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## Walt Whitman, Free Love, and *The Social Revolutionist*

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The transformation of ordinary Walter Whitman into the extraordinary poet Walt Whitman has long puzzled scholars. We may never know what event, individual, book, or combination of circumstances changed him, but we can better understand *how* he was transformed. The imagining of the persona “Walt” was an ongoing, empowering act. During the 1850s, Whitman the poet and Whitman the journalist were at odds: the poet often sounded like a free lover, the journalist like a much more conventional thinker. In *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman opposed his culture’s dominant sexual mores and in doing so liberated his own distinctive voice.

Whitman’s poetry was “reckless and indecent” according to its first reviewer, full of words which might “have passed between Adam and Eve in Paradise, before the want of fig-leaves brought . . . shame” (*New York Tribune* 23 July 1855: 3). Clearly, for Charles A. Dana, too much sex flawed *Leaves of Grass*. Little did he know that Whitman was just getting started. In 1856 the poet claimed (in his famous open letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson) that American literature lacked “an avowed, empowered, unabashed, development of sex,” and, charting his own poetic course, he added: “the courageous soul, for a year or two to come, may be proved by faith in sex, and by disdaining concessions” (Letter 737-38). Whitman included sexual passages in the first two editions of *Leaves* (1855, 1856), but it was only with the 1860 edition that he published programmatic sex poetry, his songs of “amativeness” and “adhesiveness.” Hence it is intriguing that one can find among Whitman’s private papers a marked copy of the July 1857 issue of a free thought journal, *The Social Revolutionist*.<sup>1</sup> The poet benefited from radical reformers—and from free lovers in particular—not because he adopted their notions but because he struggled to come to terms with their ideas. Examining Whitman’s response to *The Social Revolutionist* and to the free love movement in general reveals much about his poetic persona and allows us insight into intellectual tensions at the root of his creativity. The following pages present, first, a brief account of *The Social Revolutionist* (with special attention given to the issue Whitman preserved) and, second, a consideration of a critical period in the poet’s career seen against the backdrop of the free love movement.

## I

*The Social Revolutionist*, the brainchild of John Patterson, had a two-year life from 1856 to 1857.<sup>2</sup> This magazine was distributed to roughly 450 subscribers and was also sold in Cincinnati, Boston, Pittsburgh, and New York bookstores. Published in Greenville, Darke County, Ohio, the magazine emanated from The Rising Star Association, a community that first banded together in August 1853.<sup>3</sup> By 1856 the group numbered thirteen people—eight adults and five children. In 1857 Francis Barry (the leader of the group) joined Cordelia Barry, Joseph Treat, C. M. Overton, and others in buying a ninety-acre farm and began planning the further development of about 600 acres in the nearby area (Stoehr 447). There were also other plans for expansion afoot: a convention drew seventy-five people, and hundreds of additional letters testified to widespread interest in forming a larger association. These efforts were later curtailed because public sentiment in Berlin Heights, once thought by the reformers to be “not only perfectly tolerant, but decidedly, more and more in our favor,” turned hostile, and several people were arrested on charges of “adultery, fornication, keeping a house of prostitution, &c.” (*Soc. Rev.* 4 [Sept. 1857]: 88; 4 [Dec. 1857]: 189). Although acquitted, they were restrained by these legal actions and threats of violence from vigilantes. Moreover, the demise of the journal was hastened when local citizens overpowered a Rising Star Associate and burned several hundred copies of the November 1857 issue of *The Social Revolutionist*.<sup>4</sup> These activities brought a great deal of attention to Berlin Heights, and it became “in the public imagination, and in fact, the center of free love in America” (Stoehr 478).<sup>5</sup>

