

ROUNDTABLE

Walt Whitman's Gift

His friendship with the Gilchrist family survives in art.

By Don James McLaughlin

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The Tea Party, by Herbert Harlakenden Gilchrist, c. 1884. University of Pennsylvania, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts.

Three alcoves border the reading room at the Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books, and Manuscripts at the University of Pennsylvania. Each holds an oil painting as a focal point. All came from the same hand, the London-born artist Herbert Harlakenden Gilchrist (1857–1914), a close friend of Walt Whitman who

created some of the poet's most striking likenesses. One features the poet seated in his rocking chair, a sunlit beard descending to his chest; another painting shows the artist's mother, the Mary Lamb biographer Anne Gilchrist, at work with a quill pen. The third painting, *The Tea Party*, is the most impenetrable. It depicts Whitman having tea with the painter's family, a familiar event at their home on North 22nd Street in Philadelphia. The work's original title was *The Good Gray Poet's Gift*. *The Tea Party* dwells in a nebulous state of suspended conversation. No one looks at each other. Anne sits on Whitman's left side, staring thoughtfully above his head. Grace, the painter's youngest sister, glances out at the viewer with an elegant boredom, her green velvet dress draped across the floor, redolent of the pre-Raphaelites, with whom the Gilchrists were associated. (William Michael Rossetti, brother of Christina and Dante Gabriel, first introduced *Leaves of Grass* to Anne and other British readers with a cautiously expurgated version of Whitman's fourth edition, published in London in 1868.) In a posture of still meditation, Whitman smells a red flower. Among Gilchrist's and Whitman's friends at the time of the painting's creation, 1882–84, the import of the scene would have been inseparable from the story of Herbert's notably absent older sister, the widely connected and beloved physician Dr. Beatrice Gilchrist.

Scholarship on Whitman's relationship with the Gilchrist family tends to fall prey to the overplayed conceit of the unrequited crush. The story begins with a kernel of truth: euphoria did strike Anne when she first encountered Whitman's verse. Gilchrist was well-established in the world of Victorian letters; in 1863 she had published an influential biography of William Blake that her late husband had begun and she, with the help of the Rossetti brothers, had finished. In 1869, at the age of forty-one, Gilchrist wrote to Rossetti of *Leaves of Grass*, "I had not dreamed that words could

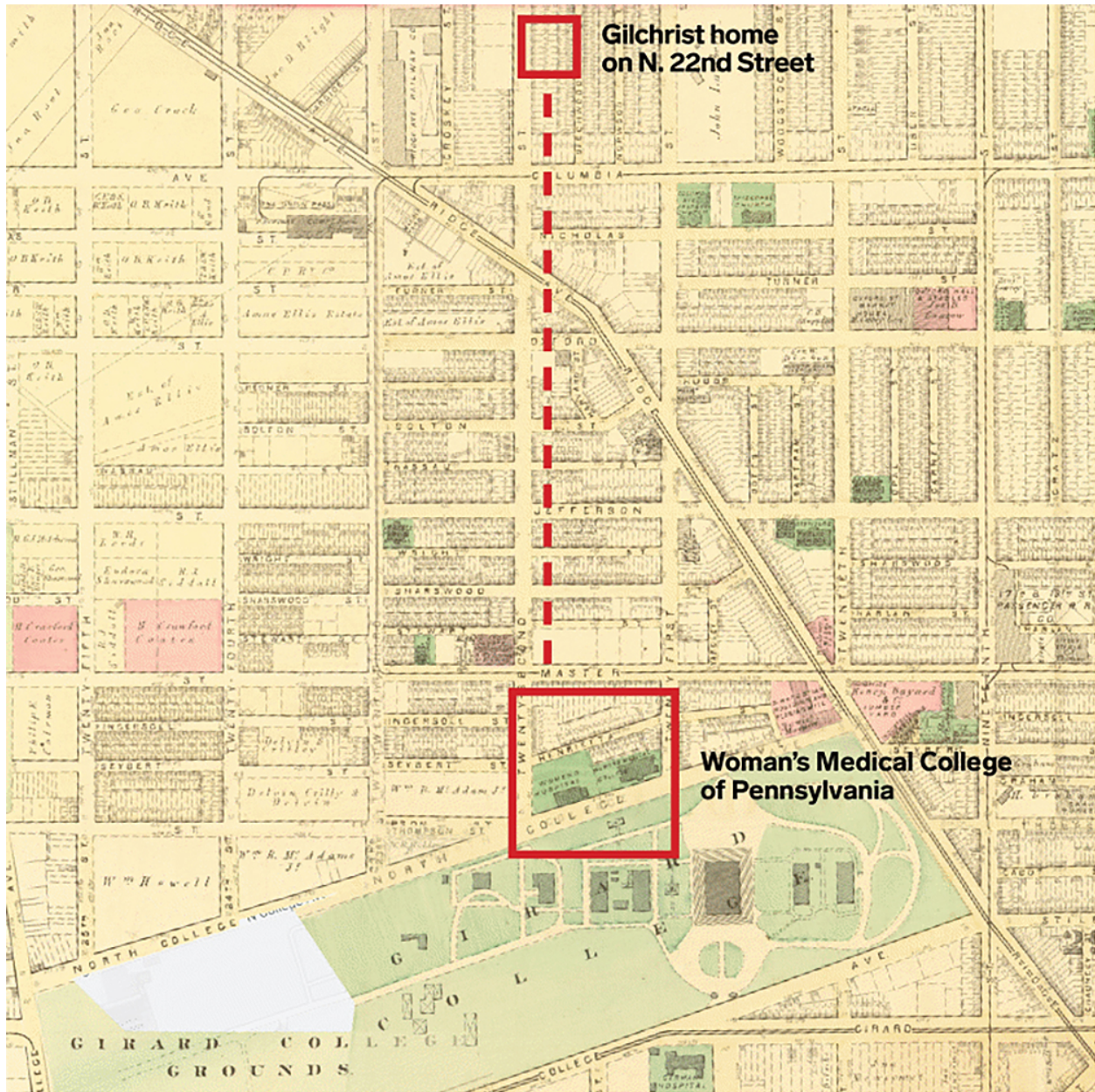
cease to be words, and become electric streams like these.” In May 1870, with the assistance of Whitman’s close friend (and origin of the “Good Gray Poet” moniker) William Douglas O’Connor, she published a stirring essay derived from her correspondence with William Rossetti in the Boston-based monthly magazine *The Radical*, titled “A Woman’s Estimate of Walt Whitman.”¹

