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Walt Whitman's Closet

"Yet it seems to me that with every precaution you take against such an evil you put yourself into the power of the evil."

Emerson

Walt's Wardrobe

In Whitman's closet in the upstairs hallway: "a dark sack coat, with dark gray waistcoat and trousers, low shoes, and grey woolen socks;" "six new [cotton] shirts" Mary Davis had made for him, one of which she'd decorated with lace around collar and cuffs; "his unclasped, antiquated arctics," cane, and hat with the brim pushed up in front.

Garments in Use

Walt Whitman's wardrobe was relatively conservative, "a suit of gray, and a white slouch hat." He did not wear Greek robes and sandals or set himself too much apart from others with his clothing.

A Change of Clothes

John Baulsir of Brooklyn told Johnston of Whitman's going to Trinity Church in Brooklyn and forgetting to take off his hat:

One of the church officials requested him to remove it, but in such a low voice that he did not hear him; and thinking that he was defying him, he deliberately knocked it off; whereupon Whitman stooped down, picked it up off the floor, and twisting it into a kind of rope - it was a soft felt - he seized the man by the collar and struck him with it on the side of

the head three or four times, and then walked out, followed by the red-faced official, who vowed he would have him arrested.

Burroughs said "it was the only instance he had ever heard of Whitman resenting anything."

An Outfit Rarely Worn

"You don't often see me mad: I don't dare get mad: I get so damned mad when I get mad that it shakes me up too much - leaves ugly results: so I hold myself in sternly: have to: yes, must."

Walt Whitman

Undergarments

An early review of *Leaves of Grass*, the review itself perhaps written by Whitman, "spoke of the Whitman who appeared in Gabriel Harrison's 1854 daguerreotype, as rendered in a steel engraving by Samuel Hollyer--'in a garb, half sailor's/half workingman's, with no superfluous appendage of coat or waistcoat, a 'wideawake' perched jauntily on his head, one hand in his pocket and the other on his hip, with a certain air of mild defiance, and an expression of pensive insolence in his face which seems to betoken a consciousness of his mission as the 'coming man.'"

Among Several Items in a Portmanteau

In those days of wandering and of taking in all sights and sounds . . . he once went over to Georgetown, where coal barges were being unloaded at the Canal, and he told us that he watched for hours a negro at work, who was naked to the waist, and the play of his muscles, as he loaded and unloaded the buckets of coal, was most fascinating: "No Greek statue could have been more superb," he said.

Ellen M. Calder

The Family Bible

Camden: Sunday December 30, 1888

Lisk, Whitman's Closet

No day passes now but W. hands over to me some document which he says is for my "archives." I said to-night to him: you are giving me some great stuff nowadays. I will find real use for it; I'll make a big story out of it all some day." He nodded. "That's what I want you to do, if the world will stand it. In the final sense they are not records of my life,--of my personal life, of Walt Whitman,--but scripture material applying to a movement in which I am only an episode."

Horace Traubel

A Few Old Books and Pictures

November 10, 1856

A few books were piled disorderly over the mantel-piece, and some characteristic pictures--a Hercules, a Bacchus, and a satyr--were pasted, unframed, upon the rude walls.

....

I said, while looking at the pictures in his study: "Which, now, of the three, particularly, is the new poet here--this Hercules, the Bacchus, or the satyr?" On which he begged me not to put my questions too close, meaning to take, as I inferred, the virtues of the three to himself unreservedly. And I think he might fairly, being himself the modern Pantheon--satyr, Silenus, and him of the twelve labours--combined.

Amos Bronson Alcott

Ditto

An unsigned obituary in the *New York World* for March 27, 1871 refers to Moncure Conway's description of ". . . a picture of Bacchus which hung up in the poet's humble study. That study was a curious nook; it contained no books except a Bible and Homer, and but two pictures, line engravings—Silenus and Bacchus."

A Crazy Quilt

His manuscript was like Joseph's coat, of many colors. Sometimes he used half a dozen kinds of paper on which to complete one poem -- a verse or two each, and then he would pin them together. His poems he worked over and over again. He would roll a completed poem, or a book, or an article, up, wrap it about with a piece of twine and throw it in the corner of his room. . . . He used the crook of his cane to hook out what he wanted from the pile on the floor.

