide ban, a heated public debate about the justness of Comstockian censorship, and a boost in sales for Whitman, who profited from the new, prurient, sensational interest in his book. As Edwin Haviland Miller has argued, Boston always emerges from this controversy a “national joke,” renowned for its “dubious morality,” and Whitman emerges a hero, having weathered the Puritanical storm with his integrity intact (quoted in Loving, Walt Whitman, 416).

The notion that Whitman and his “hot little prophets” stood alone—or virtually alone—during the controversy is often implicit in these accounts. Whitman himself wanted it to appear that way, especially after his cause was taken up by disreputable firebrands like Ezra Heywood, president of the New England Free Love League. “As to the vehement action of the Free

religious & lover folk,” he wrote to William O’Connor, who had thrown himself into the controversy on Whitman’s behalf, “in their conventions, papers &c. in my favor...I see nothing better for yourself or your friends to do than quietly stand aside and let it go on” (quoted in Reynolds 543). Whitman feared, correctly, that the support of people like Heywood would overshadow the poetry itself, and seem to confirm his critics’ worst fears about the unwholesomeness of Leaves of Grass. Indeed, Heywood’s notoriety, as well as the “vehement action” of the Free Love community and other “fringe elements,” have dominated accounts of the banning ever since (Loving, Walt Whitman, 417). But this standard version of events, in which the Whitmaniacs and the Free Lovers joined forces to defend Whitman against a sanctimonious Boston establishment, is misleading. In his cautious letter to O’Connor, Whitman actually provided evidence for a less sensational, but equally important, side to this story, an unexpected pairing that incorporated Old Boston into his “fringe” defense team, as he referred “to the vehement action of the Free religious & lover folk.” This essay seeks to examine the role Free Religion, as opposed to Free Love, played in the events that followed the banning of Leaves of Grass in 1882.

Anyone familiar with Stow Persons’ staid 1947 history Free Religion: An American Faith, still the only monograph entirely devoted to the movement, may be surprised by the sheer volume of free religious material bearing the Whitmanite stamp. Free Religion was, after all, a late nineteenth-century movement dominated by former Unitarian clerics and Harvard Divinity School graduates who were influenced by early Transcendentalism, English Romanticism, and German idealism, and wanted to put their secular learning to new spiritual uses. In other words, the free religionists were just the sort of ivory tower intellectuals Whitman always claimed to distrust, and whom he always claimed distrusted him. Throughout his life, he entertained wild notions about his own outsider status and his denunciations of professors and editors were often

tinged with a perverse kind of glee—all of which was only reinforced by the 1882 Boston controversy. “Harvard never wanted me,” he once told Horace Traubel, the source of many of Whitman’s connections to Free Religion in his later years. “I am not quite the sort: I need toning down or up or something to get me in presentable form for the ceremonials of seats of learning...I am mostly outlawed—and no wonder” (Traubel, vol. 4, 48). But such statements, once broadcast by the Whitmanites, may have done more to foster Whitman’s “outlaw” reputation than any real opposition he faced. His biography is in fact littered with supporters in high places, and, as his experiences following the 1881 Lincoln lecture and the subsequent banning controversy suggest, he was a particular favorite among the liberal intellectuals of Cambridge and Boston.

Founded by the radical wing of the Unitarian church in 1867 to protest the remaining doctrines of the Unitarian establishment, the Free Religious Association was a thoroughly Brahmin institution from the start: Emerson was the first member to pay his dues, Octavius Brooks Frothingham was elected its first president, Thomas Wentworth Higginson was an elected vice president, and Frank Sanborn was appointed to the Board of Directors. As some of these names suggest, Free Religion was ultimately more a literary movement than a religious one, born in its adherents’ responses to particular texts—including Emerson’s essays, the German Higher Criticism, Romantic texts by Coleridge and Goethe, and Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*—and propagated in sermons and essays published in specialized journals like *The Index* and *The Radical* as well as in general interest publications like *The North American Review* and *The Atlantic Monthly*, all based in and around Boston. Given this set of intellectual interests, it seems almost inevitable that Whitman and the free religious ministers would find each other in the post-war years. Indeed, the anti-ecclesiastical and supremely literary

spirituality of Free Religion often resembles an intellectualized version of Whitman’s own nebulous faith, both of which imported antebellum Transcendentalism into the twentieth century.

