Walt Whitman’s Trunk

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ABSTRACT
Whitman is often thought of as a chaotic creator, leaving behind an ocean of messy manuscripts, flimsy scraps, scribbled notes, and endless clippings. Nonetheless, this essay argues, storage of his manuscripts and previously printed work was a pressing concern for Whitman in his early and mid-career, occupying his mind even during major life crises. Importantly, he wasn’t concerned merely with preserving a bibliographic record but with maintaining a resource for future work. Whitman developed a means of accessing his past writings in a mobile form — a trunk as both an actual object and symbol — as he relocated frequently from place to place. This article presents newly identified, almost word for word borrowings in the 1860–1861 “Brooklyniana” series, taken from his 1849–1850 “Traveling Bachelor” series. It connects these new findings to recently identified reviews from the late 1840s appearing almost verbatim in Whitman-edited papers hundreds of miles apart. Framing the “trunk” as both a historical, physical storage medium and an icon of archival practice on the move, “Whitman’s Trunk” proposes a new reading of Whitman as a meticulous record keeper and careful practitioner of nineteenth-century copy & paste authorship.

Critical and biographical accounts of Walt Whitman rarely describe him as a careful record keeper. In fact, at the Walt Whitman Archive, researchers like to joke that a late-life photo of Whitman, awash in a mass of clutter, depicts the first iteration of the Walt Whitman Archive: a “chaos of papers”, as biographer David Reynolds has called this scene, with letters, lithographs, and personal notes, scattered seemingly at random around the aged poet, immobilized by a series of strokes (1996; see Fig.1, below). “Finding order in what appeared to be chaos was a skill Whitman seems to have possessed,” notes Matt Miller, marveling at “the poet’s attitude toward discrimination and order [that] has at times seemed a bit cavalier, [while] the end result has usually been effective enough to convince us of his methods” (2010, 51). Indeed, if there was a “method” in the organization of the poet’s chaotic room, it was highly idiosyncratic and

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caused Whitman’s housekeeper many headaches (Keller 1909, 331–37). This image of the poet’s record keeping is visually striking and highlights the challenge facing those who wish to impose a sense of coherence and chronology on what Whitman left behind.

Figure 1. Whitman in his “chaos of papers” (Library of Congress).

Yet in fact this photograph is more misleading than indicative of Whitman’s textual archiving techniques. Partly because of Whitman’s own myth-making as a renegade, loafer, and proto-hippie, his textual collection methods throughout his life have received little attention. This essay highlights an unfamiliar aspect of Whitman: his careful safekeeping of his prose writings in particular and his canny repurposing of them. Storage of his own manuscripts and previously printed work, we argue, was a central concern for Whitman especially in his early- and mid-career, occupying his mind even amidst major upheavals in his life. Importantly, he wasn't
concerned for his papers primarily as a means to preserve a bibliographic record but as a resource for future work. Whitman reused his own writings extensively and with remarkable accuracy, even across scores of years and hundreds of miles. When it comes to Whitman’s ability to repeat himself, sometimes at length and in surprisingly different contexts, “time or place — distance avails not.” All Whitman needed, it seems, was a good trunk.

On March 31, 1863, a few months after he relocated from Brooklyn to Washington, D.C., Whitman wrote to his mother expressing anxiety about his writings: “tell me if my papers & MSS are all right — I should be very sorry indeed if they got scattered, or used up or any thing — especially the copy of Leaves of Grass covered in blue paper, and the little MS book ‘Drum Taps,’ & the MS tied up in the square, spotted (stone-paper) loose covers — I want them all carefully kept” (1863a). A few months afterward, Whitman followed up, reiterating that he “must have a trunk” to protect and preserve his writings (1863b). These letters point to his care for his textual archive. Whitman, we argue, required a means of accessing his past writings in a mobile form as he moved frequently from place to place (Roberts 2004, 136–37; Ryan 2010, 2–3). Despite his unstable living conditions, Whitman’s usage of his textual archive maintained a remarkable degree of depth and fidelity. Seeing the “trunk” as both a historical, physical storage medium and an icon of archival practice on the move, we propose a new reading of Whitman as a meticulous record keeper and careful practitioner of nineteenth-century copy and paste authorship — a view we will illustrate by highlighting two significant moments of textual recycling we have discovered.

