CONSERVING WALT WHITMAN’S FAME
The Iowa Whitman Series

Ed Folsom, Series Editor
Conserving Walt Whitman’s Fame

SELECTIONS FROM
HORACE TRAUBEL’S
CONSERVATOR, 1890–1919

Edited by Gary Schmidgall

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NOTE ON THE TEXT

With a few noted exceptions, every article is reproduced in its entirety; ellipses in the text, therefore, are original. Traubel’s relatively few footnotes are here marked, as they were in the Conservator, by an asterisk. All square brackets in the text [—] and the material therein are Traubel’s. All information provided by the present editor, within the text and in notes after articles, is enclosed in curved brackets {—}. Titles are original, unless in curved brackets or otherwise noted. All descriptions of the source of an article found just beneath the title and author’s name are Traubel’s, though they have been raised from their original position as footnotes.

Every item is identified by month and year of publication and by location in the Conservator. A single number in parentheses (123) indicates the location of a passage or item that has been included in this volume. Two numbers in parentheses (12:34) indicate that a quoted passage or item referred to is not present here and must be consulted in the Conservator itself. Its annual volume always commenced in March; volumes were through-numbered. The first number in parentheses identifies the volume, and the second gives the page on which a cited article or passage commences. Citations from With Walt Whitman in Camden (ed. Horace Traubel et al., various publishers, 1906–1996) will provide the volume number, followed by page number (W1:234). The series will be referred to in the text as WWC.

With the following exceptions, the text is reproduced as it appeared in the Conservator: (1) all obvious typographical errors and misspellings have been silently corrected; (2) all titles of books, originally enclosed in quotation marks, are here italicized, and all titles of shorter works, such as poems and essays, are now enclosed in quotation marks; (3) names of authors appear exactly as in the journal but at the beginning rather than the end of an article; (4) some British spellings and the British style of placing periods and commas outside quotation marks have been rendered consistent with American style. Finally, regarding Leaves of Grass: (5) Traubel and his contributors often did not identify Whitman quotations, but here all are given a source title in boldface, with section numbers added in parentheses for longer poems; (6) quotations from Leaves of Grass in the Conservator are, surprisingly, often faulty, so here all quotations conform to the 1891–1892, or “deathbed,” edition, which Traubel so often and
vociferously insisted upon in his pages as the final and one true *Leaves*. The few instances where quotation is not from this edition are noted.

Otherwise, Traubel’s penchant for the sentence fragment and very long paragraphs has been respected. Also honored is Traubel’s evident loathing for the contractive apostrophe, as in “dont” and “cant” (here he was in agreement with Bernard Shaw, who condemned such apostrophes as “uncouth bacilli”). Traubel’s rather arch attitude toward genteel “parlor” expression is perhaps explained by this comment of John Erskine in his *Yale Review* essay on *With Walt Whitman in Camden*: “According to Whitman’s desire, this journal reports every infelicity and roughness and frankness of speech just as it came from his lips. The number of expressions that might be mended is smaller than one would expect in any talk so inexorably caught, yet an occasional strong term or a human ‘dondt’ for ‘doesn’t’ will confirm some readers in their persuasion that Whitman was not a gentleman” (see 208) — a view with which Whitman would have enthusiastically agreed.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project sparked to life one summer day several years ago when, by happenstance, I came upon a perfect run of Horace Traubel’s *Conservator* in an open-stack basement of the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. That serendipitous moment offers the perfect occasion to register my considerable debt of gratitude to the Huntington Library. A few well-handled index cards on me in the file of the library’s Readers’ Services office record that for more than thirty years I have been coming annually — sometimes more often — to make use of its unparalleled holdings, the unfailing helpfulness and expertise of its staff, and the wonderfully relaxing paths of its surrounding botanical gardens. Perhaps a dozen essays and books of mine were greatly enhanced or (as in the present case) made possible by the splendid resources of the Huntington Library, for which I am very thankful. I am also grateful to acknowledge a Professional Staff Congress—CUNY travel grant that supported one summer’s work on this project. Dr. William Innis Homer, grandson to the longtime printer of the *Conservator*, William T. Innis III, and a friend of Gertrude Traubel, proved a very helpful informant for my research on the history of the *Conservator*. As with *Intimate with Walt: Selections from Whitman’s Conversations with Horace Traubel*, 1888–1892, which inaugurated the Iowa Whitman Series, Ed Folsom recognized the value of this project from the moment I broached it, and his encouragement and advice have eased every stage in its gestation. As before, the scrupulous attentions and astute bookmaking advice of Holly Carver, Charlotte Wright, and Bob Burchfield of the University of Iowa Press have greatly enhanced this volume. Ivor Kraft has generously supported its publication. Finally, I dedicate my editorial efforts here on behalf of Horace and Walt to the memory of Vincent Newton.
CONSERVING WALT WHITMAN’S FAME
On Saturday, March 15, 1890, Horace Logo Traubel headed to Mickle Street in Camden, New Jersey, for one of his daily visits with Walt Whitman. A very special request must have been on his mind, for this was the official natal day of a new monthly journal he had decided to publish. Its chief intention would be “to give a voice to the voiceless” and “to Liberalism as variously spoken” in the Philadelphia area (1:1). Traubel promised in his editorial “Greeting” for volume 1, number 1 (signed “H. L. T.”) that “not less than Thoreau at Walden shall we spiritually realize all climes and seasons here at our doors.” What the founder and editor hoped to garner from Whitman was an appropriate motto – cum – battle cry for his front page. Back home later that evening, Traubel recorded that Walt “promised me a motto for the Conservator ‘if so be one hits me.’”