It was because of these similarities, however, that the free religionists’ support, like Emerson’s a few decades earlier, was often grudging and contingent upon his remaining within the bounds of literary propriety. Indeed, many of Whitman’s closest allies, and even the poet himself, suspected that Higginson, the FRA’s first vice president, was the chief instigator of the 1882 banning. A second generation Transcendentalist, an ardent opponent of “scripture idolatry,” and a friend of many of Whitman’s most influential supporters, including Moncure Conway, Sanborn, and Frothingham, Higginson certainly fit the Whitmanite profile (The Magnificent Activist 344). Yet his hostile review of the Osgood edition of *Leaves of Grass*, published in December 1881 in the *Nation*, was among the first to raise the specter of indecency and, obliquely, the possibility of suppression (Reynolds 583). “So long as ‘Leaves of Grass’ may be sent through the mails,” Higginson declared, “the country is safe from over-prudery at least” (quoted in Nelson and Price 501). As if that were not enough to enrage the Whitmanites, Higginson went on, in a *Women’s Journal* article entitled “Unmanly Manhood,” published two months later in February of 1882, to link Whitman’s literary indiscretions to his personal habits and choices, comparing the “good gray poet” to the sensational Oscar Wilde and berating him for refusing to enlist as a soldier in the Civil War, and for choosing instead the “unmanly” occupation of nursing. At their most devastating, Higginson’s attacks on Whitman had long combined formalist literary criticism with appeals to public decency, and did so in shockingly personal terms. But what was at stake for Higginson, the only major American liberal to mount a decades-long campaign against the poet, as he pandered to moralistic forces most of his free religious colleagues distrusted?

In recent years, scholars have repositioned Higginson as a profoundly conflicted example of Victorian manhood, and his objections to Whitman certainly lend themselves to this psycho-sexual reading.<sup>2</sup> However, while he frequently rejected Whitman on the grounds that *Leaves of Grass* was unsuitable material for “ladies’ boudoirs,” as he did in “Unmanly Manhood” and elsewhere, Higginson also hinted at a more substantive critique of Whitman’s place in literary and intellectual history, one that attempted to set the boundaries of “freedom” in late Transcendentalism and Free Religion. Grouping Whitman and Oscar Wilde throughout the article, Higginson argued that there was “nothing Greek” about their new sensual poetics, because they did not “suggest the sacred whiteness of an antique statue.” Instead, he argued, the poetry of Whitman and Wilde represented the “forcible unveiling of some insulted innocence.” While this critique now seems to have been a misreading of both Whitman and the Greeks—and, indeed, it sounded absurd to most Whitman supporters in 1882—it revealed Higginson’s primary concern: as the foremost English translator of the stoic philosopher Epictetus, a critic who prided himself on his chaste appreciation of Sappho’s poetry, and a second-wave Transcendentalist who cast himself as an intellectual successor to Margaret Fuller, Higginson feared Whitman as the “unmanly” manifestation of his own idealistic philosophy—which he traced from Plato and the Greek idealists, through German Romanticism, to Fuller and Emerson (*The Magnificent Activist* 489, 497, 293). In Higginson’s analysis, Whitman was Transcendentalism’s worst-case scenario, a disciple who took philosophical and ethical idealism out of Greece’s “sacred whiteness” and deposited it in the degradation of social and sexual ambiguity.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, Whitman revealed the moral, and perhaps mortal, dangers inherent in the individualistic radicalism through which Higginson himself had made his name.<sup>4</sup>

Fortunately for Whitman, Higginson’s attacks provoked a few important responses from within the FRA. And many ministers, beginning with president O.B. Frothingham, sided with