For the editors, to have copies of *The Social Revolutionist* go up in flames must have been a painful reversal of one of their own goals: to promote a revolution that would “set everything on fire, and burn the world up” (*Soc. Rev.* 2 [July 1856]: inside front cover).<sup>6</sup> Normally, however, the language of this magazine was not so incendiary. An early prospectus promised “a monthly journal of thirty-two octavo pages [that would] canvass the grounds for the inauguration of a new Social Order, as an outward correspondent to Spiritual Regeneration.” They aimed to create “the freest journal in the world” and argued, interestingly, that since they were not dependent on sales for their livelihood, they could speak more freely than those supposedly making use of America’s “free press.” They initially guaranteed subscribers that they would remain viable for one year, though they acknowledged that “further continuance” would require a “remunerative . . . list” (*Soc. Rev.* 1 [Feb. 1856]: 63).

In their inaugural issue the editors stressed their receptivity to various and even conflicting viewpoints. After calling for candid and earnest thought expressed vigorously and concisely, they insisted, “we shall refuse publicity to no opinion, whatever, for any difference between it and ours” (*Soc. Rev.* 1 [Jan. 1856]: 4). At the end of the first year, John Patterson (by then the controlling editor) claimed the journal acted on an even more generous principle: “We have always had a surplus of articles on hand to choose from, and we have selected . . . the freshest and ablest, without reference to the nature of the doctrines advocated; except that preference has been given to such articles as contained sentiments in opposition to those of the Resident Editor” (*Soc. Rev.* 2 [Dec. 1856]: 190). The editors praised the virtue of tolerance and wished to make the magazine an organ for brave thinkers: “we should greatly prefer that every one who may write for its pages, should give his utterances the public sanction of his name.” In practice most of the contributions were signed.<sup>7</sup>

A range of opinions on free love questions were expressed, including those of both “varietists” and monogamous free lovers. The multiplicity of meaning of the term free love was frankly acknowledged by Patterson who enumerated five different free love views:

1. Dual, exclusive life-union between those pairs that were born for each other. If unhappiness result from marriage union, it is evidence that the parties made a “mistake”; and so they should be free to seek again for the “right one.”
2. But one integral sexual love at a time, which, however, is liable to perish even while the parties live, and so there should be freedom for a succession of loves.
3. More loves than one for the same individual, at the same time, but one of these is, or should be a “pivotal love”—a greater love than any of the rest.
4. Many loves, at the same time, for one individual, but the physical ultimatum should obtain only for the purpose of conception.
5. The plurality of integral loves, or more loves than one at the same time, which should receive the physical ultimatum in temperance, as the right of the love. These several views are a matter of course arising from the difference of mental constitution in connection with old prejudices and the new thought. The difference of opinion as to the nature of any human right, does not invalidate the right itself. (*Soc. Rev.* 2 [Nov. 1856]: 134-35)

That those who favored “variety in love” began to dominate the community by 1857 is suggested by the fact that Joseph Treat—one of the founders—felt compelled to break with the group in November 1857 because, in his opinion, free lust had overtaken free love (*Soc. Rev.* 4 [Nov. 1857]: 154-57).<sup>8</sup>

*The Social Revolutionist* was linked with the work of other reformers, in particular with the phrenologists Fowler and Wells. As is well known, Whitman also

had close ties with Fowler and Wells, and hence it is intriguing to see how *The Social Revolutionist* characterized its own relation to the phrenologists:

Every reformer has his own work to do, and the Fowlers have theirs. We approve of their work, perhaps more than they would approve of ours. . . . The human mind must get a start on the road of progress; and the Fowlers helped start us. . . . When the students of Mental Science become fitted for a higher range of freedom, they demand it, pass on, and become social revolutionists! (*Soc. Rev.* 1 [Feb. 1856]: inside front cover)

The editors of *The Social Revolutionist* regarded the views of the Fowler brothers (Lorenzo and Orson Squire) as an early stage in an evolutionary progression toward their own beliefs. The Fowlers' connection with "socialist" experiments is also clear from the May 1856 issue which notes that the "Octagon Settlement Company Kansas" supplies information of inquirers through Fowler and Wells, New York. In the July 1857 *Social Revolutionist*—the issue Whitman preserved—an anti-free love contributor accused Orson Fowler not only of promoting causes tending toward free love but also of being a free lover himself.