Other scholars have commented on Whitman’s reuse of his own materials. Emory Holloway points out a number of such occurrences in the footnotes of Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman. For example, a single sentence from the sixth number of “Sun-Down Papers” (published in 1840) was repurposed, almost verbatim, in a signed piece of journalism four years later (Holloway 1921, 32–33). In addition, Whitman reused much

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1. Ryan 2010 provides a list of the Whitman family residences in Brooklyn and Long Island, along with a list of all of Whitman’s homes in Washington, D.C., and Camden, New Jersey — a total of forty different residences.
of the material from an 1845 essay on “Art-Singing and Heart-Singing” (published in Poe’s *Broadway Journal*) in an editorial on music that appeared in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* more than a year later. Holloway also notes that some of the material from Whitman’s 1850 series “Paragraph Sketches of Brooklynites” was reworked in a *Brooklyn Daily Times* editorial in 1857. Much more material from those “Sketches” was recycled yet again in “Brooklyniana” — more than ten years after their initial publication (Holloway 1921, 234). All of these instances suggest that Whitman had ready access to his past publications, even those published many years earlier and in relatively ephemeral forms such as cheaply printed, daily newspapers.

These small-scale borrowings pale in comparison to Whitman’s more extensive and dramatic repurposing of his earlier writing. Between October 1849 and January 1850 Whitman published a series of sketches in the *New York Sunday Dispatch*, which remains one of his better-known journalistic productions. These “Letters from a Travelling Bachelor” mainly recount various scenes of life and the landscape on eastern Long Island with occasional explorations of Brooklyn and Manhattan, all loosely stitched together in a fashion characteristic of many of Whitman’s periodical series. When Whitman began to publish a multi-installment history of the city of Brooklyn more than ten years later he must have had copies of “Travelling Bachelor” ready at hand, because he returned to his earlier sketches and mined them aggressively.2

The most arresting example is the ninth installment of “Travelling Bachelor”, a large portion of which was used to form nearly the entirety of installments 38 and 39 of “Brooklyniana” in 1862 — a reuse of more than 1,800 words (see Fig. 2, below). Similarly, nearly all of the fourth installment of “Travelling Bachelor” — roughly 1,500 words in all — was republished in two separate installments of “Brooklyniana” in 1861, most of the text used verbatim (1862a, 1862b). Hidden in plain sight for decades, these “Brooklyniana” borrowings likely constitute the most extensive instance of Whitman’s textual recycling of his prose yet discovered. In the poetry of *Leaves of Grass* textual reuse was overt and fundamental, of course, to his evolving work across six editions (Jausser 2017, 39–66). In Whitman’s journalism, by contrast, his reuse was less easily detected and thus has been little understood.

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A look at one example illustrates the lengths to which Whitman went to fit his decade-old prose into the frame of a new series. In “Travelling Bachelor No. 4” Whitman narrates, in the present tense, the sights and sounds of his journey on the Long Island Railroad as he rode east from Brooklyn, opening with a passage describing a railway tunnel — “dark as the grave, cold, damp, and silent” (1849a). Nearly thirteen years later Whitman returned to these lines in “Brooklyniana”, but the intervening years necessitated a shift in their framing.
The tunnel Whitman had written about in 1849 was closed and filled in late in 1861. Thus, when Whitman wanted to recycle these passages and offer readers in 1862 a tour of the eastern end of Long Island he was forced to turn his present-tense railroad journey into a reminiscence. After noting that the tunnel had now been closed, Whitman writes that he was “along there a few days since, and could not help stopping, and giving the reins for a few moments to an imagination of the period when the daily eastern train, with a long string of cars, filled with summer passengers, was about starting for Greenport [. . .] We are, (our fancy will have it so), in that train of cars, ready to start” (1862a).