Whitman against Higginson, Stevens, and the Boston moralists. Perhaps no other defender of Whitman’s character and poetry had Frothingham’s extraordinary pedigree and cultural cachet. The son of Nathaniel Langdon Frothingham, longtime pastor of Boston’s First Church, and related through his mother’s family to the Everett and Adams families of Massachusetts, the minister was a true Boston Brahmin. Entering Harvard College in 1839, in the aftermath of Emerson’s Divinity School Address, and graduating from Harvard Divinity School in 1846 along with Higginson, Frothingham eventually fell under Theodore Parker’s influence. After a brief sojourn in Salem, he ascended to the pulpit of the Third Church of New York City, his “church of the unchurched” (which he renamed the Independent Liberal Church of New York in 1870) and attracted a prestigious, liberal congregation, including publisher George Haven Putnam, architect Calvert Vaux, Transcendentalist George Ripley, editor and politician Horace Greeley, and F.A.P. Barnard, president of Columbia College (Caruthers 71-2). Thus Frothingham, as pastor of the Independent Liberal Church, embodied the New England cultural elite that Whitman repeatedly renounced *as well as* the New York cultural elite that Whitman typically avoided by fraternizing with omnibus drivers and assorted bohemians. Nevertheless, Frothingham’s biographer places Whitman on the same stage as the minister during the 1879 founding of a New York temperance organization, the “Society for Moderation,” and Whitman himself frequently expressed his admiration for Frothingham, as well as his appreciation for Frothingham’s support: “I have understood O.B. was always my friend—that his allusions were always kind—that he quotes ‘Leaves of Grass’ without doubt, fear” (Caruthers 167; Traubel, vol. 5, 8, 355).

In October of 1882, in the wake of the Boston banning, Frothingham published “The Morally Objectional in Literature” in the *North American Review*. In this essay, he drew a distinction between “works that are demoralizing and works that are simply coarse.” Tom Jones

and Leaves of Grass were his examples of books in the latter category, “books objectionable certainly, but not pestiferous, because vice is not their aim” (325):

It is an article of their creed that whatever exists in nature deserves to be recognized and copied. It is there, and should therefore be produced, but they are not satisfied,—at least Fielding and Whitman are not satisfied,—with depicting leaves of grass. The later preraphaelites are not content with the rudiments of realism, but, beginning at the bottom, aspire to perfection of drawing and color. (326)

What Fielding, Whitman and the Pre-Raphaelites all had in common, according to Frothingham, was an interest in naturalistic detail—exemplified by “leaves of grass”—and sensuality, but only insofar as such “coarse” investigations advanced an understanding of ideal human existence. In this way, Frothingham started Leaves of Grass on the path back to “sacred whiteness.”

Of course, a prominent clergyman like Frothingham could not afford to throw all caution to the wind; later in the article, he would object to the more sensational aspects of Whitman’s fame, bemoaning the fact that prurient interest always attended Comstockian “persecution,” and that the poet’s popularity was “due in the main to passages in the volume of which the writer is probably least proud” (336). Nevertheless, he folded into the middle of the essay a second and even more significant defense of Whitman’s work:

In this respect Walt Whitman’s unsavory “Leaves of Grass” occupies a place in literature vastly above Oscar Wilde’s so-called “poems” or the earliest productions of Swinburne. There is a vulgar coarseness in some of Whitman’s pieces, but the aim of the volume is high; so high, that it drew encomium from R.W. Emerson, who had no sympathy whatever with dirt. A few of the poems are steeped in moral enthusiasm. A sentiment of human brotherhood pervades. The faith in progress is glowing and constant. The trust in Providence is unwavering. Soul is everywhere sovereign over sense, at least in the author’s

design. Love for man may be excessive; but it is genuine. Visions of the future may be too dazzling for reason, but they grow out of earnest conviction. The man is a believer,—an absorbed, an intense one,—as the intelligent reader must perceive. The author is not a prophet of obscenity; not a teacher of sensuality under the name “aestheticism.” He sings a paean of man in all his relations; and, in his own judgment, his song would be incomplete if it did not voice human desires. (328)