Upon receiving a transcription of Gilchrist’s letters in advance, Whitman, then fifty, responded that he had never received a “eulogium so magnificent.” In their ensuing correspondence, Gilchrist positions herself as Whitman’s equal, inhabiting the second-person address of *Leaves* with the goal of crafting an epistolary companion to his verse: “In May 1869 came the voice over the Atlantic to me. O the voice of my Mate: it must be so—.” Whitman appreciated her frankness, but also attempted to set boundaries:

My book is my best letter, my response, my truest explanation of all... You understand this better & fuller & clearer than any one else... Enough that there surely exists between us so beautiful & delicate a relation, accepted by both of us with joy.

Their friendship deepened over the next half-decade. Then, in January 1876, Whitman received the startling news that Gilchrist had decided to relocate herself and the three youngest of her four children from London to Philadelphia. Whitman lived across the Delaware River with his brother and sister-in-law, George and Lou, in Camden, New Jersey. He protested the “American transsettlement,” but Anne’s mind was made. On August 30, 1876, Anne, Beatrice, Herbert, and Grace set sail on the ship *Ohio*. They docked at the port of Philadelphia on September 10. Whitman and Gilchrist did not begin a love affair. It is now common knowledge that the poet’s known romantic relationships were with men. Flirtation by mail was one thing; in-person obligation was another. Their encounter in Philadelphia thus tends to be narrated as a meeting of mismatched intentions, in which Gilchrist, having taken

considerable risks to be with Whitman, was rebuffed and left to endure her disillusionment in an unfamiliar country.

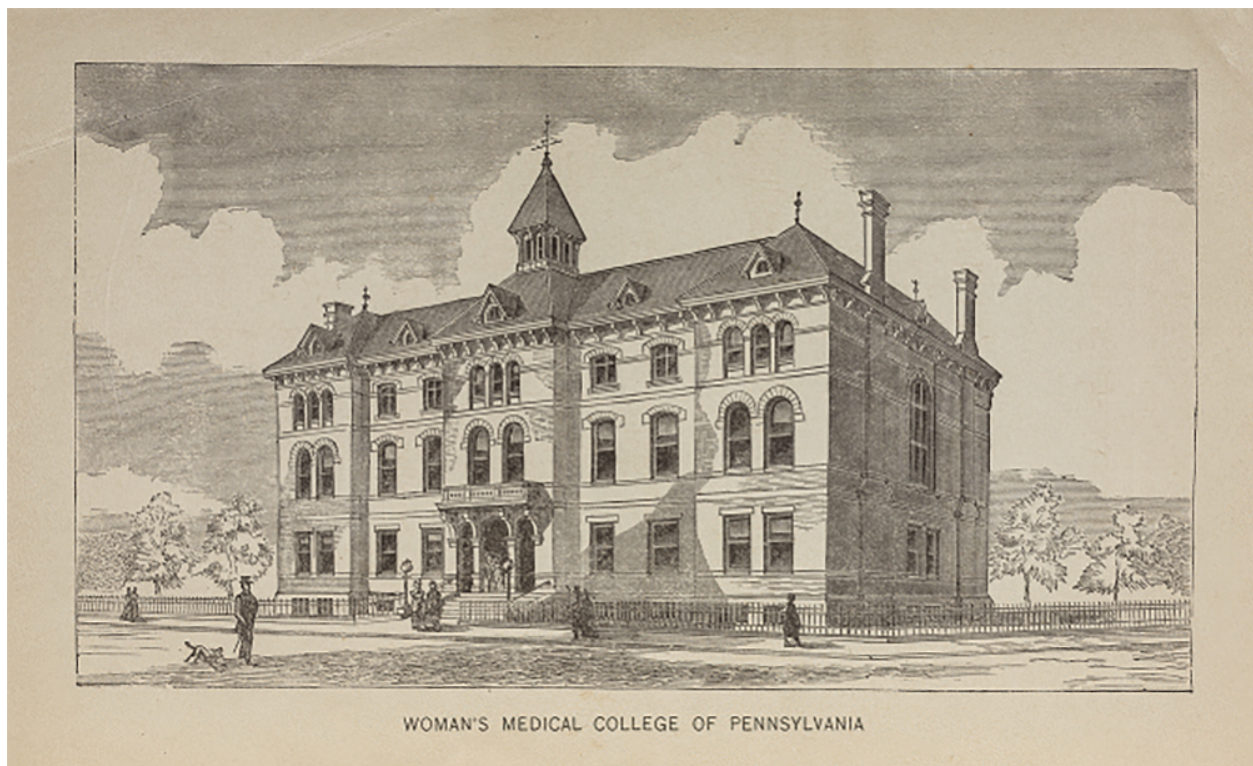


Map of Philadelphia from 1876, showing Beatrice Gilchrist's commute from the house on N. 22nd Street to the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania.

This partial account, leaning on the old-fashioned trope of a woman scorned, neglects one of the most important details prompting the American experiment. Anne's eldest

daughter, Beatrice Carwardine Gilchrist, born September 18, 1854, had plans to become a physician. Beatrice intended to pursue her education at the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania, founded in 1850 as the second medical school in the world established to train women physicians.²

“In England women have at present no means of obtaining a complete medical education,” Anne told Whitman, since only men were granted “admission” to the “hospital for the clinical part of the course.” The Gilchrists set up residence just five blocks north of the Woman's Medical College.



Engraving of the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania. American Antiquarian Society.