Thus, on a happily fateful Ides of March, did the Conservator make its debut in the conversational mix of With Walt Whitman in Camden (W6:329). This new liberal clarion, which in its first three years strongly emphasized news of Ethical Culture societies, was not only closely read at Mickle Street but also disseminated from there. The following May, Traubel records Whitman’s high praise for an article by Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke titled “Leaves of Grass and Modern Science” — “it is so satisfactory, strong, virile” — and adds that Whitman “wishes 50 copies of the next Conservator, desiring ‘to send them far and near — many abroad!’” (W6:392). Two months later, Traubel read to Whitman the manuscript of a 400-word piece by William Sloane Kennedy, “Walt Whitman’s Quaker Traits,” and received this approval: “That is good — that is idiosyncratic — very good — a piece of Kennedy’s self” (W6:481). After the item appeared, Whitman again enthused, “It’s a proud example of style, a new dress, a distinct development” (W7:16). Another day, Walt announced, “I have a subscriber for the Conservator. . . . Ingram was here today and left the money for it” (W7:96). The October issue brought this compliment: “I like the number of the Conservator a great deal; it is a good number throughout” (W7:216). Not that Walt was entirely uncritical; his last recorded remark on a Conservator article — “The ‘Second Annex’ to Leaves of Grass” by Sidney Morse — was: “I confess I was not taken with it” (W9:31).

**TONIC EMANATION**

Walt Whitman in the Conservator
When the journal reached its first birthday, Traubel’s celebration had a decided Whitman gleam to it: “The *Conservator* comes up with its first mile-post. It has journeyed the pathway of quest and outcast — has known the forth-stretched hand and the disdaining look and word — has gone with undimmed faith into all hours, under whatever skies, and holds to-day, in the last shadows of the old year, that the rough road, the heart-sore love, the spur of friendly salutation and the lift of adversity, were but ascents by which it came face to face with itself” (1:89). That is not a bad capsule summary of the “journey” of *Leaves of Grass* itself, one might add, and make no mistake: the *Conservator* was dedicated to continuing that beloved book’s posthumous journey.

As for the requested motto, the poet’s well-honed ability to procrastinate finally triumphed. Inspiration had not hit him by the time he was reposing in Harleigh Cemetery two years later. It took another year for Traubel to come up with his own ideal Whitman gem. In the March 1893 issue, just under the front-page title, appeared these words: “Moral conscientiousness, crystalline, without flaw, not godlike only, entirely human, awes and enchants forever.—Whitman.”¹ As one who has recently examined a perfect run of all 352 issues of the *Conservator* — a set that almost certainly came from Traubel’s editorial office on Chestnut Street in Philadelphia — I find it hard to imagine a better choice, this pronouncement from Whitman’s challenging jeremiad on the ills of his nation in *Democratic Vistas*.²

Throughout its thirty-year run, the *Conservator* displayed a remarkably vigorous conscientiousness that was not only moral but also political, social, economic, literary, and cultural. Decidedly liberal in its bias and also, with increasingly vocal passion, socialist in its soul (some declared Traubel a communist as well), the *Conservator* consistently fought on behalf of the “dear and dreadful” beginners of the first post-Harleigh generation. These radicals were insisting, in varying ways, that America’s and the world’s citizens were, as Whitman says in “Beginners,” mischoosing “the objects of their adulation and reward.” Eugene V. Debs himself declared in the *Conservator*’s pages in 1917 that socialism was Traubel’s “chief distinguishing feature,” and he hailed him as one who “breathes the very life-breath of the crowd” and who “loves best of all the lowest stratum in it. He is pre-eminently the voice of Les Miserables” (28:77). A few months later, David Fulton Karsner, already at work on his Traubel biography, seconded this view: “Every Socialist, every radical, every man and woman who thinks, should read this journal, which stands out today like a beacon light in the printerial fog” (28:105).

The sound of a Whitman note in that praise is clearly audible. The Whitman tintinnabulum, in fact, can be heard ringing very often in the pages of the

xviii  *Tonic Emanation*
Conservator, sometimes loudly in the foreground but also, between the lines, in the distance. On the other hand, there was nothing Whitman-like in Traubel’s earnestness, polemical energy, or success in dealing with the practical challenges of publishing a periodical single-handedly. In this respect, let us recall how short-lived Whitman’s effort in this line of work was; his Huntington Long Islander lasted less than a year.