The remarkable thing about this passage is how precisely it applies free religious principles to Whitman’s work. In differentiating Whitman’s “high” project from Wildean aestheticism, in citing once again Emerson’s famous letter of encouragement, in insisting on Whitman’s status as “a believer,” and in listing the elements of that belief—“moral enthusiasm,” “human brotherhood,” “faith in progress,” “trust in Providence,” “soul over sense”—Frothingham drew Whitman into his own, peculiar form of religious radicalism: idealistic, optimistic, scientific, Emersonian. In praising the poet for singing “a paean of man in all his relations,” the author of The Religion of Humanity was identifying one of his own.<sup>5</sup>

By July of the following year, Frothingham had so convinced himself of Whitman’s prophetic importance that he began to offer up Whitman as a positive, rather than merely a persecuted, voice in American letters. This time, he opened an essay entitled “Democracy and Moral Progress,” also published in the *North American Review*, with a quotation from the poet’s recently published Specimen Days<sup>6</sup>: “I say that our New World democracy, however great a success in uplifting the masses out of their slough, in materialistic developments, products, and in a certain highly deceptive superficial intellectuality, is, so far, an almost complete failure in its social aspects and in really grand religious, moral, literary, and aesthetic results” (28).

Whitman’s criticism of the nation’s moral inferiority, Frothingham then noted, came from “an enthusiastic believer in republican government, perhaps the most ardent democrat living.” It was



severe, he warned, because the poet “hopes so much, and sees so much to be at stake in the experiment of liberty.” It is Whitman, then, who has the first word in a jeremiad that Frothingham concluded with the following warning: “[A] word of urgent exhortation must be spoken, therefore, to teachers, preachers, authors, guides of public opinion... They must work hard if they would counteract the downward tendencies of democratic ideas as vulgarly expounded.” In other words, it was Whitman, recently vilified as a purveyor of unpublishable filth, and arguably the most famous alleged pornographer of his era, whom Frothingham enlisted to stand with him and resist the tide of “vulgarity.” And he did this in one of the most respected journals of Boston, the very city in which Whitman was denounced.<sup>7</sup>

If Frothingham advanced Whitman’s case for respectability in the public at-large, through his contributions to literary institutions like *The North American Review*, his fellow FRA founder, Sidney Morse, was largely responsible for Whitman’s reputation within Free Religion proper. Typically, Morse appears in Whitman biographies as a sculptor who cast busts of the poet in 1876 and 1887, the latter set finding their way to the Pre-Raphaelites in London and to Bronson Alcott in Concord. But Morse, a former Unitarian minister in Ohio and Massachusetts, was also the editor of *The Radical*, the “lofty” and “philosophical” counterpart to *The Index*, Francis Ellingwood Abbot’s more popular FRA weekly (Mott, vol. 3, 78).<sup>8</sup> It was for his support in this capacity most of all that Whitman would later enthuse, “Sidney deserves everything from us—everything. His love is a proved possession,” and count Morse among the “fellows” who “knew me from the start—seem at once to have seen me as their own” (Traubel, vol. 8, 440; vol. 4, 495). As editor, Morse published Anne Gilchrist’s “An Englishwoman’s Estimate of Walt Whitman” in 1870, an early defense of Whitman’s sensuality, as well as an 1877 defense written by his former co-editor Joseph Marvin, in which Marvin declared: “[T]his poet of Democracy is a physician of both soul and body. He comes to diagnosticate the disease

in the intellect, in the art, in the heart, of America to-day. And what does his discriminating eye discern? He sees that there is a false sense of shame attaching, in the modern mind, to the sexual relation” (quoted in Bucke, Walt Whitman 163-4). In these articles, Morse set the precedent for Frothingham’s support and reserved a place of prominence for Whitman in the intellectual center of his journal, itself the intellectual center of Free Religion. For this service, Whitman was so grateful that, in a reversal of the way things usually worked in the Whitmanite camp, he offered to raise money to build a house and studio for the often impecunious Morse on the outskirts of Camden (Traubel, vol. 4, 436).