The July 1857 number was unusual in the amount of space it devoted to the issue of free love. The editor noted that "there is more on the subject of Free Love in this than has yet been in any one No.—more, perhaps, than will be in any other No. soon" (*Soc. Rev.* 4 [July 1857]: 32). In other ways, however, the number was fairly typical. Although the free love contributors to *The Social Revolutionist* were outspoken proponents of the anti-slavery and temperance movements, neither of these issues figured as prominently in their thought as the matter of women's rights. Many women writers were represented, and women's issues and concerns were prominent. One writer proclaimed: "Before free love can be fully actualized, we repeat that woman must become self-sustaining. This will be effected through industrial cooperation; and there seems to be nothing so very difficult about this, where the parties really want to secure independence for themselves and for each other" (*Soc. Rev.* 2 [1856]: 134-35). It was the view of the editor, Patterson, that marriage was "incompatible with the sovereignty of woman":

I am aware that many who advocate Woman's Rights, would abandon that reform if they thought it had the least tendency toward the abrogation of the sacred institution of marriage; but while this is the fact, I am well convinced for myself, that woman can never be her own sovereign whilst subject to the thralls of marriage. (*Soc. Rev.* 4 [July 1857]: 29)

The free lovers shared many of the same concerns voiced by women at Seneca Falls ten years earlier: female suffrage, property rights for women, dress reform (and the

larger matter of women's health), and a woman's right to divorce, particularly if abused by her husband (Cantrell 6).

Whitman wrote no verbal comments on his issue of *The Social Revolutionist*, but he did, in his characteristic manner, mark passages of particular interest.<sup>9</sup> He underlined a sentence by Alfred Cridge which he probably agreed with: "True reformers might occupy themselves more appropriately and usefully than in increasing the number of STRAIGHT JACKETS for mankind, which are already sufficiently numerous" (7). He also heavily marked a passage that discussed both the subtle signals of attraction and those of repulsion (17). The most interesting marked passages, however, are those which employ sexual vocabulary similar to Whitman's. One of these notes how ridiculous it is for one man to lay down "iron, arbitrary rules for another, either in respect to eating, sleeping, or the amative function" (7). (The term *amative* probably derives from Robert Dale Owen's *Moral Physiology* which distinguishes between "amative" and "propagative" functions of sexual intercourse [Foster 94].) Another article, Mary A. Chilton's "Sexual Purity," discussed the "truth and inspiration of the electric touch" (5). What this indicates is that Whitman's sexual vocabulary—most often traced to phrenology or medical writers—was also current in free love publications. Here was a journal which spoke Whitman's language.

## II

Certainly Whitman would have known of various individuals thought to be free lovers before coming in contact with *The Social Revolutionist*. In 1851 he probably read in the *New York Times* and *Tribune* about Josiah Warren, founder of the community of Modern Times on Long Island (Ditzion 161); though Warren himself claimed not to believe in free love, the label was nonetheless applied to his community. No doubt, Whitman also knew of John Humphrey Noyes, the leader of the notorious Oneida Community, a utopian group which practiced pantagamy or, as it was called, "complex marriage." Interestingly, Noyes lived in Brooklyn from 1849 to 1854 and his sexual ideas were given full coverage in the New York papers, especially during 1852, when *Leaves of Grass* was taking shape (Foster 108). In 1855 Whitman probably read in the *New York Times* about free love controversies involving Henry Clapp. Clapp, who later became a friend of the poet, was arrested for operating what was suspected to be a free love meeting place on Broadway (Fornell 37).

All things considered, historians are justified when they conclude that the discussion of sex and marriage reached a peak of intensity in the 1850s (Sears 3).