Still, the soul of the Conservator was deeply and extensively influenced by Whitman, and Traubel employed its pages relentlessly and kaleidoscopically to secure the “foothold” of Leaves of Grass in American letters, about which Whitman so often fretted doubtfully. Thomas Harned, prominent member of the Whitman inner circle and one of his literary coexecutors, wittily acknowledged this agenda when he began his remarks at a Whitman dinner in 1905 thus: “I am here under orders from Traubel (the high priest of the Whitman propaganda) to respond to the toast he has given me” (16:167). That Whitman’s and Traubel’s values were practically indistinguishable — a universally acknowledged fact — is perhaps caught in the former’s remark to the latter, halfway through the Conservator’s first year, “We are fortunate to have the means to get at the public in our way” (W7:211). Traubel wrote in 1906, apropos the appearance of Edward Carpenter’s Days with Walt Whitman, “We are seeing a new breed of Whitman people today” (17:75). Here was another part of Traubel’s agenda, which was to assure that Whitman’s poetry was not merely read but lived. The journal also served to strengthen the bonds of far-flung circles of Whitman enthusiasts. John Johnston wrote to Whitman in January 1891 to say that the circle of Whitmanites in Lancashire subscribed to the Conservator “mainly with a view of seeing what may be said about W. W. as any & everything about him is of great interest to us” (W7:424).

The Conservator would prove a cornucopia of material for such devotees: of its 352 issues, only about 60 contain nothing of Whitman note (except, that is, the ever-present advertisements for Whitman-related publications in its back pages). Many issues contained multiple Whitman items. Traubel apparently never vouchsafed in print his reasons for choosing the title he did, but from a Whitmanite’s perspective, it is tempting to explain the choice by simply turning to the dictionary. A conservator is “one who conserves or preserves from injury, violation ... one who is responsible for the person and property of an incompetent.” When Traubel walked away from Whitman’s deathbed into the rainy dusk of Camden on March 26, 1892, he had become not merely a coexecutor of the poet’s estate but also the conservator of his legacy. The Conservator became a chief means for fulfilling both duties. It might be noted that the words “conserve,” “conservator,” and “conservation” never appear in Leaves

Walt Whitman in the Conservator xix
of Grass. However, this sentence in *Democratic Vistas* contains the verb: “That which really balances and conserves the social and political world is not so much legislation, police, treaties, and dread of punishment, as the latent eternal intuitional sense, in humanity, of fairness, manliness, decorum, &c.” Though too long for a motto, this assertion certainly accords with the one Traubel finally chose.

On his March 1890 introductory page, Traubel struck the Whitman pose of subversiveness combined with a wide, Quakerish, live-and-let-live embrace. He quoted this passage from a letter applauding the new publication: “If Liberalism means anything, it surely means toleration, based on a sympathetic appreciation of our neighbor’s peculiar point of view and disposition of mind. Such a journal as you contemplate must help to promote this toleration; therefore I wish it all success” (1:1). In the third issue, Traubel printed this Sidney Morse comment on its name: “*Conservator* is a very good name, conserving past, present, future — another way of saying Radical. The old-time criticism was always at fault. Radical never meant destruction and waste. It was reliance on reason and spiritual insight” (1:18).

The general tone of discourse in the *Conservator* is well captured in such language. Fiery and rambunctious its pages are not, though often wickedly satiric, coolly caustic. Poised, well mannered, sensible — such is the personality of the journal, with a few notable exceptions. And yet, as with *Leaves of Grass*, the cultural and political subversions in the *Conservator* are often incendiary, explosive. Nothing underscores this better than the colorful ridicule and insults the *Conservator* evoked over the years from enemies of liberal reform, many of which Traubel, with delicious and sometimes hilarious equanimity, was happy to reprint for his readers. Not the least charming Whitman-like quality of Traubel’s journal is its rhinoceros-skinned resilience to criticism.

Some critics of the *Conservator* took it upon themselves to write “slurring” letters to Whitman about it, and this led to a little lecture from poet to editor, in July 1891, that clearly took a page from the early days of *Leaves of Grass*: “We must get used to the howlers — there’s enough to do, not to busy with their demonstrations. Settle your case with yourself — then go ahead — the howl, the rest, what-not, won’t hurt. . . . We are players in a play: this is all part of the play, to be welcomed along with the rest” (W8:298). Following this advice, Traubel proved dauntless amid the howlers and went doggedly on his self-chosen way for the next twenty-eight years.

The way Traubel chose, of course, was Whitman’s way, though on only two occasions was a *Conservator* devoted entirely to the poet. The first was in June 1895 (the second was the 1919 Whitman centennial issue, presented in full in...
part VIII in this volume). In his opening editorial for this “Walt Whitman Birthday Number,” Traubel offered this memorable summation (6:50):

Whitman’s is the path of unhesitating universal reverence and of the democratic ideal.

Others have hinted the way. In them is the scent and the reflection. In him is the rose and the full sun.

He arrests and vitalizes skepticism. He takes concern by the hand and leads it apart from the dispute. In his atmosphere the soul is made aware of unaccustomed encouragements and confirmations.

I have always felt this tonic emanation from the man in my associations with him, and I feel it no less in these after-years of our physical separation.

The Conservator itself was a tonic emanation of the Whitman ethos and agenda. As such, its pages offer an unparalleled panorama of the early decades when the poet began not merely to gain a foothold on American poetry’s Olympus but to reach the mountain’s top.