More typical of the way things worked for Whitman was the 1887 Boston Cottage Fund, created in response to exaggerated reports of Whitman’s poverty, to help Whitman build a home of his own. Sanborn, William Dean Howells, Charles Eliot Norton, and Edwin Booth were among the contributors to the fund, helping to raise \$800 which the poet then used, apparently with the donors’ permission, to cover expenses other than the planned construction in Timber Creek, New Jersey (Barrus, Comrades, 268). But no one took a more public role in the Cottage Fund than the *eminence grise* of Free Religion, Cyrus A. Bartol. One of the original members of the Transcendental Club as well as the man who hosted the initial organizational meetings of the FRA, Bartol was a minister at Boston’s West Church for fifty-two years. Upon Bartol’s death in 1900, Sanborn would testify that “Old Boston—the Boston of the first half of our century—may be said to have died with [him]” (On Spirit and Personality xxxiii). For someone who was so active in Transcendental and free religious circles, there is surprisingly little evidence that Bartol had a longstanding interest in Whitman’s work, and certainly nothing to suggest a friendship to rival Sanborn’s, or Morse’s, or Moncure Conway’s, or even Frothingham’s.<sup>9</sup> Thus his May 24, 1887 letter to the editor of *The Boston Herald*, asking readers to contribute money to the Cottage

Fund on Whitman’s behalf, remains the most significant indication of his feelings toward the poet:

WALT WHITMAN

**Friends of the Poet Propose to Build Him a Summer Cottage.**

*To the Editor of the Herald:* May I ask in your courteous and hospitable columns space to say it is proposed to raise money enough to provide a modest residence for the poet, most original in style and patriotic in theme America has produced? If from his overful pen, to some eyes, a drop seems to fall and blot the illuminated page, the plainness is purity, and the Garden of Eden no more innocent than the writer’s thoughts. In his lecture, and in his lines entitled “My Captain,” he has given an unmatched picture of our chief martyr, Abraham Lincoln; and the “Little Captain” of “Leaves of Grass” is an unsurpassed portrait of valor. In another piece his finding the burial place of his friend, not in the graveyard, but the world everywhere a sepulcher, puts a finer touch on the conception in Bryant’s “Thanatopsis.” No author among us is so little a borrower. In comforting his old age let us pay him part of our debt.

C. A. Bartol

It is perhaps indicative of intellectual guilt that the Cottage Fund would emerge out of Boston five years after Oliver Stevens prohibited Whitman’s poems from being published in that city. There is little doubt, in fact, that the events of 1882 were directing Bartol’s pen when he chose to emphasize Whitman’s patriotism, “purity,” and pathos in his endorsement: those have always been the Whitmanesque qualities of choice among readers seeking to sidestep the explicit sexuality of his poetry. Nevertheless, Bartol’s insistence upon Whitman’s “purity” was particularly significant, since he was a rather harsh critic of obscenity during the Comstock

years, and had even published a letter in the August 1, 1878 *Index* that, while condemning Comstock’s deceitful methods of enforcement, supported a stringent campaign against “indecent books and pamphlets” (367).<sup>10</sup> By campaigning on behalf of the Cottage Fund in a medium like *The Boston Herald*, Bartol was therefore doing what his friend Emerson had always refused to do: he was publicly and unequivocally declaring Whitman a moral writer, using the remaining influence of the Transcendentalist movement to renovate Whitman’s reputation and inform a skeptical nation of the debt it owed to an aging literary giant.

Nevertheless, “plainness is purity” was a decidedly antiseptic defense of Whitman’s earthy, innovative subject matter. Presiding over what Georges Santayana has called the “genteel tradition” of American literature, Bartol (like Frothingham) incorporated *Leaves of Grass* into a preexisting moral discourse. Instead of seeking new standards in the poet’s work, as did the “hot little prophets” who gathered around Whitman in his final years, Bartol reclassified Whitman’s most sensual passages to fit the accepted standards of propriety. His support was therefore rooted in a prescriptive approach to literature that was, in its own way, as conservative as the one sustaining Higginson’s critique: If some of what Whitman writes is objectionable, it is also leavened by moral seriousness—by religion and science and reason—and therefore suitable for polite audiences. However, to the free religionists’ dismay, this is precisely the kind of logic that drew the Free Love radicals to *Leaves of Grass* as well: once freed from the strictures of institutional religion, institutional morality, institutional literature, and *institutional marriage*, the free-loving Whitmanite understood all aspects of creation as elements of an original purity. For Free Religion, this resemblance to Ezra Heywood’s more thoroughgoing radicalism was a little too close for comfort: in the coming years, the FRA would split precisely along the divide that the controversy surrounding *Leaves of Grass* had exposed—in this case between friends like Frothingham and Higginson (Persons 114). Just how “plain” could one be—scientifically,