What seems more striking than the squeamishness of Victorian Americans is their mix of high-minded religious earnestness with a willingness to consider alternative social arrangements. Although official culture may have been dominated by prudery, there were plenty of radical reformers (many of them in the Burned-over District of New York State), and these reformers established a number of successful arrangements in alternative living. The main impetus for change seems to have come from “increasing economic differentiation”:

men’s occupations increasingly took them away from the home into the highly competitive, individualistic world outside. Concurrently, women began to assume a position of almost sole responsibility for managing the home, rearing children, and a variety of other domestic concerns. The gap between the worlds of men and women became wider than possibly at any other time in American history. (Foster 12)

Whitman, in his roles as poet and journalist, registered the conflicts in the culture, voicing a range of opinions from the prudish to the radical.

In 1855 or 1856, a reader sensitive to social and sexual issues might have mistaken Whitman for a free lover.<sup>10</sup> After all, Fowler and Wells acted as the agent and distributor for his poetry, and they were linked with “most of the socialist books published in this country” (“Free Love” 819). As the *Living Age* indicated in 1855, “Socialist” writers were the “chief advocates and defenders” of free love (“Free Love” 818). Furthermore, Whitman even looked like the stereotypical free lover described at length in the *New York Times* in October 1855: “If a man, he is exceedingly hirsute. Such eschew razors as an unclean thing. He probably affects a Byronic collar; has bushy hair; takes excellent care of his teeth, which usually sparkle like double rows of ivory; is careless in dress, but bathes freely, and so is not offensive. He is often a man of learning . . . and is a rabid socialist” (10 October 1855: 2). Since the stereotypical free lover apparently scorned razors, one line that Whitman later dropped from “Song of Myself” takes on added resonance: “Washes and razors for foofoos . . . for me freckles and a bristling beard” (*LG*, 1855 46). The first edition of *Leaves* also seemed to convey free love themes more directly. In a poem eventually titled “A Song for Occupations” Whitman speaks of loving freely the strangers in the street and of being as “personally . . . welcome” as “lover or husband or wife” (*LG*, 1855 88). And in “Song of Myself” he declared:

I am a free companion . . . I bivouac by invading watchfires.

I turn the bridegroom out of bed and stay with the bride myself,  
And tighten her all night to my thighs and lips.

(*LG*, 1855 61)

Nonetheless, any reader who argued that *Leaves of Grass* endorsed any particular version of free love would be oversimplifying what one critic has called Whitman's "omnisexual vision" (Miller 231-59). Just as free love is apparently extolled by Whitman, so, too, we find celebrations of autoeroticism, homoeroticism, voyeurism, and monogamous marriage. Whitman believed that most literature had either ignored or debased sex, and hence he attempted the reverse, to emphasize and elevate this central aspect of life. To achieve these ends, he adopted a paradoxical strategy. Though Whitman the man was not a practicing free lover, he took on certain attributes of the free lovers as part of his poetic pose. Additionally, Whitman became "barbaric," "coarse," "rude," "savage," "untamed," and "vulgar." All of these terms, of course, fit the persona of the "rough," not Whitman the man (Hollis 174). Significantly, these terms were often used to criticize lower or working class individuals. Whitman took these descriptions upon himself and transformed them from terms of opprobrium to terms of praise. Likewise, since it was widely believed that the lower class was salacious, Whitman took on the role of lower class sexual colossus, thereby again turning a negative into a positive.

The free love suggestions in *Leaves* were in accordance with Whitman's effort to glorify what had been shunned and despised. In his role as common man/lyric poet, Whitman took on more progressive attitudes toward blacks, women, and sex than those he held as a private citizen. The free love suggestions also fit with his general effort to flout convention and to depict himself as one free of restraints. As one biographer argues, "sexuality as sexuality—the desire to copulate—is a force in *Leaves of Grass*, a work that celebrates the democratization of the whole person, the liberation of impulse and instinct from involuntary servitude" (Kaplan 193). But it was also, we might add, a liberation of ideas. Including free love and other sexual themes was sure to provoke thought in even the most complacent reader. For Whitman, the inclusion of such material was fully justified. "Through me," he explained, "forbidden voices" are heard:

Voices of sexes and lusts . . . voices veiled, and I remove the veil,  
Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigured.