Tom Donaldson

Simulacra in Plain Wrappers

Only once was I fated to see him carried out of his usual quiet mood. One day, sitting there at his side, I picked up a New York paper and there read a paragraph about a new book by the poet, Swinburne. Without thinking, I casually mentioned it, forgetting that Swinburne had lost his earlier enthusiasm for "Leaves of Grass," and had even, to put it proverbially, gone back on his tracks and "ratted" in a disgraceful article entitled "Whitmania." The effect of his name now on Walt Whitman was astonishing. He turned round, raised his big hand from the broad arm of the chair on which it rested, and in a tremendous voice that shook me to the mid-rib, cried: "Of all the damned simulacra I have known, that man was the worst. He

brought me to a table spread with fair dishes and when I lifted up the covers, behold, *there was nothing there!*"

Ernest Rys

A Tasteful Outfit

The big fellows are always the generous fellows: they recognize each other wherever they are. It's the generosity that makes the big fellow. It will do for the little crowd to have all the bickerings, the mean jealousies, the quarrelling ambitions, the mean policies.

Walt Whitman

More Wardrobe

"3 shirts, 1 under. 1 dr., 1 hdkf." [sic]

No Necktie

No necktie.

A Place for Everything

Mrs. Davis also sacrificed her reputation by keeping house for the author of the notorious *Leaves of Grass*. Many conventionally-minded/ people in Camden regarded this menage as highly improper, and slanderous gossip was circulated in the town. Whitman had never cared what his neighbors thought, but the woman was more sensitive.

Gay Wilson Allen

Outside the Wardrobe

"That miserable wretch, the mayor of this town, has forbidden the boys to bathe in the river. He thinks there is something objectionable in their stripping off their clothes and jumping into the water."

Walt Whitman

A New Suit

"Along in the summer of 1882 he procured and wore a suit of dark blue flannel--all blue--even a blue hat, but always a slouch one."

Tom Donaldson

A Composite Drawing

Death was a woman, "strong deliveress." But women were also life--a mother, a lover, bare-bosomed night.

Through you I drain the pent-up rivers of myself,

In you I wrap a thousand onward years

Several Almost Identical Outfits

He is clearly his Book,--and I went off impressed with the sense of a new city on my map, viz., Brooklyn, just as if it had suddenly risen through the boiling sea.

Moncure Daniel Conway

A Penholder and Four Nibs

I picked up a pen card from the floor. There were still four mammoth falcons in it. Whitman said: "That's a present from Jim Redpath: I have made good use of it:" and he added: "I find I get to like the vast pens: they give me something to take real hold of: they

encourage me to write spacious things." He laughed. "There's a spiritual side of the simplest physical phenomena: not only a spiritual side: more than that: a spiritual outcome."

W[hitman] needs a mammoth pen holder. He showed me the big pen squeezed into a little holder.

Horace Traubel

On the Shelf a Flask of Cologne with the Label Removed

"The scent of these arm-pits, etc."

A Perfume Catalogue

Chypre, English Lavender, Jasmine, *eau de Millefleurs*, *eau de Mousseline*, *eau Aromatique de Montpellier*, Jicky, etc.

Laundry

“ . . . a generous piece of soft cotton or cheesecloth. His wide-brimmed hat, always looking the worse for wear. . . .”

Elizabeth Keller

A Questionable Item

The beards of the young men glisten'd with wet, it ran from their long hair,

Little streams pass'd all over their bodies.

An unseen hand also pass'd over their bodies,

It descended tremblingly from their temples and ribs.

. . . .

In me the caresser of life wherever moving

A Locked Grip

"I am not fond of being catechized - indeed rather run from it: I am not fond of questions - any questions, in short, that require answers."

Walt Whitman

In or Out of the Closet

I like the outright person - the hater, the lover - the unmistakable yes or no: the street "damn you!" or "how are you me boy?" [Punctuation sic]

Walt Whitman

On the Floor

The magazines and newspaper piled higher than the desk, covered the floor so completely that I had to kick my way by the two sides of the wall of the room to get to the desk. [Punctuation sic]

William Osler

More Wardrobe

A "blue striped shirt," an "old gray overcoat;" an "old broad-brim straw" hat, "easy shoes,"
"An umbrella and a fan."

A Fan

"'Walt Whitman,' she exclaimed, 'the effeminate world needed thee.' It needed such a poet who was 'enamored of *women*, not *ladies--men*, not *gentlemen*.'"

Fanny Fern

An Old Photo Album

In 1986-87, the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* published a collection all the known photographs of Whitman. Among the earliest in the collection is a daguerreotype from the 1850s that pictures a man in a straw hat set at a rakish angle. The face in the photograph has long sideburns that almost meet at the chin. The notes on the photograph describe it as “at best a very questionable attribution. WW in 1889, trying to identify a certain photograph, noted that ‘I never wore a stiff hat,’ a remark that might rule this photo out as an image of WW; note also the uncharacteristic broad nose, non-drooping eyelids, and unarched brows.”