As early as 1908, the summit was already within view, and for some this was not a happy thought. That year, apropos the interment of the “Last of the Whitmans” at Harleigh Cemetery (Walt’s sister, Hannah), the Philadelphia Inquirer groused, “We are suddenly asked to believe that in the few years since Whitman died he has grown to be the greatest of the world’s apostles and is now accepted as the high priest of ethics the world over.” Then the paper snidely adds, “This is a fine exhibition of what a finely conducted press agency can accomplish.” The intemperate Inquirer’s parting shot is that “Walt Whitman had the poetic instinct, although he could not often write poetry” (374). Traubel, who was often hospitable to what Walt called “the crowd of hooters,” reprinted the article in the Conservator. I like to think he did so because he wished to accept the unintended compliment about fine press agency. As Whitman’s press agent par excellence, he certainly had the right to do so.

It will be helpful, now, to describe briefly the Conservator’s format and how it changed, in relatively modest ways, over its life span. Please note, incidentally, that the journal’s name was pronounced with stress on the first and third syllables, as in “radiator” (Traubel, it might be added, was pronounced with stress on the first syllable, which rhymed with “cow”).

The first Conservator announced that it would be “issued about the middle of each month.” A year’s subscription would be fifty cents, or single copies five cents. Its eight pages were 9½ inches wide and 12 inches high, with ample margins (irregularly, perhaps a dozen times, it appeared with cramped margins...
on 8½-by-11-inch stock). The text ran on the page in two columns. For the entire run, an editorial by “H. T.” began on the front page, its title, “Collect,” borrowed from Whitman. The Collect would always jump to the second and sometimes third pages, typically running 1,200 to 1,800 words. There was at first no table of contents. In April 1893 a brief “Books Received” feature was instituted on the bottom of the front page.

The Collect was then followed by two or three or four titled essays that could vary in length from 600 or 700 words to as many as 3,000. The author’s name followed the final paragraph in italics. Essays of greater length and importance were serialized in subsequent issues; at eight installments, the series “Notes on the Text of *Leaves of Grass*” in 1896–1898, most of them by Dr. Bucke, was the champion in this regard (see appendix 1 for a list of approximately 150 topical Whitman-related *Conservator* articles). The most notable aspect of the inaugural issue is that Whitman’s name does not appear once. However, its two initial signed articles are prophetic of the “good gray” color scheme that would dominate countless subsequent issues. They were by Whitman partisans and members of his inner circle: the Unitarian minister John H. Clifford, writing on natural law in spiritual culture, and the scholar Daniel G. Brinton, writing on the relation of the ethical to the intellectual life.

Following the essays in the first *Conservator* was the “Budget,” which consisted of four pages of short reports from Ethical Culture societies in Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, and St. Louis, as well as news items from Unitarian and Jewish congregations. Meetings of Walt Whitman groups were also occasionally noticed in the Budget. By 1895, however, the *Conservator*’s devotion to specific Ethical Culture societies and liberal congregations began to wane. Indeed, there was a formal rupture at this time, when Traubel and a score of others seceded from the Philadelphia branch of the society. In their desire for more freedom and democracy than they believed Ethical Culture afforded, these dissenters formed the Fellowship for Ethical Research (of which Traubel was elected chair) and the Walt Whitman Fellowship. The *Conservator* became their semiofficial public voice, offering an array of short items and reports. The *Budget* of April 1895, for example, included short pieces titled “Political Economy versus Justice,” “The Art of Acting,” “Ingersoll and Economic Reform,” “Walt Whitman Reunion,” “School of Applied Ethics,” and “Of Political and Industrial Liberty.” By 1902 the Budget vanished, ceding to “As to Books and Writers,” a feature introduced in 1896 that ended each *Conservator* for the duration.

The obvious parallel today for the resulting format is the *New Republic*.

Like-minded Philadelphians helped the *Conservator* survive. An architectural firm provided a rent-free office on Walnut Street (a move to Chestnut Street
came later). Joseph Fels, a wealthy soap mogul, proponent of the single tax, and political soul mate of Traubel’s, was a major backer of the *Conservator*, not only running regular ads for soap in its pages but also helping to establish the printing firm of Innes and Son, whose first job was printing the *Conservator* (an earlier printer was Billstein & Son, which had also served Whitman). From September 1903, the *Conservator*’s printer became the Rose Valley Press, a part of the Rose Valley Association, an arts and crafts colony that Traubel helped to found in 1901, about fifteen miles west of Philadelphia. Rose Valley Press published the *Conservator* until its final issue (the printing was in fact always done in Philadelphia, under the supervision of William T. Innes III).  

The *Conservator* remained entirely unillustrated throughout its run, and for thirty years its editor shunned any makeover of its plain, rather ascetic graphic design. As for its circulation figures, we learn that in 1893 a possible expansion in length was dependent upon receiving 600 new annual subscriptions at a dollar each (3:89). Many years later, in 1917, Traubel reprinted a short item from the *New York Call* in which we learn that Debs “told Traubel a little while ago that the *Conservator* should have a circulation of ten thousand copies. But its circulation is nowhere near that figure.” The reader is also informed that Traubel’s friends learned “with great alarm” that World War I “may even yet swamp his quaint old printing shop and still the pen of the brave journalist, merely for lack of subscriptions” (378). The *Conservator* press run was actually more like 1,000.  