(*LG*, 1855 48)

Whitman, as a homosexual in a heterosexual society, had reason to be interested in the ability of sex radicals to break out of established patterns of thought. This may explain why Whitman saved *The Social Revolutionist* while discarding so much else. Because contextual evidence suggests this item influenced Whitman's journalism in the late 1850s and his sexual poetry of 1860, the document should be placed in specific temporal context.

It seems likely that Whitman read his copy of *The Social Revolutionist* shortly after it appeared in July 1857 and had a largely negative reaction to it. We know that as editor of the *Brooklyn Daily Times* he attacked free lovers on September 2, 1857, blaming the “loose popular literature” of the day for “debauching the popular” mind. In this article Whitman stresses the dangers of novel reading and particularly criticizes Balzac, Bulwer, and George Sand (*SIT* 113). Whitman’s argument is thoroughly conventional, right down to the particular writers he cites. An anonymous contributor to the *Living Age* had made a similar argument in 1855, noting that the “seeds of . . . libertine philosophy [were] broadcast in the poems of Byron and Shelley, and in the romances of Bulwer, George Sand, and Eugene Sue” (“Free Love” 815). The fact that Whitman would adopt the arguments and language of the purity writers is very striking. Whitman not only attacks one of his favorite novelists, George Sand—whom, incidentally, he thought safe enough for his mother—but he also uncharacteristically stresses the importance of a specifically Christian society:

“Progress” and “Liberal Ideas” are good. They are good in very many things. But what may be good in material science may be evil . . . when applied to moral questions. The sacredness, the divine institution of the marriage tie lies at the root of the welfare, the safety, the very existence of every Christian nation. (*SIT* 113)

Two weeks later on September 15, 1857, Whitman wrote an editorial about how kissing had become a profanation:

Perhaps some of our readers may have noticed the alarming increase of late years, in the custom of kissing among ladies. It has rapidly usurped, indeed, every other mode of salutation or parting ceremonial. . . . A kiss should not be deemed a mere unconsidered trifle to be rudely pitched, especially by those who in the nature of things cannot be expected properly to appreciate it. (*SIT* 114)

Whitman’s apparent discomfort with same-sex affection based on assertions about the “nature” of things is certainly puzzling given that he would soon publish “Calamus.” Some might be inclined to explain away the difference between Whitman the journalist and Whitman the poet by claiming that a newspaperman is always subject to the wishes of the owner and responsive to the opinions of the public. Yet Whitman could have avoided the subject of “kissing among ladies” easily enough. Moreover, Whitman did not regard his journalistic work lightly. His earlier journalistic career makes clear that he was willing to sacrifice his job rather than compromise his principles in the press.

Instead of disregarding Whitman's journalism, we need to explain why he alternated from daring poetry to cautious journalism back to daring poetry. In the late 1850s he was insincere in neither his journalism nor his poetry but was instead deeply ambivalent about sexuality. The radical ideas of *The Social Revolutionist* and related movements made Whitman recoil, I think, because they were voiced in the language of *Leaves of Grass*, because they expressed—admittedly in distorted form—tendencies in his own poetic thought. In his journalism, Whitman was probably reacting to his own provocative poetic statements. He was also displaying a streak of cautiousness in his character, a cautiousness evident in one of his own favorite sayings: “Be radical—be radical—be not too damned radical!” (Traubel 1:223). The movement of this phrase traces, as it were, the development of his sexual ideas. He made daring initial statements, brazenly chanting songs of sex in 1855 and 1856. Then after being chastised by reviewers and after reading *The Social Revolutionist*, he pulled back as if to recover his balance.