artistically, ethically—before one lost one’s “purity”? Just how radical could one be before one lost one’s respectability? Just how “free” could one be before one lost one’s way? After the initial thrill of rebellion and experimentation had passed, a significant number of Free Religionists, including Frothingham, would answer these questions for themselves by returning to institutional Unitarianism. In contrast, Whitman, who always prided himself on being “radical...but not too damned radical,” would negotiate a third way (Traubel, vol. 1, 223). Exploiting the scandal of his Free Love associations, but protected against charges of outright obscenity by his Free Religion associations, he would thrive on the controversy that surrounded his book and, by “letting it go on,” sold out over six printings of the Osgood (later Welsh/McKay) edition of Leaves of Grass over the next two years.

<sup>1</sup> Actually, Osgood had recently lost the Ticknor and Fields backlist to Henry Houghton, and had signed Whitman along with Mark Twain as a way to rebuild his reputation as a publisher of recognizable names in American literature, of which “Walt Whitman” was certainly one (Loving, “Osgood’s Folly,” 117).

<sup>2</sup> See Kim Townsend, *Manhood at Harvard*; Robert Nelson and Kenneth M. Price, “Higginson, William Sloane Kennedy, and the Question of Walt Whitman”; and Christopher Looby, ed., *The Complete Civil War Journals and Selected Letters of Thomas Wentworth Higginson*.

<sup>3</sup> Recent scholarship on Higginson has reliably documented his passionate relationship with his Harvard classmate, William Henry Hurlbut, the model for the protagonist of his novel, *Malbone*, as well as for Theodore Winthrop’s 1862 transvestite romance, *Cecil Dreeme* (Nelson and Price 504; Blanchard 28; Shand-Tucci 44). The Hurlbut plotline has been of particular interest, since Hurlbut was a member of Wilde’s entourage during his celebrated 1882 tour of the United States, the very tour that inspired Higginson’s *Women’s Journal* condemnation of Wilde and Whitman (Blanchard 29-31). Even if the love-triangle existed only in Higginson’s head by 1882—Hurlbut appears to have withdrawn his affection for Higginson by the mid-1850s—he was, nevertheless, wounded when Hurlbut excluded him from Wildean festivities in New York. Thus, it is more than likely that his “Unmanly Manhood” vituperations were the manifestations of a profound internal conflict about his own sexuality, and that even his earliest responses to Whitman’s poems were informed by an uncomfortable fusion of sex and philosophy.

<sup>4</sup> Certainly, Higginson had Whitman in mind when, in “The Sunny Side of the Transcendental Period” (which first appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1904) he listed the ill-effects of Transcendental philosophy on the self-absorbed and the weak-minded:

“The freedom that belonged to the period, the sunny atmosphere of existence, doubtless made some men indolent, like children of the tropics...Others led lives morally wasted, whether by the mere letting loose of a surge of passion ill restrained, or by that terrible impulse of curiosity which causes more than half the sins of each growing generation, and yet is so hard to distinguish from the heroic search after knowledge. I can think of men among those bred in that period, and seemingly under its full influence, who longed to know the worst of life and knew it, and paid dearly for their knowledge; and their kindred paid more dearly still. Others might be named who, without ever yielding, so far as I know or guess, to a single sensual or worldly sin, yet developed temperaments so absolutely wayward that it became necessary, in the judgment of all who knew the facts, for their wives and children to leave them and stay apart, so that these men died in old age without seeing the faces of their own grandchildren” (The Magnificent Activist 572).