With the frame set, Whitman then pastes in the present-tense lines from “Travelling Bachelor”, which continue for the next several paragraphs. Also recycled is Whitman’s later description of the village of Jamaica as seen along his railroad journey, complete with descriptions of local sites and residents. And while the bulk of the passage is reproduced unaltered in “Brooklynniana”, Whitman made slight changes to verb tense and other phrases when necessary to correct what otherwise would have been anachronisms, suggesting that he attended to this piece carefully and with an eye for detail.

Occasionally, of course, Whitman’s habit of reuse resulted in a lack of congruence. For example, also in “Travelling Bachelor No. 4”, he reports passing the house of former New York governor John A. King while traveling through Jamaica. “I saw Mr. K. just return from an agricultural fair, somewhere east”, Whitman wrote in 1849. “He holds his years well” (1849a). Thirteen years later the then-seventy-four-year-old King was seemingly still returning from that agricultural fair somewhere east, continuing to hold his years well (cf. 1862a). Similarly, in his rather unflattering description of the village of Hicksville in 1849 Whitman noted that despite high initial hopes for its prominence, the place contained little more than “a large unoccupied tavern, a few pig-pens, a very few scattered houses, and the aforesaid little enclosures.” However, he added, “we shouldn’t wonder to see Hicksville gradually pick up, and be a tidy, little hamlet, in the course of five or six years” (1849a). But thirteen years later the description of Hicksville was unchanged — although Whitman seemingly continued to hold out hopes for its future, noting that now it might become a tidy little hamlet in the course of only “a few years” (1862b).

3. For a discussion of the debate over the tunnel and steam locomotion on Atlantic Avenue, see “The Question of Steam on Atlantic Street”, Brooklyn Daily Times (January 8, 1859), 2. For a notice of the closing of the tunnel, see “Atlantic Street Restored to Its Pristine Beauty”, Brooklyn Daily Times (December 23, 1861), 3.
In the examples discussed thus far, the extent of borrowing as well as the time separating the borrowings have been noteworthy. One might be tempted to speculate that Whitman stumbled over these older writings by accident and pragmatically decided to recycle them, believing that the source materials were likely long-forgotten by all of his potential readers. (Considering that even with the benefit of digital editions, these borrowings have largely remained undiscovered until now, Whitman seems to have been correct in this belief.) Other instances of textual borrowing, however, suggest a more involved strategy: one that was not based on happenstance rediscoveries but on a purposeful, proactive archiving explicitly for future use. In Whitman’s 1848 borrowing for the New Orleans Daily Crescent, for instance, what is striking is not the temporal but the physical distance between first use and reuse, and the data storage and transportation challenges implied by it — evidence that Whitman’s textual archive remained relatively stable not just across time but across space as well.

The topic of the writings in question is as obscure as it seems un-Whitmanian: German folk music. Indeed, Whitman seems to have developed a bit of an obsession with the pathos-laden, earnest emotionality of what he described as “music from the fatherland” (Schöberlein and Turpin 2022, 8–10). In April of 1848, Whitman, who had just relocated to New Orleans, was thrilled to announce to his Southern readers that one of his favorite Austrian singing groups had arrived in town (1848b) — and he repurposed a review of the troupe he had published earlier that year in the Brooklyn Daily Eagle (1848a). While the Crescent piece employs some verbatim borrowing as well as paraphrasing, it is clear that it is based on a version of the previous Eagle puff ready at hand — either its final, printed form or a draft of it — which must have accompanied Whitman on his trip to the South (see Fig. 3, below).

