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Holograph Page of Whitman's "Abraham Lincoln"

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ON THE BACK COVER:

HOLOGRAPH PAGE OF WHITMAN'S "ABRAHAM LINCOLN"—This unpublished draft of a page of Whitman's essay, "Abraham Lincoln," is printed courtesy of the Iowa Historical Museum (Des Moines). In 1885 Whitman gave this manuscript fragment to Charles Aldrich, the founder of the Iowa Historical Department and a voracious autograph collector. (See Ed Folsom, "The Mystical Ornithologist and the Iowa Tuffhunter," *WWQR* 1 [June 1983], 18–29, and Roger W. Peattie, "Whitman, Charles Aldrich and W.M. Rossetti in 1885," *American Literature* 58 [October 1986], 413–421.) Recently M. Wynn Thomas (*The Lunar Light of Whitman's Poetry* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987], 235), has examined this passage as "a touchingly murky, even distorted, reflection of 'The Wound-Dresser.'"

This manuscript page gives us a rare glimpse into Whitman's process of relentlessly revising his prose; in this brief passage, there are over thirty-five additions, deletions, and substitutions. The first several lines (up through "And my friends I") are written on a scrap of paper attached to the main sheet, as are the final quoted lines from Alexander Pope's translation of the *Odyssey*. The main sheet itself is the verso of a notification allowing Whitman free passage on the West Jersey Railroad during 1878—Whitman, an inveterate hoarder, wasted no paper and often wrote on the backs of various printed sheets. Here, then, is a transcription of the patchwork manuscript page:

But the time speeds. Already a new generation treads the stage, since those events. And my friends I [attached sheet] have [deleted: f] more than once fancied to myself, the time when [deleted: the] [inserted: our own] age has well sped on—when the present century has closed and a new one open'd, and the persons & deeds and vivid excitements of that [deleted: war] [inserted: contest] have become misty and dim and [deleted: far-off] [inserted: distant—]—perhaps in [deleted: some] [inserted: some great Western city, in a] group collected together, or [deleted: on some] public [deleted: gathering or] festival where the [deleted: times] [inserted: days] of [inserted: old] 1863 [inserted: and '4 and '5] are discussed, I have [deleted: fancied in the background of the crowd] fancied some [deleted: old] [inserted: ancient] soldier, [deleted: standing(?)] [inserted: sitting] perhaps [inserted: unknown] in the background [inserted: as the talk goes on, betraying himself by his emotion] [deleted: betraying himself as] [inserted: like] the [deleted: old] [inserted then deleted: unknown] [deleted: T] [inserted then deleted: unsuspected] [deleted: Greek veteran] [inserted then deleted: hero] [inserted: Ulysses] at the banquet of King Alcinous (al-kin-o-us) when the bard Demodocus [deleted: indecipherable word] [deleted: brings up all] [inserted: sings] the [inserted: contending] warriors & [deleted: makes then fiercely] their [deleted: fierce] battles [deleted: &] on the plains of Troy [attached sheet]

So from the sluices of Ulysses' eyes,

Fast fell the tears, & sighs succeeded sigh[s.] [corner torn]

Whitman's reminder to himself about how to pronounce "Alcinous," and his oratorical flourish ("And my friends . . ."), clearly identify this page as a portion of a speech. Whitman, of course, lectured frequently on Lincoln, beginning in 1879 and continuing intermittently through 1890. Most accounts of these lectures suggest that the only prose piece that Whitman read aloud was "Death of Abraham Lincoln," his dramatic (and imagined) first-person account of the assassination (see Floyd Stovall, ed., *Prose Works 1892* [New York: New York University Press, 1964], 2:497–509). But this manuscript fragment suggests that "Abraham Lincoln," written probably in the late 1870s or early 1880s when Whitman was reviving his long-dormant plan to give frequent public lectures, was conceived as a speech, too: perhaps this was an effort to have an alternative Lincoln lecture on hand, though there is no evidence that Whitman ever delivered it orally.

After further revision (compare this version with the final printed version in *Prose Works 1892*, 2:603–604), this Lincoln piece ended up as a brief essay, published in Allen Thorndike

Rice, ed., *Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln* (1886). Whitman's friend James Redpath had solicited the essay from Whitman for Rice, and Whitman was paid \$33 for it. Whitman was not particularly proud of the article, which lacked the compelling pace of "Death of Lincoln"; he told John Burroughs in 1886 that his "small screed" was "unworthy the theme" (see Edwin Haviland Miller, ed., *The Correspondence* [New York: New York University Press, 1964, 1969], 3:402, 3:412, 4:21). Despite his misgivings, Whitman did reprint the essay in *November Boughs* (1888).

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