Yet at the time of his cautious journalism Whitman was also composing the “Calamus” and “Enfans d’Adam” sequences. Here Whitman seems to illustrate that one source of art is internal conflict. Far from hampering Whitman, such dissonance prompted creativity. He was arguing with himself in the 1850s when as a journalist he had been concerned to preserve “the divine institution of marriage,” while as a poet he claimed, in Calamus No. 24:

I hear it is charged against me that I seek to destroy institutions;  
 But really I am neither for nor against institutions,  
 (What indeed have I in common with them?—Or what with the destruction of  
 them?)

(*LG*, 1860 367)

In No. 19 he rejects the existing social codes, explaining: “Long I minded them, but hence I will not—for I have adopted models for myself, and now offer them to The Lands” (*LG*, 1860 364). The desire for liberty leads the poet to the expression of what must be regarded as a free love theme in No. 6 of the “Adam” poems:

O to escape utterly from others’ anchors and holds!  
 To drive free! to love free! to dash reckless and dangerous!

(*LG*, 1860 309)

Superficially at least, many poems seem to be at odds with the journalist’s complaints about “loose popular literature.” For example, No. 8 of the “Adam” poems calls for “libidinous joys only” and explains that the speaker is for “those who

believe in loose delights." This poem celebrates, without apology, the "drench of passions," and revels in "life coarse and rank" (*LG*, 1860 310).

The difference between poet and journalist on the issue of sex is real, but it is not absolute. In fact, one finds a progression in Whitman's attitudes toward sex in his journalism from 1857 to 1859. As we noted, in September 1857 he completely rejected free love and criticized the loose novels of Balzac and George Sand. In June 1858 he mocked the congregation of radicals meeting at Rutland, Vermont, describing the free lovers as "amiable lunatics" because they regarded the marriage relation as "detestable humbug." Nonetheless, he was already softening his position. He added:

This gathering, like other gatherings of the kind, we look upon as significant of a grand upheaval of ideas and reconstruction of many things on new bases—not in the manner indicated by these excrescences [sic] who have just finished their pow-wow at Rutland, but on an infinitely larger, grander and nobler scale—all in God's good time. Nevertheless, these, too, have their uses. (*SIT* 46)

By June 1859 he went so far as to argue that unattractive women who did not marry need not remain ignorant of the pleasures of sex. "It is hard to fast," he explained, "when so many are feasting" (*SIT* 121). This editorial must have shocked readers as much as any poem in the first two editions (*Loving* 103). Gradually Walter was adopting the outlook of Walt, the journalist being convinced by the poet.

*Leaves of Grass* was not a scheme for remaking society, but a book of poems so fresh and challenging as to promote a rethinking of ingrained Victorian attitudes. Sex radicals in journals such as *The Social Revolutionist* proclaimed the socially unacceptable and in doing so helped Walter Whitman free himself from a whole set of stock responses to life. Those free lovers who threw away the fig leaf cleared the way for Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Whitman's copy of *The Social Revolutionist: A Medium for the Free Discussion of General Principles and Practical Measures Pertaining to Human Progress and General Well-Being* can be found in the Special Collections Department, Archibald Stevens Alexander Library, Rutgers University.

<sup>2</sup>John Patterson was listed as editor for each issue of *The Social Revolutionist*. Throughout 1856 he was assisted in his editorial duties by William Denton and (briefly) in 1857 by W. S. Bush. Patterson was the author of various reform tracts and a 300-page novel (distributed by the Rising Star Association) entitled *Charles Hopewell: Or Society as it is and as it Should Be*.

<sup>3</sup>This was one of the innumerable “associations” based, at some remove, on the principles of the French thinker Charles Fourier and his American follower Albert Brisbane. Many nineteenth-century groups reconsidered the conventional marriage bond, adopting complex (and often successful) alternative structures. The most notable (and often studied) examples are the Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Perfectionists.