Half of the back page of the inaugural issue was given over to advertisements, and by the third issue ads grew to a full page. The ad copy now makes for amusing reading. Fels’s Germicide Soap is “Dainty in use. Made so by its natural ingredients. Not by perfumery.” Wolff’s Shoe Blacking touted its “sponge applicator,” and the manufacturer of Bird Manna boasted knowledge of “the secret of the Hartz Mountains.” Fitler’s Carminative was a “certain and safe remedy for Diarrhoea or Looseness of the Bowels, Cholera Morbus, Summer Complaints.” The May 1892 issue would bring the first of countless ads for Whitman-related titles, for *At the Graveside of Walt Whitman*, a forty-page pamphlet at fifty cents. By 1893 there were two full pages of ads, and in 1896 three full pages became standard for the remainder of the run. Books of interest to *Conservator* readers were, of course, of a radical bent. In the first full-page ad, in 1899, the Humboldt Library of Science counted among its 177 titles such books as Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*, Wilde’s *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, and Marx’s *Capital*.  

Several changes in format and innovations in the *Conservator* over the years can be briefly noted. One, heavy with portent, occurred in the issue of
January 1891, when the journal published its first poem. Fittingly inauspicious, Harrison S. Morris’s “What Difference?” is a doggerel spree of rhymed tetrameter quatrains reminiscent of the youthful poetical skeletons in Whitman’s closet. This opened the way for verse as a regular feature in the journal, some of it by other hands, but the lion’s share from Traubel’s own pen. He did observe some diplomatic restraint, however, by delaying his debut until July 1892, when Whitman was safely in the ground. “Near You Is Sorrow and Plaint,” at twelve lines of two intricately rhymed stanzas, is among the shortest of the countless poems he installed regularly in his pages, almost always immediately after the Collect. His gift for prosaic titles was perfect: “Let me be cheerful for you all” or “The bread line trails its clouded way into my sunny heart” or “I guess it’s all about love,” for example. There is perhaps flavor enough of the Traubel style in just these first five lines of a poem titled “Backgrounds” that appeared in the March 1895 Conservator (6:6):

Loving the light, loving the darkness,
Sailing with equal content the flush and lapse of the tide,
Challenger of fate, penetrater of disguises, mate of those who scorn and those who receive,
Friendliest my weapons, my disposition measured equably to every event,
I, questioning, pass my way.

When Traubel’s Conservator poetry was published in a volume titled Optimos in 1911, it was modestly praised by the like-minded but mostly deplored. The poet pushed the volume hard (the September 1911 issue was almost entirely devoted to it), but, as usual, he gave the rejecters plenty of space, too. Readers learned from H. L. Mencken that “all of the faults of the master appear in the disciple. There is the same maudlin affection for the hewer of wood and the drawer of water, the same frenzy of repeating banal ideas ad nauseum, the same inability to distinguish between a poem and a stump speech” (22:87). A few months later, Traubel unflinchingly reprinted this poisoned squib about Optimos from the Los Angeles Times: “After due consideration — after much research and careful comparison, the statement must be recorded: Horace Traubel writes some of the worst poetry ever penned by a human being” (22:145). A Traubel poem, plus the often lengthy Collect that invariably preceded it, meant a large initial dose of Traubel for readers of the Conservator. In the March 1902 issue, as a typical example, the two elements ran to more than four pages. Clearly, Traubel and his journal came to be perceived by the public as nearly one and the same.

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A table of contents appeared for the first time in the April 1892 issue, along with the only “Supplemental” in Conservator history, a four-page insert titled “At the Graveside of Walt Whitman,” which covered the previous month’s obsequies. In this issue, as well, was an early example of a “blow-in” ad for the journal, the only one I encountered in the full Conservator run. Among the items in its pitch for subscribers: “It is not a speculative enterprise. It does not suffer from any plan for profits or for salaries to proprietors or editors.”

The next issue in May brought the rather belated first signed article by a woman, “The Coldness of Ethical Society Meetings,” by Marian Mead. (About this time, coincidentally, the Conservator’s attentions to Ethical Culture began their decline to nothing.) Women writers and poets, as well as the cause of women’s participation in culture, politics, and society, became a part of the Conservator agenda, a “tinge” Whitman would certainly have favored. “Men restrict the life of women,” wrote Traubel in his August 1892 Collect. “They do so in the interest of the children. But how can you expect a slave mother to produce or raise free children?” (3:41).

Whether the 1893 campaign for 600 new subscribers was successful or not, the first issue of volume 4 constituted the one major expansion during the Conservator’s three decades. It doubled in size to sixteen pages, and the price rose to one dollar per year and ten cents a single copy. The Collect reiterated that the journal would not be an “organ” of any one society, creed, or sect: “The Conservator is not interested in one note, but in the whole song” (4:2). Clearly proud of his larger format, Traubel ended a separate article, “Walt Whitman the Comrade,” in the poet’s high bardic style: “We go hence, sworn to a love that mixes sea and land and heart and immortality in one purpose — the carol, the chant, the duo of life and death” (4:8).