Missing

“out with the dumps, in with the condom’d orgasmic friend—“

Allen Ginsberg

A Latin Text

"Peccatum illud horribile, inter Christianos non nominandum."

Rufus Griswold reviewing *Leaves of Grass*

In a Briefcase

Where Chatham, Catherine and Division Streets meet at the Bowery, "Here precipitate themselves, early in the forenoon, hundreds and thousands of delicious New York girls, going to their work." But not one particular girl.

A Letter

In the spring of 1862 he [Whitman] may have had a brief affair with a woman who sent her servant to deliver a letter to Whitman "At Pfaff's Restaurant, Broadway, New York," signing herself protectively "Ellen Eyre." He could have met her anywhere. Perhaps she was,

like him, a hospital visitor. He did notice a lady ("I dare not mention her name, but she is beautiful") moving through the wards with small gifts she had brought to distribute

Whatever pleasure he shared with "Ellen Eyre" on a Monday night in March, it was one she longed to repeat. "I fear," she wrote, "you took me last night for a female privateer. It is time I was sailing under my true colors.--but then today I assume you cared [sic] nothing piratical though I would joyfully have made your heart a captive."

Philip Callow

In an Attaché Case

In the early days of our acquaintance with him, which rapidly grew to intimacy, my mother once asked him if he had ever been in love. After a long pause he answered somewhat reluctantly, I thought, "Your question, Abby, *stirs a fellow up.*" Although he would not admit that he had ever been "really in love," he took from his pocket a photograph of a very beautiful girl (remember, he was still in his thirties) and showed it to us. That is all we ever knew about the original of the picture either then or afterwards, but I well remember the girl's exceptional beauty.

Helen Price

In Any Case

Leaves of Grass are "the ejaculations of one identity."

Walt Whitman

Parts of a Uniform

"I wear army boots, with magnificent black morocco tops, the trousers put in, wherein shod and legged confront I Virginia's deepest mud with supercilious eyes."

Walt Whitman

Traces of Others

". . . a large and handsome fan of wood, ivory, and ostrich feathers," autographed by Carlyle, Browning, Tennyson, Emerson, Lowell, Hans C. Andersen, Dickens, Longfellow and others, owned by Mrs. Bloomfield N. Moore of Philadelphia and brought to Donaldson by Joseph Jermon for Walt Whitman's autograph.

Someone Else's Veil

It is not half so dangerous to a man to be immured in a dungeon alone with God and his own clear conscience, as to walk the streets fearing the scrutiny of a thousand eyes, ready to veil, with anxious care, whatever may not suit the many-headed monster in its momentary mood. Gentleness is dignified, but caution is debasing; only a noble fearlessness can give wings to the mind, with which to soar beyond the common ken, and learn what may be of use to the crowd below.

Margaret Fuller

Tucked in a Corner After Whitman Left

"I believe that man must suffer from sexual torture as long as he is capable of sexual feelings."

Egon Schiele

Another Fan

Lisk, Whitman's Closet

"How I did hunger for that fan!"

Thomas Donaldson

A Grail

“[A]n old china cup which had belonged to Mr. Whitman for forty years.”

J. W. Wallace

To Cap it Off

He wore a soft French beaver, with rather a wide brim and a towering crown, which was always pushed up high. My sister would sometimes take it slyly just before he was ready to go, flatten the crown, and fix it more in accordance with the shape worn by others. All in vain; invariably on taking it up his fist would thrust inside, and it would speedily assume its original dimensions.

Helen Price

Bedding

“ample brownish woolen blanket,
Gray and heavy blanket, folding, covering all.”

More Bedding

When Whitman told Traubel he wanted to “ram a needle up the ass of . . . ,” what exactly did he mean by “ass:” anus, rectum, buttocks? In *Walt Whitman’s America*, David Reynolds makes clear Whitman was always careful about his language. How much he actually swore is in question, and when he did swear it was of the milder variety (hell, damn, ass) rather than what he called “low conversation, licentious jokes.” Profanity is “a mark of low breeding.” Reynolds also says that in early 1841 Whitman may have been driven from a teaching job in “Southold, a fishing village on the northeastern end of Long Island,” charged with sodomy, tarred and Lisk, Whitman's Closet

feathered. “Later on, reports of ‘bloody bedding’ would emerge,” Reynolds asserts in parenthesis. Among “Whitman’s victims” may have been Giles Wells. If Whitman did practice sodomy, how could he then have talked about it? Did he have the vocabulary at age 21 to speak in clinical terms of his penis and the young man’s anus? (I think neither word appears in *Leaves of Grass*.) Did he use more affectionate language, or was there a thrill for him at that age in using “obscenity,” or was such language the common coin?