There were many Transcendentalists who would have fulfilled Higginson’s criteria for “moral waste,” including his own brother-in-law Ellery Channing (Capper 509). And it is hard to read this passage against the emerging story of his own youthful love affair with William Henry Hurlbut and not believe that he was obliquely referring to his own prelapsarian “search after knowledge.” Nevertheless, many of the signs point to Whitman in particular. The opprobrium Higginson attached to “sensual or worldly sin,” culminating in the separation of families, evoked a rumor, originating with Whitman, that the poet had sired six children in his lifetime and had lost contact with all six. By his own admission, Whitman was going to die “without seeing the faces of his own grandchildren.” Similarly, as the most famous “loafer” of his generation, Whitman admitted that he had been made “indolent” by Transcendental freedom. And as the

most famous writer of American homoerotic poetry, he had proven incapable of distinguishing true idealism from “the worst of life.”

<sup>5</sup> “We have but to think of our bond of brotherhood with our kind, and once more the fruits of the Spirit are seen to be—love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faith, mildness, self-control” (Frothingham, The Religion of Humanity, 226).

<sup>6</sup> In the first paragraph of the essay, Frothingham recommends the rest of Specimen Days to his readers, calling it a “remarkable volume” and suggesting that it “will be a surprise to some who regard their author an altogether fleshly poet.” The term “fleshly” was another reference to Whitman’s relation to the Pre-Raphaelites, which Robert Buchanan called the “Fleshly School” of art in an infamous 1872 attack in *Blackwood’s* magazine.

<sup>7</sup> Although Frothingham was a prolific writer, Caruthers suggests that he lacked a literary temperament, particularly in contrast to his friend Higginson, whose critical eye earned for him a solid literary reputation by the turn of the century. Nevertheless, Frothingham’s literary interests, such as they were, displayed a distinctly Whitmanesque tendency. In his Recollections he revealed that his fascination with the Paineite tradition of radical theism extended to “Paine’s best exponent in America,” Robert Ingersoll, and his closest literary friend in his later years was Edmund Clarence Stedman, a New York critic whose support for Whitman was often ambivalent, but whom Whitman would ultimately count among his best friends in the New York literary elite (Recollections and Impressions 253; Loving, Song of Himself, 407).

<sup>8</sup> *The Radical*, never a journal with a common touch, was perpetually short of funds and, in 1873, nearly merged with the less-erudite *The Index*. Frank Luther Mott’s assessment of nineteenth century religious journals therefore seems particularly apt in relation to Morse’s journal: “The lives of the reviews were commonly filled with disappointments. The writers for them, though seldom gifted with the ability to be interesting, were utterly sincere. They wrote as teachers—



sometimes as prophets even. Yet one is often moved to almost as much admiration for the readers as for the writers; they, too, were earnest, and they had an appetite for solid food that seems extraordinary in this light-minded generation. What shelvesful, what libraries of learning—theology, metaphysics, philosophy, philology, exegesis!” (v. 3, 63). J. Wade Caruthers makes a similar point, though in a less condescending tone, in his biography of Frothingham: “In spite of Frothingham’s usual restraint, his elegant style, and scholarly breadth of writing elsewhere, he obviously relished the intellectual adventure in a journal that permitted combat with words in the realm of ideas. That he thought highly of the journal and that he also wanted to increase his own audience is clear from the advice he gave an unknown person who asked for advice on religious literature. ‘You could not do better than subscribe to the *Radical*’ (158). That Whitman should be so frequently included among *The Radical*’s subjects therefore suggests the profoundly intellectual nature of Whitmanism in the post-war years, and the extent to which his vaunted populism was a poetic pose rather than a fact of his reception.

<sup>9</sup> While, in his *Autobiography*, Moncure Conway mentions an episode in which “Mr. Bartol” failed in his attempt to read *Leaves of Grass* “in company,” a story that apparently gratified Whitman, there is no concrete evidence of an intellectual union between Whitman and Bartol—indeed Conway does not even clarify which “Mr. Bartol” he means, whether Cyrus or his younger brother George (*Autobiography* 216).

<sup>10</sup> In the conclusion to this letter, Bartol wrote, “[T]he circulation of indecent books and pamphlets, though by a man insane on their subject, is a capital sin and justly made indictable by law. All freedom must have legal restraint. In vain we try to distinguish between action and speech. A word may be more than any deed for evil or good.”

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