The implications here are striking: Whitman certainly didn’t plan on writing about the “Steyermarkers” in New Orleans (their tour hadn’t been announced when Whitman left Brooklyn early that year). Still, Whitman’s mobile archive allowed him access to the review anyway — hundreds of miles from home, and after a weeks-long journey involving steamboats, trains, and horse carriages, with only a teenage brother in tow to help. If the power and potential of Whitman’s trunk required an “exercise in anticipation [. . .] [an act of] imagining the unknown and attempting to account and prepare for it”, as Susan Harlan has described luggage (2018, 66), his sense of authorial preparedness had much wider-ranging implications. Whitman’s trunk was an organized storage system for his writing that included both major texts, like his Brooklyn sketches, as well as minor pieces — things kept purposefully for future reuse, as
Figure 3. Examples of textual borrowing in the “Steyermarker” pieces. Word-by-word copies highlighted solid, slight paraphrasings are dotted. The remainder of the article engages in broader paraphrasing.

well as documents whose potential for such reuse was questionable at best. In this sense, the trunk appears to have functioned like a database: a structured system that wrangled significant amounts of textual data and which Whitman could access and query based on emerging writerly needs, whether it be years, decades, or, in some cases, even half a century later. His 1892 Complete Prose Works, for instance, contains an appendix titled “Pieces in Early Youth. 1834–’42”, in which Whitman reprinted various poems and pieces of prose from much earlier in his career.4 That Whitman had ready access in the 1890s to work that appeared in daily newspapers fifty years earlier (and would not yet have been preserved systematically in

4. Although Whitman claims that the pieces stretch back to 1834, the earliest known publication date of any of the texts that he includes is 1841 (when he published the short story “Death in the School Room”).
libraries or archives) is remarkable and at odds with the characterization of the poet as a careless hoarder.

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To those who came to the poet's home late in his life to converse and pay respects, the secret to Whitman's textual fidelity over time was visible even amidst his “sea of papers”: “a mighty trunk having double locks and bands of iron”, as one late-life visitor described it (Selwyn 1888, 339), which once held the documents now strewn about the floor (Wolfe 1895, 201–17, esp. 212). According to surviving accounts, Whitman's mobile archive had been housed in a piece of luggage typical for the antebellum period but somewhat outmoded by the end of the poet's life. The trunk even had two-factor authentication: it was strapped and double-locked (Whitman 1873b). Additionally, it contained some capacity for document sorting, with a letter from 1873 noting it had a “pocket” for important documents (Whitman 1873a). Like other traveling trunks of the time, it may have also had a tray or dividers — which may explain how it could hold treasured papers alongside clothing items (Whitman 1873b), without the latter damaging the former. Modern suitcases, of course, would not become the norm until the turn of the twentieth century.

The trunk was a visual constant in Whitman's last years in Camden and invited much commentary by visiting journalists and disciples alike. One interviewer described it as “looming” in the corner and compared it to “a receptacle as comes over sea with the foreign emigrants, and you in New York may have seen hoisted by powerful tackle from the hold of some Hamburg ship” (Selwyn 1888, 339). The trunk was so big and antiquated-looking, it seemed alien. Another remarked on the “immense iron-bound trunk” dominating one side of his room (Wolfe 1895, 205), and even Whitman himself suggested that the “big trunk” was hard to miss (Whitman 1873b). The prominent placement of this item as well as the contents suggest that the trunk was quite dear to the poet: besides keepsakes, manuscripts, and correspondence, it even held his will (Whitman 1873a).

There are also other indications that Whitman was much more stringently careful with his papers than generally thought. He was a known scrapbooker, reassembling his work and the works of others into books of clippings, which would then have enabled them to travel, stored in a trunk. Ohio Wesleyan University, for instance, holds within their
Whitman collection a scrapbook of more than 1,000 pages in which the poet compiled portions of textbooks, magazine and newspaper clippings, as well as handwritten notes, all related to matters of world geography and culture. Ever the autodidact, Whitman employed this massive artifact to increase his knowledge of the world and its people in the years between the publication of the second and third editions of *Leaves of Grass* (roughly 1856–1860), and portions of several manuscripts that were stored in the scrapbook were incorporated into poems in the 1860 edition of *Leaves*. Researchers at the *Whitman Archive*, who recently digitized the scrapbook in its entirety, attempted to trace the source of all of the volume’s clippings, and found that multiple identifiable texts date from the mid-to-late-1840s (roughly ten years before the scrapbook’s compilation), and that Whitman retained them until the end of his life. He possessed at least one other such themed scrapbook, dedicated to texts about literature and writers, which evidence suggests was dismantled by a bookseller in the early twentieth century and sold as separate manuscripts (McMullen 2024). There are also references in Horace Traubel’s record of conversations with Whitman in late-life that mention multiple scrapbooks present in the poet’s room; upon Whitman’s death, Traubel noted that there were “4 or 5 old scrapbooks (containing manuscript beginnings from notebooks, etc.)” amongst the surviving literary effects (TRAUBEL 9:613).