In the September 1893 issue another standard feature was inaugurated: the appearance, in italics above the table of contents and the Collect, of substantial extracts, ranging from 150 to about 400 words. These oversized epigraphs, mostly nonfiction, were chosen from an extraordinary range of favored authors, usually from books recently received. Traubel’s choices were distinctly avant-garde and included the likes of Baudelaire, Edward Carpenter, Eugene Debs, the antimonopolist Henry Lloyd, Jack London, William Morris, Nietzsche, Rodin, Bertrand Russell, Margaret Sanger, Shaw, Turgenev, Wagner, and Wilde, to name some of them. Hugo, Maeterlinck, Tolstoy, and Zola were chosen particularly often. Whitman served Traubel’s purposes several times. Sharing the honor of authoring the first of these extracts, fittingly, were two from the Whitman inner circle, Daniel Brinton and Robert Ingersoll. Only the author’s name followed the extract; rarely was the title of the quoted work specified.

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In August 1898 the name of Traubel’s wife, Anne Montgomerie, appeared for the first time on the page one masthead as “Associate” to the editor, a post she would retain through the final issue. She is doubtless the “A. M.” who a year later wrote, on the appearance of “The Yellow Wall Paper” by Charlotte Perkins Stetson, that the story “seems at first to be only a skit — a gentle, mildly amusing joke. But it grows and increases with a perfect crescendo of horror” (10:60). Later, she finely summarized of Shaw, “I believe the bottom feeling of many of Shaw’s critics is the same as my own. He does not confuse mentality with emotion” (10:150). Emile G. Traubel, Horace’s older brother, appeared briefly as “Advertising Manager” in September 1899. Finally, in September 1906 Traubel’s fourteen-year-old daughter, Gertrude, appeared on the masthead as “Associate Worker,” a title she, too, held until the valedictory issue.

There were, then, several Traubels behind the scenes and one Traubel overwhelmingly present in the journal. After twenty years, this family operation was well settled in a format that would change scarcely at all in its final decade: a front-page extract; a Collect usually starting on page one and running for two pages and more; from one to three or four poems, the longest almost always by Traubel; two or three longer articles; As to Books and Writers, with most of its notices — in later years often all of them — signed “T.”; and three pages of ads, many for books in which Traubel had a hand as editor or literary coexecutor of Whitman.

When the June 1919 issue carried a notice to subscribers explaining the combining of four issues because of the editor’s “serious physical disabilities,” I suspect no one imagined the Conservator would outlast him. Indeed, the combined issue that was promised never appeared. The timing could not have been more perfect. Before himself heading to Harleigh Cemetery, Horace Traubel and the Conservator were able to conclude their lives just months after the celebration, the previous May 31, of the 1919 Whitman centennial.

It is important, before turning to the Whitman trove, to offer an impression of the editorial voice of the Conservator — a voice from Whitman’s grave in countless respects — and to sketch its remarkably forward-thinking worldview. In the earliest years, Traubel’s Collect consisted of a potpourri of brief comments on multiple topics. Word of a peace conference in London might be followed by notice of a new book or a play, like Hamlin Garland’s politically alert Under the Wheels or Ibsen’s Ghosts. Correspondence might be acknowledged — “A wise man has written me” — or pronouncements made with a tinge of Whitman: “The positive forces of individuality shock the sloth of the commonplace” (1:65). In the June 1890 issue, inevitably, Whitman’s birthday

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dinner is mentioned, causing Traubel to utter the first of countless optimistic assessments of Whitman’s future reputation: “These later days, the harsher storm passed, have by various indications marked what the world’s future attitude towards Walt Whitman will be” (1:25).

Traubel once described William Herndon, the Lincoln friend and controversial revealer of Lincoln’s private life, as a “hot in the collar man” (13), and that applies aptly to the warmth often generated in the Collect, though the deadpan Traubel style usually avoids the appearance of palpable steam. Here is a sarcastic swipe at the local pruderies of Philadelphia: “The five hundred Christian women to whom the nude subjects at the Academy exhibition were an offense must not read the ruin of children upon the virile manifestations of nature or the pure sentiment of art, but upon the subtle play of ascetic forces, through generations of Christian and other culture, which has thrown the body into disrespect, and robed in filth that which of right should stand clean and free in any eye or thought” (2:1). Here is a typical anticlerical bolt of lightning about sermons he finds reprinted in newspapers: “I rarely find . . . the first word of serious import, arrowed as if from first hands to a high mark. Whispered gossipries, thundered platitudes, the halt, lame and blind theologies: these be the current, formal, institutional gods” (2:50). No wonder, then, that in 1910 the New York Evening Sun would repine about a “surfeit of Mr. Traubel and his countless headshakings” in “his highly emotional journal” (21:54).

As the Conservator moved into its second decade, Traubel’s Collects became less scattershot and more focused on single subjects or issues; they also became longer. His next-to-last one, given in full below (380), can stand for all of them. Their tone, always leaning to the wry and unillusioned, became somewhat more acerbic, homespun, and now and then even curmudgeonly. In February 1901, for example, Traubel began, “My grocer is the only sane man I know. He it is who can quote mackerel and sugar without mixing his data and tell you who holds the whip handle in the market. He deals in no margins, no guesses, no dreamland expectations. He climbs no ladders, excursions noway into space” (11:177). Traubel’s style of expression, which began simply as very compact and shorn of all rhetorical decoration, latterly became almost eccentri- cally clipped. Here is a sample (29:23):

My laugh is a challenge. It will meet iniquity on any terms. It will confute that iniquity. It will send that iniquity home sore, if not dead. The wrong-doers do not always understand. My laugh is uncompromising. It demands its due. It laughs out for the last round. I laugh private property to scorn.