Beatrice's determination to study medicine had been fostered in childhood. In October 1861, at the age of seven, she fell ill with scarlet fever at the Gilchrists' home on Cheyne Row in London. Recognizable by its combination of flushed cheeks, a rash, and “strawberry tongue” (the appearance the tongue takes when swollen papillae protrude through a thick white coating), scarlet fever spread into a serious global

pandemic between 1820 and 1880. In England mortality rates spiked in the 1860s. When at last Beatrice began to improve, the fever attacked her father, Alex. He died five days later. As Anne later recollected, “The fever burned and devastated like a flaming fire: to four days of delirium succeeded one of exhaustion, of recognition. It was on a wild and stormy night, November 30, 1861, that his spirit took flight.”³ One does not get the sense that Beatrice assumed an unjustified burden of responsibility for introducing the fever to her family’s home. More than guilt, a desire for control and a serious disposition became pronounced characteristics as she grew older. If one part of the tragedy stuck with the family more than any other, it was a sense Alex had expressed that the medical care they had received when Beatrice became sick was substandard. Growing up in a household that contextualized Alex’s death in the inability of doctors to provide a solution, Beatrice decided she would become a physician herself.

By the time Beatrice matriculated at the age of twenty-two in 1876, the Woman’s Medical College of Pennsylvania had succeeded in contesting discriminatory obstacles to women’s participation in medicine for a quarter of a century. As scholar Regina Morantz-Sanchez has shown, the hurdles were both elaborate and crude. In a notorious 1869 incident, the dean, Dr. Ann Preston, and her students were finally granted access to teaching clinics in general surgery at the Pennsylvania Hospital only to be greeted by hundreds of men opposing their entry. Harassed with insults and projectiles that included, as the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* recorded, “missiles of paper, tinfoil,” and “tobacco juice,” the women educators and doctors in training used these public displays of prejudice to their advantage, decisively winning support from people in powerful positions who were driven to reexamine their bias.

Whatever the initial expectations might have been, Whitman and the Gilchrists became close. The Gilchrists prepared “a nice room here with a stove and oak wood—everything very comfortable and sunny” for Whitman, where he stayed for weeks at a time. They in turn visited him at his brother-in-law’s home in Camden. Beatrice left an immediate impression. In a letter to the nature essayist and biographer John Burroughs, Whitman described his time getting to know the Gilchrists. “I am stopping up here in 22d street for a week or two—they are very kind to me, & very jovial & we have real good times.” Of Herbert, he said that “the young man, about twenty-one, he & I are very thick.” Of Beatrice, he wrote, “There are two grown daughters—the eldest one is a first class trump, she is my favorite every way.”

The Gilchrists lived in Philadelphia for twenty months while Beatrice completed her education. After she graduated, Anne and Grace departed for a stay at the Round Hill Hotel in Northampton, Massachusetts, while Herbert took off for Brooklyn. True to form, Beatrice kept working. She enrolled in an internship at the prestigious New England Hospital for Women and Children in Boston, where her routine provided fodder for her continuing correspondence with Whitman.

“Hospital life is beginning to seem a long-accustomed life,” she wrote in August 1878. “I enjoy all the duties involved & all the human relations. Even getting up in the night is compensated for by yielding a sense of importance & independence.” Beatrice was sensitive to the needs of her patients and committed herself to developing forms of care that alleviated pain: “I like introducing lint into wounds (such simple ones as an incised abscess of the breast) with the probe, because if I take trouble enough I can do it without hurting the patient, much to the patient’s surprise.”



Caroline Still [Wiley] Anderson, c. 1880. Photograph by J.A. Hurst. William Still Collection.

During this period, Beatrice became one of the best-connected women physicians in the Atlantic world. She found a friend and role model in her African American classmate Caroline Still Wiley Anderson (daughter of prominent Philadelphia abolitionists Letitia and William Still), who went on to become an influential physician. Wiley had also moved to Boston to intern at the New England Hospital. For three months, Gilchrist and Wiley were stationed together at the outpatient dispensary on Warrenton Street. “In tastes we have much in common & on the whole I prefer to live with her rather than with any of the other students,” she told Whitman. “We share rooms. We have a bedroom, a drug-room, a treatment room, waiting room for patients, & take our meals in the kitchen.” At least once, Wiley invited her to be the single white guest among thirty attendees at an African American women’s literary society meeting, a possible prototype for Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin’s Woman’s Era Club of the 1890s. With a confession halfway between self-deprecation and dispassionate assessment, Beatrice told Whitman, “Dr. Wiley is very popular with her patients, far more so than I.”

The internship concluded in the spring of 1879, and the Gilchrists returned to England that June. Beatrice quickly departed for the University of Bern to continue her studies. She reported settling in comfortably, but by the end of March 1880 something changed. “She could get through her examinations well enough as she has done before,” Anne told Whitman, “but could not she said ‘pass’ her own inward examination or conscientiously enter upon practice—she would not add to the already too great number of ‘fumbling physicians.’ ”

Although Beatrice had resolved to quit medicine when she went back to England, she reconsidered her decision shortly afterward. One of the most influential physicians of the era, Sophia Jex-Blake—counted among the Edinburgh Seven, who had studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh in the 1860s only to be denied a degree because they were women—persuaded Gilchrist to become her assistant, and Gilchrist moved north that summer.³



Sophia Jex-Blake, age twenty-five, by Samuel Laurence, 1865. Wikimedia Commons.

Despite the confidence of her family and colleagues, Beatrice remained discouraged. She disappeared on July 20, 1881, at the age of twenty-seven. Worried about her daughter's state of mind, Anne had concluded a monthlong visit with Beatrice in Edinburgh only days before she went missing. Meeting patients who adored Beatrice led her mother to believe her concerns would be assuaged with time. After hearing the news that Beatrice was gone, Anne rushed back north to find her, hoping the terrifying episode would have a happy end. But it did not.

On August 15 Beatrice's body was discovered in a field on the outskirts of Edinburgh, badly decomposed. According to the death certificate (which, given the corroborating evidence, appears reliable), she had died from an overdose of hydrocyanic acid, with "suicidal intent." In the epitaph she composed for her daughter, Anne captured the crushing grief and loss felt by her family, friends, and colleagues:

faithful unto death
Many hearts mourn her
In her short career did she by skill
tenderness and unwearied devotion to duty
bring healing and comfort to many
both here and in America.