In a particularly memorable anecdote, Traubel noticed one of the scrapbooks “on the floor mixed up with the firewood strewn before the stove. I said: ‘O Walt! You must n’t forget yourself and use that for kindling’.” Whitman replied: “‘No indeed: that’s too precious, too useful: then besides I’m too much accustomed to it — know it too well. It has been about me now for fifty years: I am very close to it: it is one of my bibles’” (TRAUBEL 3:154). Here again we see Whitman’s deep concern, indeed, reverence, for his papers and their safe and orderly preservation. And that the scrapbook was both “too precious” and “too useful” to be sacrificed further underscores the clear utility that such storage mediums held for the poet. The inclusion of these documents within the relative order and between the protective covers of a themed scrapbook rendered them more locatable and more enduring, and thus more easily reused should they ever be needed. Practically, the scrapbooks offered Whitman a means of organizing his manuscripts and clippings, both for storage and organization at home and

5. One of these was dedicated to clippings about Whitman and his work, with Traubel noting that it contained reviews (some of them critical) dating back to 1860 (see TRAUBEL 1906–1996, 4:478).
also to make them easier to transport; they could be organized in his trunk, forming a portable archive to which he could return when needed, with the thematic scrapbooks serving like labeled folders on a digital desktop. Kevin McMullen has therefore called these thematic containers a "laboratory space and training ground for the cutting and pasting practices that had already and would increasingly become the mildly maddening norm in the composition of Leaves of Grass" (2024, 96). Whitman’s trunk and its data — thematically and at times idiosyncratically organized — was more an active workspace than merely a tool of textual preservation, though ultimately it served both ends.
Late in life, Whitman acknowledged his tendency to retain materials for a long time, as well as his tendency to reuse them. His essay “Elias Hicks, Notes (such as they are)”, published first in *November Boughs* (1888), for instance, describes itself as a collage of scraps,\(^6\) reassembled into a retrospective essay—a recurring gesture in Whitman's late-life publications. When discussing the project with Horace Traubel, Whitman recalled that “some of these bits were written as many as thirty years ago. Some of them I have written within the past year. They are a miscellaneous lot but they all belong in the same stream” (in Traubel 2, 42). Many of these scraps survive, underscoring Whitman’s truthfulness: some are written on tax forms from the late 1850s—during a time the poet was working on church history projects while employed at a local Brooklyn paper—some of which were then pasted on the back of periodical pages from 1845 (see Fig. 4, below). In total, this scrapbooked assemblage thus appears to reflect an ongoing creation process spanning more than four decades.

Documents like these are, then, a striking reminder that the poet’s own scrapbooks and trunk were more than storage vessels for his and others' writings: they were key elements of his writing process. Viewed in this light, the photo of Whitman awash in the sea of papers depicts a stage of life when the nomadic Whitman had ceased his wanderings, a time when his infirmities had forced him finally to stay put. He could allow the contents of his trunk to spill: he could live in the midst of his literary remains.