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I laugh the millionaires out of their increments. I laugh the workmen out of their lethargy. My laugh will outlast all economic tyranny and social stratagem. The bullet might be a mercy. But my laugh will try you to the end.  

Putting perhaps the best face on such an odd manner, the *Passaic (N.J.) Daily News* called Traubel “a master of the concrete, the abrupt, the multum in parvo in style” (26: 102). As the paragraph above suggests, Whitman’s own penchant for the rhetorical devices of anaphora (multiple repetition of an initial word or a phrase) and the catalog has much to answer for here.

Assessing the house style of the *Conservator* in 1905, the *Philadelphia Press* summed up perceptively, “Mr. Traubel . . . has cultivated a style all his own. It might be described as breathless. All the sentences are short and choppy. He does not hesitate to use a single word as a sentence. The result is usually explosive. Mr. Traubel would probably say with a smile that that is exactly his aim. He is endeavoring to explode a bombshell of ideas, and he adopts a style which he believes conforms to the ordinary man’s method of speech when he is in earnest. Really it is all a trick of punctuation” (16: 77). Eugene Debs, in 1916, put the best face on Traubel’s style in the St. Louis *National Rip-Saw*: “Traubel writes in a telling, epigrammatic fashion all his own. His short sentences are all charged with lightning” (377).

But damnation was as fair game as praise in the *Conservator*. Whitman’s standard public reaction to criticism was unflappable poise: “I . . . have adjusted myself for opposition, denunciation,” he told Traubel (W2: 154). Traubel followed the same strategy. Indeed, he seemed almost to relish the more piquant reactions to his style. In 1901 he reprinted a letter that had appeared in the *Boston Evening Transcript*, in which the writer states that Traubel is “a follower of Walt Whitman and an exponent of the mystical. Much that he utters is common sense, something is rhapsody, and something more is the merest verbiage.” The writer then quotes the opening of one of the Collects and comments, “And so on. Have my readers had enough of Horace Traubel?” (367). The editor was happy to let his readers decide. In 1905 Ernest Crosby, one of the *Conservator*’s most frequent contributors, concocted a friendly parody by way of reviewing Traubel’s first poetry collection, *Chants Communal* (16: 29). Here is a sample that also happens to convey much of Traubel’s editorial agenda as well:

Traubel is Traubel. Traubel is nobody else. Not you. Not me. Not him. Not her. Only Traubel. That is enough. Possibly more than enough. What is the traubel with Traubel? He chants. He communes. Hence *Chants Communal* (Small, Maynard & Co., Boston, Mass. $1; postage 10 cents). He pits his little *Chants* against all the big Shants. The Shant of State. The Shant of State. The Shant of
Landlord. Of Lendlord. Of Mrs. Grundy. Of me. Of you. Traubel’s Chant is a Shall. Traubel is Traubel. *Chants Communal* are Traubel. Traubel chants. Traubel trebles and warbles. Traubel sings a lone song. Traubel plays a lone hand. Traubel takes your best and goes it alone. Traubel is a monopolist in chants. Traubel needs competition. Compete! Learn to chant like Traubel. Let Traubel learn what it feels like to listen to his chants. Rub it in. Hard. Let us all learn to warble and traubel.8

While the form of Traubel’s Collects may have been hard for some to digest, their content and fighting spirit must have been thoroughly appealing to readers possessed of liberal, radical, or reformist values and avant-garde artistic tastes. Veins of a quite un-Quakerly gift for derision and sarcasm run through some of them. Traubel was icily unmoved by the capitalist baron Andrew Carnegie’s large donation of funds for public libraries: “The law of the Carnegie has been the law of exploitation. . . . When you know how much hell comes from an unearned dollar both to the man to whom it belongs and the man who gets it you will not say ‘Carnegie’ and think you have said ‘Justice’” (12:3). News of Cecil Rhodes’s announcement of his scholarship program reaped even more withering scorn: “Rhodes dropt over Africa like a shadow. He sowed hatred. His successors will reap what he sowed. The soil will give back his venomous impulse. . . . A few tawdry scholarships. So many dead Boers. So many dead Englishmen. So many dead ideals” (7).

In the end, the image left by a perusal of the entire *Conservator* run is inevitably reminiscent of Whitman in the summer of 1855: a voice crying in an American political and cultural wilderness. Calling Traubel an “enthusiastic communist” and an enemy of “the monopolists and millionaires of America,” an observer of his career from Germany summed up accurately in 1910: “Traubel knows that he is preaching for the most part to deaf ears, but in spite of that he goes on speaking and will not let himself be cowed. Never does he despair of the ultimate victory of justice. The storm must come. His eager fancy says to him that it has come already. . . . Out of the crisis foreseen thus mankind passes unharmed and covered with glory. . . . The lost paradise which holds no priests nor slaves, no Rockefeller and no Lazarus, has risen anew” (21:135).

As suggested earlier, if there is a motto poem in the Whitman canon for such an editor and such a journal, it is surely “Beginners.” The Whitmaniana presented here includes numerous editorials, reviews, and fillers that seek to argue and prove “How all times mischoose the objects of their adulation and reward.” Following here is a mere sampling of the reformist company Walt kept in the pages of the *Conservator*; it is no adventure to say the poet would

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have found himself perfectly comfortable with most all of these fellow travelers. It is also bracing — and a good reason to admire Traubel’s editorial instincts — that so many of the causes Traubel championed in his pages laid out battle lines for reform that would be fought throughout the twentieth century. Indeed, numerous articles address issues still hotly debated now, in twenty-first-century America.