<sup>4</sup>Writing under the pseudonym of John B. Ellis, an opponent of the group who favored extralegal means for ridding the community of the free love advocates, nonetheless commented usefully on the later fortunes of the Berlin Heights free lovers: “Their Spiritualist doctrine of the sovereignty of each individual over his own acts, prevented them from acknowledging a common authority in anything. Each man was his own master, each woman her own mistress. Each had an entirely distinct doctrine which he wished to see adopted by all the others. The amount of confusion and discord which prevailed in a few years almost passes belief. Barry left the place in sorrow, as he said, his authority and influence as prophet of the new dispensation entirely gone. His visions of promiscuity came to nought, and he shook off the dust of the place from his feet. Overton became disgusted with the movement, and abandoned it. He is living in Vineland, New Jersey, I believe; but what he is doing, I cannot say. I notice his contributions occasionally in the *New York Universe*, and judge from them that he has not lost his old grudge against Barry. One by one the best of them went away, despairing of ever seeing their social millennium, and disgusted with their own doctrines. The majority of them have sought refuge in Spiritualism pure and simple, and some of them have married. A few of them—perhaps fifty in all—still live in the neighborhood, but they are very quiet and inoffensive. They hold to their old doctrines, but I believe their lives are correct. Of late years they have made little or no effort to propagate their doctrines” (quoted in Stoehr 461).

<sup>5</sup>The Rising Star Association was controversial enough to draw national attention: in 1858 the *New York Times* ran numerous articles on the group (July 14, July 16, July 21, July 27, and August 8). The *New York Herald* and *Tribune* also ran articles on the Berlin Heights movement (Stoehr 453).

<sup>6</sup>Some indications exist confirming more immediate social consequences of interest in such a subversive magazine. One subscriber in Alabama stopped his order because, as he informed the editors, it would be dangerous for him to have his sentiments known. The editors also expressed concern that postmasters might confiscate the magazine (*Soc. Rev.* 2 [Dec. 1856]: inside front cover).

<sup>7</sup>Those conducting *The Social Revolutionist* sought potentially like-minded thinkers. As they indicated in their opening number, “We send the first number of the *Social Revolutionist* to many whom we believe to be liberal and disposed to patronize a free journal” (*Soc. Rev.* 1 [Jan. 1856]: 2). Although they did not want poetic visionaries for their communal living experiment (fearing they would be little given to manual labor) it is possible that they sent a copy to Whitman with the thought that he might give literary support to their ideas.

<sup>8</sup>Joseph Treat was a “‘varietist’ only in love’s spiritual manifestations. His ideal of sexual contact was virginity, with allowance grudgingly made for the continuance of the species” (Stoehr 463). Only a month before Treat’s departure, Patterson wrote an editorial giving a rare glimpse of some of the tensions and dynamics within the group: “I wish it understood that to some, at least, of the Berlin Socialists, any promiscuous kissing, holding of hands, or any other forms of personal contact, is decidedly objectionable; and no matter how few this

number may be, they have a right to exemption from annoyance and outrage. I here take the liberty of suggesting to each individual the propriety of ascertaining by some means, whether their favors are desired, before they persistently proffer them" (*Soc. Rev.* 4 [Oct. 1857]: 127).

<sup>9</sup> On July 16, 1858, in the *Brooklyn Daily Times* Whitman commented on the Berlin Heights group after encountering a news report on a suicide in the free love community: "A feeble and diseased physical condition predisposes a weak mind to all sorts of mental eccentricities. The *mens sana in corpore sano* is the best safeguard against the mania of the 'modern lights'" (Allen 213).

<sup>10</sup> That Whitman was sometimes regarded as a free lover later complicated efforts to defend him against charges of immorality levelled by Secretary of the Interior James Harlan who dismissed the poet from a government job in 1865. When William Douglas O'Connor turned to his friend George William Curtis for help in finding a publisher for the famous defense of Whitman, *The Good Gray Poet*, Curtis responded: "The task you undertake is not easy, as you know. The public sympathy will be with the Secretary for removing a man who will be considered an obscene author and a free lover" (quoted in Freedman 186).

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