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Whitman’s archival trunk stayed with him to the very end of his life—we find ample evidence of its imposing presence between 1873 and 1892. The double-locked trunk may even be the same one that the Whitman family (his mother Louisa, brother Jeff, and Walt himself) sent back and forth during the poet’s stay in Washington D.C. between 1863 and 1873—so much so that Whitman at the end of his life still fondly remembered “the Adam Express man” as his “friend in Washington” (Traubel 9:10). Whitman’s phrasing in letters to his mother also indicates that Walt originally owned only one such trunk (he refers to it just as “the trunk”\(^7\)\)

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6. *Whitman* 1888 notes, “the following are really but disjointed fragments, recall'd to serve and eke out here the lank printed pages of what I commenc'd unwittingly two months ago” (119).

7. Note that it is distinct from “George’s trunk” that only appears later (1865) in family correspondence and was likely a significantly smaller soldier’s trunk, insufficient for Whitman’s filing needs.
and that he associates it with “MSS & books” (Whitman 1863c) — though it apparently also held the occasional cake (Whitman, T. J. 1865). Prior to this period, relatively few letters by Whitman are extant, so earlier trunk references are likely lost. Nonetheless, the existence of a trunk is implied by Whitman’s travels to New Orleans and his ability while there to draw on his prior writings.

The trunk itself may have been the “ancient and battered trunk” that was rediscovered in 1938 at the Library of Congress (Sunday Star 1939), filled to the brim with Whitman materials. Perhaps it had been donated to the institution by a niece, who had inherited “Walt Whitman’s leather trunk” when the poet’s brother George died in 1901. The label is extant (see Fig. 5), showing, in Walt Whitman’s handwriting, that it had even accompanied the poet to Canada.8 In all likelihood, the trunk itself did not survive. The Library of Congress informs us that it was probably discarded — as most containers were — because it was deemed to have little importance beyond the papers it housed.

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8. Item is in the Walt Whitman papers, Rubenstein Library, Duke University, box 11.
From the media historical perspective, this disregard for Whitman's trunk makes sense. A trunk constitutes “domestic equipment” often dismissed as “feminine”,9 as Zoë Sofia has summarized, and functions in line with fellow “technological forms associated [. . .] [with] storage, transformation, and supply, [which] have been and continue to be [. . .] overlooked in histories and analyses of technologies” (2000, 188). Whitman himself seemed to sense an unease over this, as Sean Ross Meehan and John Durham Peters have noted: “Whitman did not simply celebrate the media-operations of multiplying time, space, and bodies [. . .]. Though he always ends with affirmation, he deeply knows the ambivalence of storage media” (2024, 346). For a writer like Whitman, then, whose reception in the public sphere is still very much in line with his own historical myth-making as a free-wheeling literary maverick, attention to his careful archiving and storage practices cuts across the grain of critical practice. Scholarship still emphasizes documents relating to active creation — poetry manuscripts, his Blue Book, annotated print — over seemingly passive, underlying technology relating to preservation, archiving, and storage.

“Containers withdraw from attention, exploited but not noticed”, Sofia concludes, and, in the utilitarian form of a trunk, become something “we come to consider as an extension of ourselves” (2000, 188–89). Only very recently have scholars like Ashlyn Stewart and Matt Cohen begun to consider Whitman’s “thoughtful self-archiving and its consequences on today’s archival efforts” of the poet (2023, 30), though even they tend to focus on the structuring of ideas and concepts — not the tangible underpinnings of Whitman’s archiving methods. Whitman himself would likely have agreed with Sofia’s ultimate defense of storage as an active, vibrant technology in itself. Surveying his mess of papers, he commented on how “the whole room is a sort of result and storage collection of my own past life”, highlighting how “the place with its quaint old-fashion’d calmness also has a smack of something alert and of current work” (Whitman 1892, 517).