In a state of shock, her mentor Dr. Jex-Blake closed her practice. As the physician's romantic partner Dr. Margaret Todd later wrote in *The Life of Sophia Jex-Blake* in 1918, "It was her way, when she trusted people, to trust them wholeheartedly, and she had absolute confidence in the assistant who had worked with her for more than a year." The trust was well-placed, Todd emphasizes, channeling sentiments she had received secondhand. "Well, indeed, she might, for she was extraordinarily fortunate in that gallant-hearted and faithful young helper, whose only fault seems to have been that she threw herself too completely, too conscientiously, into everything she undertook—her chief's work and interests, together with her own studies and laboratory experiments." With sensitive diction, Todd divulges a feeling of guilt that

haunted Jex-Blake as she processed the tragedy: “S.J.-B. never realized what a responsibility her very trust was to one wholly worthy of it.”

What drove Beatrice to her moment of crisis? Marion Walker Alcaro, Anne Gilchrist’s biographer, has proposed that Anne added the line faithful unto death to the epitaph as a clue to the role a love affair may have played in her daughter’s despair. Conversely, psychiatrist Jesse M. Hellman reads the line as a theological allusion, taken from Revelations 2:10: “Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer...be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.”

It is impossible to know the thoughts that went through Beatrice’s mind in her final moments. Nevertheless, family, friends, and colleagues repeatedly contextualized signs of the young doctor’s inner turmoil in the connection she felt toward her vocation, from which she had begun to feel estranged by 1880. If her past played a role, it may be that Beatrice had set the measure of her success against an impossible wish: that in healing others, she could vicariously reverse the tragedy of her youth, her father Alex’s death from scarlet fever. The refusal she expressed to join “the already too great number of ‘fumbling physicians’ ” indicates that she harbored a dread of ineffectual care. Behind her confident, arresting disposition, she wrestled with doubt over her capacity to live up to her own expectations. The harassment women physicians faced may have been another factor, although there is no evidence to suggest she internalized the prejudice against women physicians. Rather, the mounting concerns she disclosed to her mother indicate that Gilchrist feared becoming analogous to the doctor whom, warranted or unwarranted, her father had frozen in her memory as an example of ineptitude. It is plausible that these memories prompted a deleterious relationship to the inevitable truth that she, like all physicians, would face difficult decisions and be susceptible to error.

Self-harm is incomprehensible. Paradoxically, it stirs a potent yearning for understanding. With admiration for the reputation that lived on in Jex-Blake’s memory of her assistant, Todd may come the closest to providing clarity. A false

sense of inadequacy paired with a “gallant” passion for the work resulted in collapse. It is significant that Todd uses the word *faithful* to describe Beatrice, indicating she had paid respects at her grave. Beyond the question of subtext, faithful unto death may have simply been the primary trait a distraught Jex-Blake reiterated to Anne. Beatrice was faithful until the exhaustion became unconquerable. Modifying her standards seemed an inconceivable option.

Whitman took the news hard. Herbert was the first to send word, but even he could not bring himself to write Whitman directly. Instead Herbert wrote Susan Stafford, a mutual friend in Laurel Springs, New Jersey, and she shared the news with Whitman in a letter. In his commonplace book, the record reads: “Some gloomy news—sad, sad—the death of Beatrice Gilchrist—as accomplished and noble a young woman as I ever knew.” On November 28 Whitman wrote to Anne, “My dear friend, have time & its influences at least helped to calm the terrible loss & shock & dislocation?” The glow the Gilchrists and Whitman had left with one another had dimmed for the first time. The loss of Beatrice meant the loss of an imagined future reunion, in its truest form, which needed only to exist as a possibility to make the distance between them feel slight and temporary.

By January 1882 Herbert had begun working on a new painting. Anne described the concept to Walt, using their nicknames for the children: “One he has in his mind is to be called ‘The tea-party,’ and it is to be the old group round our table in Philadelphia—you & me and dear Bee & Giddy & himself.” The “old group” had enjoyed tea together often. In a letter reminiscing about one such gathering to Herbert, who was elsewhere at the time, Whitman writes: “I went over to your mother’s yesterday afternoon about 5½ & stayed till after 8—nothing specially new with them—your mother & Bee & Giddy are all well & in good spirits—We had a good

tea,—I punished a fearful quantity of good oatmeal mush & stewed blackberries— then we sat & talked for an hour & a half, in the cool of the evening on the front stoop—.”

By 1884 the concept was being executed with steady progress. On January 26 Anne wrote to Whitman’s sister-in-law Lou to request that he send a piece of cloth Herbert could use to capture the texture and color of one of the poet’s suits. The poet obliged.

Most deviations from the original concept that appear in the final version of the painting had been decided upon by April 1883, when Herbert described the piece in another letter to Whitman. This time he called his work in progress “The Good Gray Poet’s Gift.” The strangest alteration is the change of setting. No longer a purely wistful re-creation of tea at North 22nd Street, the painting opens through a window behind the table onto Hampstead Heath, thus adding a speculative element: the poet has at last made a transatlantic visit Herbert long wished for. The most significant change is that, despite Anne’s hope that Herbert would find it possible to represent Beatrice among them, in both Herbert’s letter and the final painting she has been omitted.⁴



The upper right-hand corner of *The Tea Party* features a portrait of a young woman's

profile. University of Pennsylvania, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books, and Manuscripts.

More accurately, Beatrice is absent in person. Devised and created from 1882 to 1884, *The Tea Party* coincides with the earliest years of the Gilchrists' mourning. On closer inspection, the memory of Beatrice suffuses the painting. The first clue is a shaded portrait of a young woman hanging in the corner of the dining room, above Anne's head. A solemn, distinguished profile, it resembles surviving depictions of Beatrice. Her gaze parallels the direction of her mother's head, indicating the depth of their friendship. Beatrice remains with Anne, behind and above her, while Anne, looking beyond Whitman's head, searches for a tangible presence she cannot recover. A snuffed-out candle and the bowed head of a neoclassical statue on the mantel partake of a common iconography of mourning.⁵ A fourth, superfluous teacup on the table signals that a desired guest is missing. A lily resting on the table seems like a reference to an affectionate assessment Christina Rossetti had made of Beatrice in her youth: "Rather like a lily than like a rose as I recollect her."