A Needle

The main reason previous biographers have passed over this rumor [of Whitman’s 1840-41 sexual molestation charge in Southold] is that in the winters of 1840 and 1841 Whitman’s whereabouts are fairly well documented as being at the other end of Long Island from Southold, a town next to Smithtown, where he did teach in the fall and winter terms of 1837-1838. Molinoff concedes at the outset of her pamphlet that there is no evidence of Whitman’s having taught any farther east than Smithtown, but then immediately forgets that important information to state on p. 5 that he taught at the Locust Grove School in Southold (later called “Sodom School”—not because of Whitman’s alleged sex crime, as Reynolds suggests, but because the shed-like schoolhouse was situated next to a graveyard, i. e., with reference to the biblical fates of Sodom and Gomorrah).

. . . . In a sense, Molinoff did Whitman scholarship a service by gathering together the contradictory fragments that make up the Southold story; her pamphlet allows us to easily dismiss the story.

Jerome Loving

A Different Red Item

" . . . high boots over his pants, a jacket of heavy dark blue cloth, always left open to show a woolen undershirt, and a red handkerchief tied around his brawny neck."

Frederick Huene

Only an Armoire

In fact there was no closet in Whitman's room at 328 Mickle Street.

Outside it All

“ . . . violets peep'd from the ground, spotting the gray debris.”

Notes

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"a suit of . . . hat:" Harry Stafford, quoted in Walt Whitman, *The Correspondence*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller, 6 vols., (New York: New York University Press, 1961-77) 3: 9; hereafter cited as *Correspondence* with a volume and page number.

"One of the . . . arrested:" John Johnston and J. W. Wallace, *Visits to Walt Whitman in 1890-91* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1917; rpt, 1918), p. 66; "it was the . . . anything:" Johnston 66n.

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"Mrs. Davis also . . . sensitive:" Gay Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer* (New York: Macmillan, 1955; revised edition, New York: New York University Press, 1967) 519-520.

"That miserable wretch . . . water:" John Johnston (and J. W. Wallace), *Visits to Walt Whitman in 1890-91* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1917; rpt. 1918) 43, quoting Whitman on the subject of Camden Wharf.

"Along in the . . . one:" Donaldson quoted in Esther Shephard *Walt Whitman's Pose* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1938) 110.

"Through you I . . . years . . . : "A Woman Waits for Me," Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982) 258. Hereafter cited as LOA with a page number.

"He is clearly . . . sea:" Moncure Daniel Conway, from *Autobiography, Memories and Experiences*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), 1:215-216, in Myerson 193.

"I picked . . . outcome:" Traubel 4: 14.

"W. needs . . . holder:" Traubel 4:51.

"The scent of . . . etc." LOA 211.

"a generous . . . wear:" Keller 40-41.

"The beards . . . moving . . .:" "Song of Myself," Sections 11, 13, LOA 198, 199.

"I am not . . . answers:" Traubel 1: 185.

"I like . . . boy?" Traubel 1: 288.

"The magazines . . . desk:" quoted in Philip W. Leon, *Walt Whitman and Sir William Osler: A Poet and His Physician* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1995) 21.

"blue striped shirt:" Moncure Daniel Conway, *From Autobiography, Memories and Experiences*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), 1:215-216, in Myerson 192; "old gray overcoat:" SD in LOA 881; "old broad-brim straw:" SD in LOA 807, "easy shoes:" SD in LOA 807, "An umbrella and a fan:" SD in LOA 734. Edward Haviland Miller in *Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself': A Mosaic* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), p. xi, assumes the hat in the 1855 frontispiece picture is made of straw.

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"In the spring of captive:" Philip Callow *From Noon to Starry Night* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1992) 277-278; "Eyre's" letter is in the Oscar Lion Collection, Rare Book Room, New York Public Library.

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"I believe that . . . feelings:" Schiele, quoted in Frank Whitford, *Egon Schiele* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1981), p. 119.

"How I did . . . fan!" He got Walt Whitman's signature and returned the fan to its owner: Donaldson 106-107.

"[a]n old china . . . years:" Johnston and Wallace 196.

Traubel identifies Musgrove . . . *Camden*: Traubel 2:2.

Whitman seems always . . . visit : *Correspondence* 4:333.

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"ample brownish woolenall:" "A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim"

LOA 441.

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As Reynolds also breeding:” Reynolds 203.

“The main reason story:” Jerome Loving, Review of *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography* by David S. Reynolds (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), in *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 12.4 (Spring 1995): 257-261.

"high boots . . . neck:" Frederick Huene in *Brooklyn Daily Times* 28 February 1908, quoted in Loving, *Song*, 228

“ . . . violets peep’d from . . . debris:” “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” Section 5, LOA 460.