And of course, as we have laid out here, there is something intensely “current” about Whitman’s stored documents: no matter how old, they are always ready to find their way into — or in some cases back into — print. As Cornelia Vismann has suggested, the process of proper filing is never finished but remains in a constant, quasi-circular relationship with its outcomes (be it law or literature). In Whitman, a draft morphs into a

9. “Protection, storage, enclosure, accumulation, continuity — these contributions [. . .] largely stem from woman and woman’s vocations [and as such] we tend to devaluate” them (Mumford via Sofia 2000, 186).
newspaper column, then turns into a file, becomes a draft again, returns to a new piece of journalism or becomes part of a book, then becomes a file again, etc., etc. Whitman scholarship has long noted and celebrated the erosion of the idea of the singular “book” that is *Leaves of Grass*, tracing it first into multiple distinct print editions, then into sub-print run variants, then into a yet-to-be visualized “fluid text” that illuminates a *Leaves of Grass* that works between and across print editions, variants, and manuscript drafts. Whitman’s trunk reminds us that this fluidity extends well beyond a single book. It also underscores that readings which have reduced Whitman’s other texts to merely an Emersonian “foreground” may have, in their quest to cast Whitman as single-mindedly focused on *Leaves*, fallen victim to selection bias.

Whitman’s writing strategies — in *Leaves* but also before and besides *Leaves* — are highly flexible and, in many ways, circular. As such, they are *made possible* by storage. In a very concrete way, he was enabled by his filing technologies. Indeed, it might be said that his archive created Whitman. His recollection was notoriously “tricky”:10 “my memory is bad,” Whitman complained, late in life, to Horace Traubel, “always has been bad [. . .]. My memory is more a memory of impressions than of facts” (Traubel 7: 132). The trunk — container of records and prosthesis, as it were, for a struggling mind — was Whitman’s organizing principle in composition as well as his material filter: texts too physically flimsy, or oversized, or too hard to remove from their larger physical contexts were removed from his ability to reuse them. The trunk was to Walt Whitman what the Macintosh Performa 5400/180 was to Salman Rushdie (cf. Alexander 2015): a machine that organized, enabled, and limited textual production along data economies of storage, organization, and retrieval.

Susan Harlan has argued that, on a fundamental level, “our suitcases mark us as displaced, as lacking a home” (2018, 66). Whitman was a nomadic writer, who would not find a long-term residence until very late in life. “What is this boarding-house life?” Whitman once asked in “New-York Dissected”, “Simply a place to keep a man’s trunk” (1856).11 His trunk

10. See Traubel 1906–1996, 3:524: “They report against me in the bank: it was my treacherous infernal memory at fault again: I could not have believed it: could not have believed that the check came, was endorsed, banked, never acknowledged — since then totally wiped out of my mind!” His memory had “played” him “tricks before,” but “never one equal to this.”

11. Miller 2010 comments on this unrooted writerly existence, noting that “Whitman had moved many times as a boy, so he was probably used to a life on the go. Still the intensely nomadic lifestyle he lived while composing his first
offered continuity and consistency in a life marked by an extraordinary number of moves from one lodging to another: in the Brooklyn and New York City years, there were times when Whitman averaged a move a year, and even after he relocated to Washington, D.C., he lived at as many as seven different residences in ten years. What should have resulted in a literary life of permanent disruption Whitman instead leveraged into an innovative writerly preservation and reuse strategy. Unlike, say, Jane Austen’s portable writing desk or Thoreau’s journal box, Whitman’s trunk was not ancillary to his compositional practices but central to it. If even a normal piece of luggage “marks the boundary between inside and outside, private and public” (Harlan 2018, 77), Whitman’s trunk constituted an extension of the poet’s mind into an external database, a practice more akin to modern smartphone and cloud storage use than packing a few books for a beach vacation. To Whitman, the trunk is not just a memory aid but a memory bank — a bank from which he made repeated and frequent deposits and withdrawals throughout his career.

It is important to note that Whitman’s recycling of his earlier writings fell within the norms of journalistic practice in the nineteenth century and its “culture of reprinting” (McGuill 2007; Cohen 2017, 56, cf. 15). Individual journalists faced pressure to produce copy day after day, and it was commonplace to re-use from others or oneself. Such repetitions were rarely noted or commented upon and in a pre-professional, quasi-artisan journalistic environment did not violate the standards of industry conduct as it would today.12 By the same token, the job of a nineteenth-century newspaper editor — a position which Whitman held on numerous occasions over several decades — also involved frequent and creative reuse of previously printed materials. While this fact is widely acknowledged, the individual, archival logistics and infrastructures implied by this fact

major poems must have left its mark. Today, of course, we can move thousands of files and entire libraries in a laptop computer” (49). In contrast, Whitman relied on a trunk.