For viewers familiar with the Gilchrists, the portrait, the fourth teacup, and the flower reveal the painting to be a bereavement piece. Situated among these emblems of loss, the most striking aspect of the painting resides in the sensibility of compromised communion evident in the expressions of those gathered. Their minds are elsewhere. Anne and Whitman, in particular, appear preoccupied with the "dear one" whose parting has left them feeling stunned.



The center of *The Tea Party* reveals a superfluous fourth teacup. University of Pennsylvania, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books, and Manuscripts. Herbert's depiction of bereavement as a state of fractured communion takes on additional complexity through another symbol, one alluding to the monosyllabic nickname Beatrice used among family and friends, spelled not "Bea" but "Bee." The nickname Bee is encoded in the figure of Whitman himself, who hovers over the nosegay he has brought as a present, sniffing a red poppy. A signifier of deep slumber, emanating from the poppy's connection to opium, the flower helps mark the occasion for the piece. (Anne's delicately modified account of Beatrice's death as a fatal inhalation of ether in the obituary provides additional context for the allusion.)⁶ At the same time, Whitman's role—inhabiting the subject position of a bee, to conjure Bee's memory in a discrete gesture—introduces a disorienting question: Why should Herbert have made the poet a substitute for the lost sister?

Whitman identified with Bee in a way few of his interlocutors and close friends could identify with him. From his days as a visitor and volunteer nurse in Washington's overcrowded military hospitals during the Civil War, Whitman knew the dangers of losing oneself in an undisciplined inundation of the needs and suffering of sick and dying patients. He believed the subsequent health problems he faced, including his first major stroke in January 1873, to be symptomatic of his enervating hospital exertions. Famously, Whitman repeatedly referred to the physical and psychological aftermath he faced as his "war paralysis." "My old obstinate war-paralysis—," he wrote in November 1888, for example, "from the overstrain'd work & excitement of Secession years, 1863, 4 & 5. I am now staving it off and on, but it is a serious siege."

In late 1877 he worried that he discerned an imbalance in Beatrice's dedication to her work. A few hours before he was due to arrive at the Gilchrists' for dinner on December 13, he wrote,

Bee I have been thinking much the few hours past of what Mr Eldridge told me of a young Mrs Needham (an intimate friend of my Washington friends, & two years ago a fine healthy woman of 26) who too overwhelmingly swamped herself as a student at your Phila. medical school, a year & a half since (crowding too much & too intense study into too short a time) resulting in terrible brain troubles & a general caving in & now...of death lately in a lunatic asylum—just from sheer overwork, & too intense concentration, ardor, & continued strain.

He concludes with one of his iconic, extenuating dashes used to demarcate a new disclosure: "—My own trouble is an illustration of the same danger, & I feel peculiarly sensible of it in others near to me—Always yours Walt Whitman." Framing the confession on either side, the dashes link Whitman's concern over the sustainability of Beatrice's work ethic to his own struggles with mental health. With Beatrice, Whitman felt no need to guard against the "nearness" of her disposition to his: from experience, he knew that a feigned tirelessness in care could have a disintegrating effect over time, and he established himself in their discourse as a "peculiarly sensible" confidant.

Whitman and the Gilchrists formed an extraordinary family in the late 1870s.⁸ Their relationships resemble what is often referred to as “chosen family”—an elective, experimental kinship unrestricted by conventional biological and legal definitions of the boundaries of “kin.” Their kinship was structured by dinners, tea, overnight stays in Philadelphia and Camden, outdoor recreation, extended visits with mutual friends, and a prolific correspondence. It was also founded upon a remarkable vulnerability in the context of illness, aging, and loss. Whitman and the Gilchrists had a lot of fun together. They celebrated life and one another. And they understood a reciprocal candor to be foundational to the joy they felt each time they reunited.

In Whitman’s letters to Herbert, the poet often wrote about how a worsening case of rheumatism was inhibiting the arm and hand he used to write. “Have had a pretty severe attack of what appears to be (mostly) rheumatism in my right shoulder—more pain to me last night than I have before felt any time, I think, in my whole life,” he wrote on March 18, 1878. As of May 10, the pain had not permanently subsided. “Nothing very new with me—,” he says in another letter to Herbert. “I am only middling well, but go about—rheumatism not yet subdued—threatens to partially disable my right arm—(this writing probably shows it)—.” The Gilchrists had only recently left Philadelphia when this letter arrived; Herbert had just written to Whitman about being “exhilarated” by his first impressions of Brooklyn. Always attuned to the craft of placing words on paper, including the sensations given by a text upon its arrival in a recipient’s grasp, Whitman asks Herbert to take note of the material presence of his rheumatism, of his body writing with and struggling to manipulate the force of his pen, in the shape of his penmanship.

