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REMEMBERING, NOT COMPOSING: CLARIFYING THE RECORD ON " [I'LL TRACE THIS GARDEN] "

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NOTES

REMEMBERING, NOT COMPOSING: CLARIFYING THE RECORD ON "[I'LL TRACE THIS GARDEN]"

In a 1985 article in the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, Arthur Golden speculates that the verse from a manuscript in the Library of Congress's Feinberg Collection attributed to Whitman by Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley entitled "[I'll Trace This Garden]" was not actually Whitman's composition. Noting the presence of Emerson's poem "Brahma" in Whitman's hand on the verso of the leaf containing "[I'll Trace This Garden]," Golden concludes that "Whitman was simply passing the time by writing out from memory two poems that had appealed to him."[1] Though Golden's argument is convincing, he offers only conjecture, noting "I have been unsuccessful in locating the authorship of this poem, but those I've queried generally support its place among the sentimental magazine or newspaper verses of the period."[2]

Though Golden is mistaken to attribute "[I'll Trace This Garden]" to sentimental periodical poetry, he is right on his major point: "[I'll Trace This Garden]" is *not* a Whitman composition. It is, in fact, a version of a folk song with roots in the British Isles, the American Revolution, and, most importantly, the American Civil War.[3] The title Whitman was probably most familiar with is "Johnny is Gone for a Soldier." Cornell University's Kroch Library Rare and Manuscript Collection holds a Civil War bookplate, dated approximately 1862 by the library, which demonstrates the presence of the song in popular culture just prior to Whitman's rendering of the song.[4] The bookplate reads:

Johnny is Gone for a Soldier.

I'll trace these gardens o'er and o'er,
Meditate on each sweet flower,
Thinking of each happy hour,
Oh, Johnny is gone for a soldier.

Chorus: Shool, Shool, Shool, agrah!
Time can only ease my woe,
Since the lad of my heart from me did go,
Oh, Johnny is gone for a soldier.

Some say my love is gone to France,
There his fortune to advance,
And if I find him it's but a chance,
Oh, Johnny is gone for a soldier.
Shool, Shool, &c.

I'll sell my frock, I'll sell my wheel,
I'll by [sic] my love a sword of steel,
So in the battle he may reel,
Oh, Johnny is gone for a soldier.
Shool, Shool, &c.

I wish I was on yonder hill;
It's there I'd sit and cry my fill,
So every tear may turn a mill,
Oh, Johnny is gone for a soldier.
Shool, Shool, &c.

I'll dye my dress, I'll dye it red,
All over the world I'll beg my bread,
So my parents may think me dead,
Oh, Johnny is gone for a soldier.
Shool, Shool, &c.[5]

Whitman's inscription, though missing key elements of the song, including the chorus, unmistakably recalls this popular ballad. Whitman's manuscript reads:

1
I'll trace this garden o'er and o'er
Meditate on each sweet flower
Thinking of each happy hour
2
Some say my love is gone to France
3
I'll sell my frock—I'll sell my where
4
I wish I was on yonder hill
It's there I'd sit & cry my fill
So every tear should turn a mill
5
I'll dye my dress—I'll dye it red
Over the world I'll beg my bread
My parents dear shall think me dead[6]

It appears that Arthur Golden was absolutely correct in his claim that Whitman was writing from an imperfect memory of the verse. The missing lines and occasional mistaken word (for example, Whitman's insertion of "where" instead of "wheel" in verse three) suggest that he was inscribing a song's lyrics that he had only half-memorized or heard.

Conceivably, Whitman could have heard this song from Peter Doyle, an Irishman and a former soldier, who was probably familiar with it; Doyle and Whitman were known to recite limericks, poems, and songs to one another.[7] It is also possible that Whitman heard this familiar song while caring for soldiers in the hospital. In *Specimen Days*, Whitman relates the story of a group of "lady-nurses" that entertained the wounded with "quaint old songs and declamatory hymns" that greatly touched him.[8] Wherever he heard the song,

it is fascinating that in the years of his publication of *Drum-Taps* (1865) and *Sequel to Drum-Taps* (1865-1866), Whitman was attentive to popular ballads being sung about the Civil War. As Whitman created his own artistic reaction to the devastation, he was touched by an old and simple ballad composed from the perspective of one left at home. Perhaps Walt Whitman, who gave so much affection and care to wounded soldiers as he nursed them during the war, identified with the lonely voice of "Johnny is Gone for a Soldier," who pines for an absent lover and is overcome with grief.

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NOTES

1 Arthur Golden, "'I'll Trace This Garden': A Note on a Non-Whitman Attribution," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 2 (Winter 1985), 28.

2 Golden, 28n.

3 The song, in altered forms, has been dated as far back as the early eighteenth century, as an Irish folk song entitled "Shule Aroon" (William Cole, ed., *Folk Songs of England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales*, arranged by Norman Monath, drawings by Edward Ardizzone [Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1961], 64). It was known with the title "Johnny is Gone for a Soldier" in the United States during the American Revolution (John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, eds., *Folk Song U.S.A.: The 111 Best American Ballads*, music eds., Charles Seeger and Ruth Crawford Seeger [New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1947], 112).

4 Blodgett and Bradley date "[I'll Trace This Garden]" c.1865, due to its composition on letterhead from the Attorney-General's Office, Washington, where Whitman began working July 1, 1865 (Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley, eds., *Leaves of Grass*, Comprehensive Reader's Edition [New York: New York University Press, 1965], 697n).

5 "Johnny is Gone for a Soldier" (New York: H. DeMarsan, [1862?]), Cornell University, Kroch Library Rare and Manuscript Collections, no. 35 in a volume lettered "Civil War Pamphlets, 1861-1867."

6 Whitman's manuscript appears in the Feinberg-Whitman Collection, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division.

7 Martin G. Murray, "'Pete the Great': A Biography of Peter Doyle," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 12 (Summer 1994), 19.

8 Walt Whitman, *Prose Works 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 1:57-58.

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