12. As noted in Cordell 2015: “Antebellum newspaper pages were replete with anonymous or pseudonymous texts, attributed from other papers or merely as ‘making the rounds.’ In such a textual environment, the value of widely reprinted snippets derived from their movement through the exchange system, not the genius of individual creators. Like some viral content online today, which can become noteworthy because of its virality, the system of newspaper exchanges produced a kind of feedback loop, in which texts circulated because of their perceived value to readers while that perceived value was often tied to a given piece’s wide circulation” (418).
are rarely commented upon. Cutting-edge work like the *Viral Texts Project* (Cordell and Smith 2022) consequently favors the near-instantaneous “virality” produced by the “networked author” simulated by newsprint, while — conceptually and practically — eliding the storage and retrieval practices of individual newspapermen and women implied by the, at times, significant and meaningful lag between first appearance and reprint/repurposing.13

In many ways, those working with Whitman’s manuscripts today are still beholden to the puzzlement of his “sea of papers”. Compared to his contemporaries, “Whitman [. . .] left behind a strikingly large volume of material,” Stewart and Cohen remind us. “The meanings of that hoard lie partly in the writer’s thinking about the material conditions of authorial posterity” (2024, 30). We contend here that Whitman himself curated his archive as much for personal reuse as for posterity — his working archive was both a textual database and a preservation technique. Indeed, what we see in the puzzling chaos of his papers seems to be a transition from the former to the latter: a personal database spilling into a preservation act. It is a dying poet displaying his textual workspace and making it usable and retrievable by his literary executors. Two different archival logics are at play here: one is forward looking, aimed at future creation, one looks back to record and file away. Whitman’s archive is *feverish*, a melding of personal idiosyncratic thought and textual (re)production as well as “a movement [. . .] of the future no less than of recording the past” (Derrida 1998, 29). It is “old-fashio’d calmness” but also “something alert and [. . .] current”. His textual database focused on retrieval, reuse, and rewriting; it clashed with ideas of chronology, provenance, and context so crucial to textual preservation and authorial legacy.

The trunk constituted Whitman’s infrastructure of memory and as such has much in common with the online infrastructure through which many readers of Whitman today encounter the poet: the *Whitman Archive*. Blake Bronson-Bartlett has noted that “digital archives have opened the question of archival storage and organization by offering a digital variation on those functions, and that one of their various roles in literary history is to establish conditions for discussing the archive that have not existed previously” (2017, 493). In a strange way, Whitman Studies is just now moving past

13. Or, for that matter, of geographical distance between original and reprint/rephrasing not explainable by availability of papers on the exchange network, as was the case of the Steyermarker borrowing.
these very questions, posed by the “chaos of papers”, and embracing the historical, material dimensions of Whitman’s own archiving.

For Whitman, repetition, often with variation, was a life-long publishing strategy. As Paul Jaussen notes, Whitman’s “emergent poetry” continually starts anew, revises and grows in concert with the altering circumstances in which it is written (2017, 34–66). Growth combined with abundant and inventive repetition is the primary course of Whitman’s poetic development. It may thus be time to reconsider the extent to which Whitman retained a newspaper editor’s spirit — with its culture of reprinting and cut-and-paste authorship — long after he stopped primarily being a newspaperman. It may help explain why Whitman would have gone to such lengths to preserve so many clippings from daily newspapers. It was a medium whose content was outdated almost before it was printed. One thus might expect Whitman — a poet of the present, and perhaps more so of the ever-emergent future — to have no time for such ephemeral writings of the past, even his own. And yet there, in the middle of the room, stands Whitman’s trunk.

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