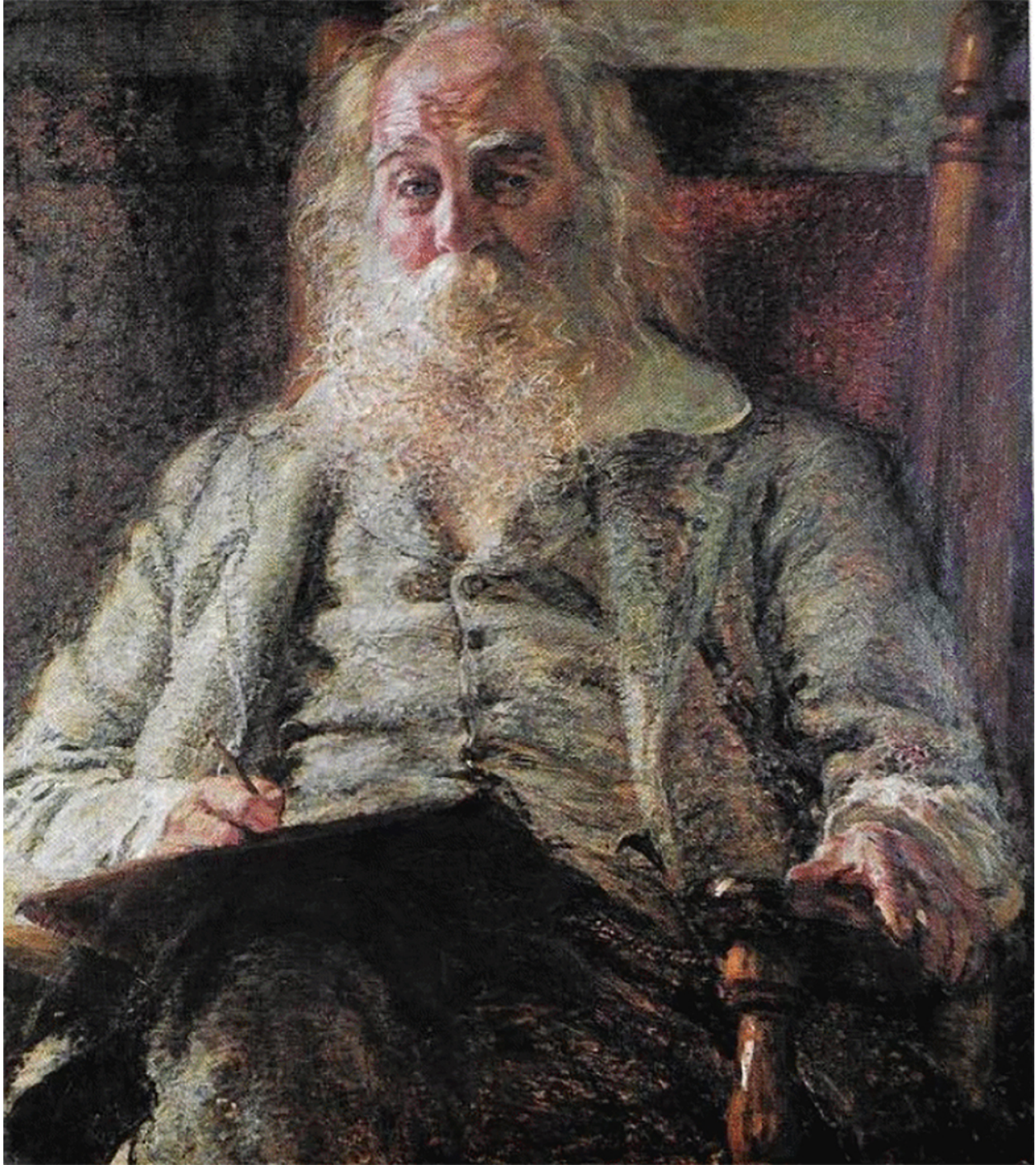
431 Stevens Street
Camden N J May 10 '78

Dear Herbert your good letter
reach'd me yesterday & I don't wonder
you like; I are exhilarated by New York
& Brooklyn — They are the places to live.
— I was down at White Horse Monday
& Tuesday last — expect to go down
again Sunday — Just as I left your
letter to Mrs S. arrived — all were
about as usual — Nothing very
new with me — I am only middly
well, but go about — rheumatism
not yet subdued — threatens to partially
disable my right arm (this writing prob-
ably shows it) — I am interested in
what you say of Eaton and the scribbler
or O'Donovan (is it?) — should like to
hear more about them — About the

Letter from Walt Whitman to Herbert Gilchrist, 1878. University of Pennsylvania, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books, and Manuscripts.

The letters showcase Whitman's modified script in the uneven thickness of his characters: light, thin lines giving way to heavy dashes looking like closed eyelids,

interspersed with thick, blotted letters, “H”s and the cursive “I” being the starkest departures. In his 1882 autobiography *Specimen Days*, a book that the blind poet Stephen Kuusisto has characterized as a “progenitor” of the “disability memoir,” the handwritten title page flaunts this same rheumatic, asymmetrical fluctuation in thickness. (Whitman personally sent a copy to Herbert.) In these missives, Whitman and Herbert established a channel of reunion, the poet treating the epistolary medium as an art form, which, as Alison Kafer describes the work of contemporary artists in her essay “Crip Kin, Manifesting” (2019), foregrounded a material embodiment of “disability” as a “catalyst” for the making of new “models of kin and relation.”⁹ The artist understood. In the letter from April 29, 1883, in which he describes *The Tea Party* to Whitman for the first time, Herbert acknowledges the most recent letter he has received by writing, “Very glad, my dear old Walt, to see your strong familiar handwriting again; it does one good, it’s so individual that it is next to seeing you.” Of the two paintings Herbert made of Whitman on view at the University of Pennsylvania, the solo portrait begun by Herbert in person in the summer of 1887 in Camden portrays this element of their correspondence most concretely. Whitman holds a pen in his right hand. Seated in his rocking chair, in the act of writing, Whitman has paused to look up.



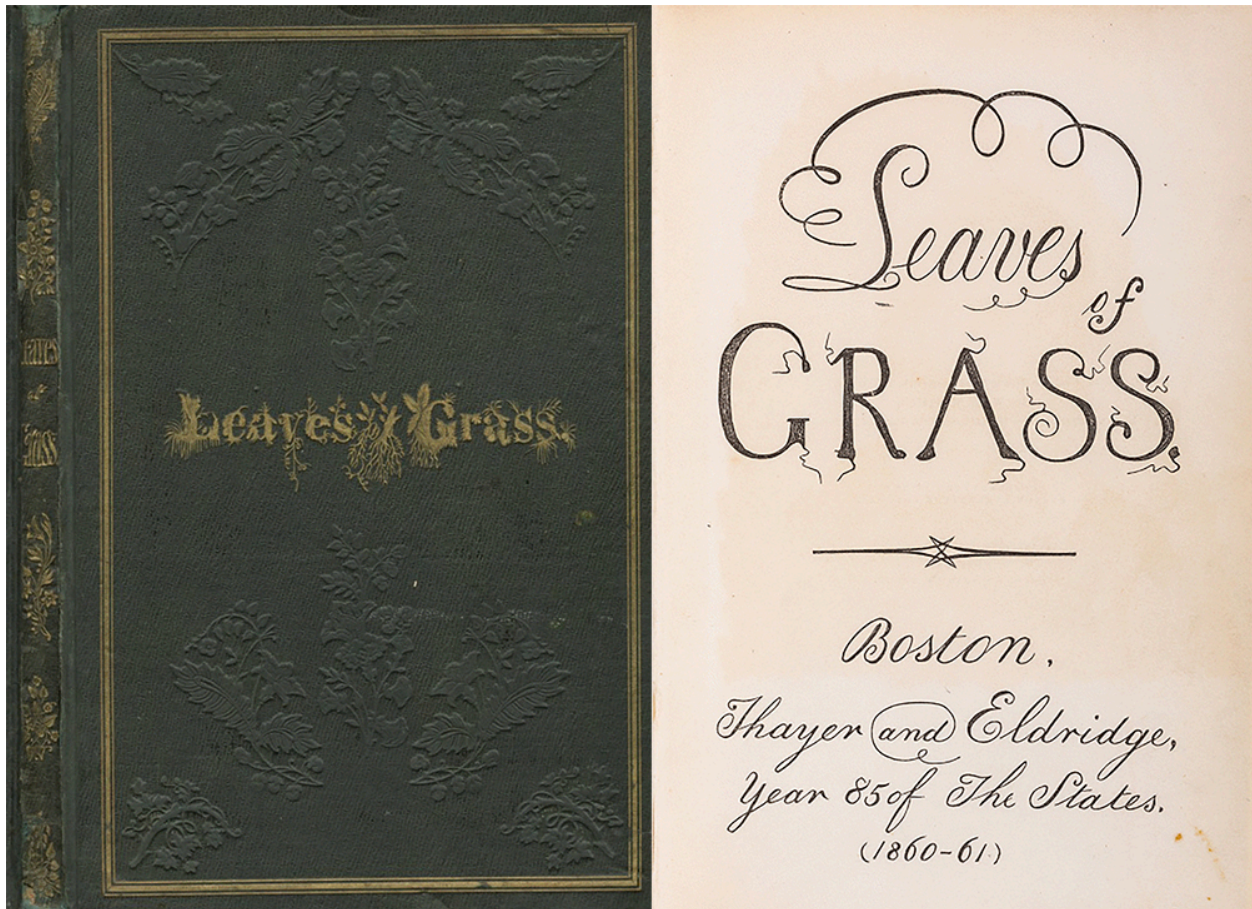
Walt Whitman, by Herbert Harlakenden Gilchrist, c. 1888. University of Pennsylvania, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books, and Manuscripts.

Whitman disliked the final product, the worst part being the beard. “The head is not so bad if you can rescue it from the curls,” he sighed to his friend and eventual literary

executor Horace Traubel. “The picture needs to be sent to a barber.” Art critic Ruth Bohan notes that Whitman’s dismissiveness neglects the complexity of Herbert’s adaptation of Impressionist trends: “The painting’s broken brushwork and animating textural effects register as visual tropes both for the process of writing represented in the painting and for the process-oriented emphasis of Whitman’s poetry.”

The curls that inspired so much distaste have a related significance. For the artist who had sustained much of his friendship with Whitman through letter writing, that is, through the indulgent curls perforating the poet’s cursive penmanship, the beard cascades like so many looping letters—the best example being the W.W.s Whitman used to conclude his epistles, crisscrossing erratically down to his chest. The literal rheumatic hold of the pen reverberates in this allusion to the deviating loops of Whitman’s self-consciously volatile handwriting. Whitman had his own predilection for transforming type into image—stylistic flourishes he used to represent an affinity between grass and body hair (chest hair described as “scented herbage of my breast”; grass imagined as “the uncut hair of graves”).

From the 1855 first edition of *Leaves of Grass* to the title page of the 1860 edition, Whitman’s typography was hirsute. The uneven white curls of the beard suggest a faithfulness not to Whitman’s appearance but to the rheumatic coils accumulated in his letters.



The 1855 forest-green cloth cover of *Leaves of Grass* (L), with the title appearing in gold-stamped letters drawn by hand to give the effect of plants shooting up from long dangling roots, echoes the figurative uses of hair in *Leaves*. The title page for the 1860 edition of *Leaves* (R) features curls extending above and below the word *Leaves* alongside squiggles Ed Folsom has characterized as a “spermatoid design” permeating the third edition. American Antiquarian Society.

Whitman found occasional relief from his discomfort. Five days after the sudden flare-up in his right arm in 1878, another letter reveals that Beatrice had prepared a therapeutic strategy to alleviate the pain.

Dear Herby Last night the best night for a week & I count on getting better now—only weakness very pronounced & general, & a little sickish—rheumatic pains in shoulder & wrist still present, but much modified—tell Bee I am wearing the flannel sleeve constantly—it was just about what I was wanting—.

A common remedy for patients trying to pacify rheumatic episodes in the nineteenth century, the flannel sleeve facilitated perspiration otherwise inhibited—offering “warmth without encumbrance,” as one doctor put it by the 1780s—opened the pores, and established a “uniform atmosphere.” As recommended, Whitman kept Bee’s flannel sleeve on “constantly,” and by late March he believed it was helping.

This exchange between Beatrice and Whitman sheds light on the subtle substitution effected in *The Tea Party*. Why did Herbert represent his sister in the action of the poet? Why is Whitman the bee inhaling the scent of the flower? Part of the explanation should not be considered exclusive to the allusion to Beatrice. Whitman refers to bees repeatedly in his letters to Anne and Herbert prior to Beatrice’s death. One reason has to do with the prominence of bees in the autobiography he began composing in the late 1870s, the final draft of which includes a segment titled “Bumble Bees.” Just over a year after Beatrice’s death, Herbert wrote on October 20 to let Whitman know he had received his copy. Of the many chapters he might have mentioned, Herbert praises the segment on “the bumble-bee,” adding that it captures his memory of their days outdoors in New Jersey.

No evidence indicates that Whitman had Beatrice in mind when he wrote about bumblebees in *Specimen Days*. Yet the question of intent might not have mattered to Herbert. It is unlikely that, during his focused period of grieving in the early 1880s, Herbert could have come across his sister’s affectionate nickname without being reminded of her. Indeed, the encounter with bees that Whitman describes in *Specimen Days* seems almost like an allegory for the sensation of memory in the context of grief:

Nature marches in procession, in sections...All have done much for me, and still do. But for the last two days it has been the great wild bee, the humble-bee, or “bumble,” as the children call him...As I wend slowly along, I am often accompanied with a moving cloud of them...Large and vivacious and swift, with wonderful momentum and a loud swelling perpetual hum, varied now and then by something almost like a shriek, they dart to and fro, in rapid flashes, chasing

each other, and (little things as they are), conveying to me a new and pronounc'd sense of strength, beauty, vitality and movement.

Herbert may have found comfort in contemplating Bee's spectral presence in these terms: a moving cloud, large and vivacious and swift, disorienting but capable of imparting beauty and strength. His remembrance of his sister, processed in the figure of the bee, allows us to reconcile three distinct elements at work in *The Tea Party*: its representation of loss in the darkened profile of the absent sister; the metaphorical and substitutional representation of Whitman in the position of a bee; and the question of what we should understand to be the poet's "gift," designated in the original title.

The kinship between Whitman and Beatrice lies in the tendency both had known to sacrifice their health in hospital work. The doctor and poet connected through a common "pedagogy of unwellness," a phrase writer and scholar Mimi Khúc has coined to describe a disarming ethical praxis that takes as its starting point "the radical recognition" that, in distinct ways and at divergent moments, we all find ourselves "differentially unwell." Whitman smells the red flower in recollecting this affinity, and, in so doing, he becomes Bee again, the earlier identification embodied now in a state of psychic reconnection. Herbert thus triangulates a process of reparation that some psychologists have defined as the purpose of mourning. Against the idea that grieving ends when one has created a viable distance between the self and the deceased, object-relations theorists have argued that mourning involves reencountering the lost object through a recuperated identification, achieved through an extension of the mourner's own ego to include the departed as an indissoluble part of the self. In *The Tea Party*, Herbert retrieves his identification with Beatrice by reincarnating her presence in the mediating figure of the poet.


The literal gift in the painting is the nosegay of flowers, which Whitman has brought as a present for Anne. But the "gift" of the title refers also to the central quality of Whitman's voice: his gift for washing his identity away in the name of the other, in whom he at last becomes recognizable to himself.

Then there is a third gift, possibly detectable in the thick, ruffled fabric of the coat arm, the flannel sleeve Beatrice had devised for Whitman to wear underneath his suit to mitigate his rheumatism, worn on the arm raising the flower to his nose. With the gift of the sleeve, Whitman acquired a material bond with a physician who shared his compulsion to alleviate the pain of others and who knew the unsettling drive to deplete oneself in that labor. In Bee, Whitman found a peculiarly sensible friend. In Whitman, Herbert acknowledged this likeness, in an endeavor to preserve a correspondence with his departed sister.

Literary critic Max Cavitch accounts for a comparable form of grieving in his 2006 book *American Elegy*. “Lodging within us as objects, our lost ones participate in our designs on the world, bypassing for the most part our conscious acquiescence or resistance,” Cavitch writes. Yet there are ways of achieving “alert and fluid relations” with them, our “burdensome feelings” of “indebtedness” and “remorse” cultivated into “more freely chosen allegiances.” In *The Tea Party*, Bee’s legacy is represented similarly as an enduring form of companionship for the artist.

Visitors to the Kislak Center at the University of Pennsylvania will find the commemoration of these bonds intact. Beatrice, though not visible, remains present. In its subtle portrayal of private contemplation, *The Tea Party* recalls a stanza from *Drum-Taps* describing the weighty hospital encounters Whitman later drew upon in his identification with Bee.

I am faithful, I do not give out;
The fractur’d thigh, the knee, the wound in the abdomen,
These and more I dress with impassive hand—(yet deep in my breast a fire, a burning flame.)

¹ At Rossetti’s recommendation, Gilchrist published the essay anonymously, under the byline “an English lady.” 

²The first was also in the United States: the Boston Female Medical College, which opened in 1848. ↩

³Marion Walker Alcaro provides extensive documentation of these events in *Walt Whitman's Mrs. G: A Biography of Anne Gilchrist*. ↩


⁴On June 6, 2019, 150 years after Jex-Blake and her peers were barred from receiving their degrees, the University of Edinburgh awarded the Edinburgh Seven their degrees in medicine retroactively. ↩

⁵Another major modification occurred after Herbert wrote Whitman about the painting. Herbert removed himself and added a servant beside the window. The figure bears a strange appearance, and it is possible that Herbert converted himself into the servant following disappointment with his attempt at a self-portrait. ↩

⁶Art critic Christina Michelon was the first to point out the symbolic significance of these elements to me, contextualizing them in a deeper tradition of posthumous portraiture. ↩

⁷The poppy recalls another major work of posthumous portraiture during this period by the Gilchrists' friend and interlocutor Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Beata Beatrix* (1870), revolving around an allusion to Beatrice Portinari (1265–90), traditionally understood to be the Beatrice who captivated the heart and mind of Dante Alighieri. Following the death of Elizabeth Siddal, Rossetti's wife, from an overdose of laudanum in 1862, *Beata Beatrix* stages a memorialization of Siddal through the figure of the historical Beatrice (a likeness Rossetti had invoked previously). In the painting, a red dove carries a white poppy in its beak, a symbol alluding to the nature of Siddal's passing. ↩

⁸While my interpretation of Whitman's bond with the Gilchrist family diverges in important ways from Michael Robertson's chapter on the subject in *Worshipping Walt*, Robertson ruminates on Whitman's related observation to Horace Traubel that "after all, Horace, we were a family—a happy family." ↩

⁹In 2019 the online journal *Commonplace* published a special issue of essays and poetry on “Whitman and Disability,” edited by me and Clare Mullaney, to commemorate the bicentennial anniversary of his birth. Essays by literary scholars Sari Edelstein, Christopher Hanlon, Bethany Schneider, and Robert J. Scholnick explore similar connections between disability and new forms of kinship and friendship Whitman prioritized from the Civil War until his death in 1892. 

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