A bemusing example of Traubel’s prescience, given recent studies that show rising obesity in America, is an article, “On Dietetic Frugality,” that appeared in the August 1890 issue, in which its author, Charles Wieland, wrote (without knowing it) of the present era of “fast food”: “If we eat without thought, only by habit, dragged along by the example of our table-fellows, we become voracious, even if we are temperate by nature; and the fact is that most people eat about twice as much as they ought to eat” (1:44). Four years later a voice was raised for a sensible alternative, with M. L. Holbrook, in “Some Thoughts on Vegetarianism,” concluding, “The ethical gain, if the vegetarians can establish their doctrine, would be very great” (5:151). The issue was revisited in 1903 in William Kennedy’s essay, “Is Flesh Eating a Passing Barbarism?” (13:168).

Another issue of perennial timeliness was raised in the December 1890 Conservator by W. I. Nichols in his essay “Patriotism in a Republic,” a brilliant attack on the two-party political system that, if anything, gains force today. “Conceive the indignity which is imposed upon a self-respecting, public-spirited man, who, elected to a position which he knows to be of responsibility to the whole country, is expected to be false to this higher obligation, and to be subservient to the maintenance of a party machine!” Nichols adds, “Political parties are to be thought of as means, not as ends. They are not in themselves fit objects for loyalty” (1:74). Also of overwhelming present concern is the role of the United States in the world beyond its shores; it is addressed by Traubel in January 1901 — when the wielder of the “big stick” entered the White House — in a poem titled “The Giant America.” In the poem he warns, “Beware, O giant adventurer!” (11:164).

An 1894 article by M. M. Mangasarian raised the still-vexing question, What justifies capital punishment? Though the author comes down in its favor (“perpetual imprisonment is impracticable”), he does make this ahead-of-its-time suggestion: “What we need is to do away with everything that makes the carrying out of the death sentence shocking and barbaric. . . . Death could be administered in some pleasantly flavored liquid, in an hermetically sealed chamber” (5:5). The Conservator — no surprise — was quick to extract stanzas from Oscar Wilde’s “Ballad of Reading Gaol” in 1898 (9:33) and to praise a Wilde letter to an editor on the barbarism of English prisons: “It is eloquent, frank,
just. He sees in English prisons propagators of disease and insanity” (9:18).
The next year Traubel reprinted a Robert Ingersoll article from the New York Journal that condemned Governor Theodore Roosevelt for refusing to commute a woman’s death sentence by electrocution: “Capital punishment does not prevent murder,” he argued. “Any punishment that degrades the one punished must necessarily degrade the one inflicting the punishment” (10:9).

The currently very live issue of assisted suicide was also addressed in the Conservator. In his article “Suicide,” Robert Ingersoll argued, “Under many circumstances a man has the right to kill himself.” And for the terminally ill, he adds, “A little morphine would give him sleep. . . . After all, death is not so terrible as joyless life” (5:84). The subject of ethical treatment of animals and animals’ rights, which has recently evoked vigorous debate and guerrilla attacks, also drew Traubel’s attention. An article on vivisection in March 1893 was not for or against but urged a rational consideration of the subject (4:6). In 1895 he favorably reviewed Henry S. Salt’s book, Animals’ Rights Considered in Relation to Social Progress, praising Salt for extending the “law of equal freedom” to the animal kingdom. “The book is uncompromising and is exquisitely tinged with an Oriental reverence,” Traubel concludes (5:173). Eleven years later a new edition was also applauded (17:13).

Whitman would certainly have seconded the Conservator’s relentless partisanship for equal rights for women. Traubel summed up this plank in his journal’s platform when he wrote in 1892, “to reform society to a juster acknowledgment of woman: what does it include? Her enfranchisement — not as a voter (the paltriest of the debts due her), but as an individual. It asserts and defends her integrity as a unit in the social compact — as a figure one, to be counted forevermore in the list of spiritual populations” (3:5). In the second issue, a Chicagoan, William Salter, who would end up writing more than fifty articles for Traubel, included this among the five “reforms good men might agree about”: “Give up the notion of woman’s existing for man’s sake” (1:10).

That the politics of the *Conservator* were fundamentally socialist-leaning-toward-communist can easily be demonstrated simply by sampling the titles of books noticed in its pages, especially after the turn of the century: Harry Call’s *The Coming Revolution*, Wilde’s *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, Jack London’s *War of the Classes*, Carpenter’s *Towards Democracy*, John Spargo’s *The Substance of Socialism*, Emma Goldman’s *Anarchism and Other Essays*, John Clark’s *The Control of Trusts*, Brooks Adams’s *The Theory of Social Revolution*, William Summer’s *Earth-Hunger and Other Essays*, Walter Lippmann’s *A Preface to Politics*, Rabindranath Tagore’s *Nationalism*, and Bertrand Russell’s *Political Ideals and Why Men Fight*.

Humane treatment of the laboring classes was central to the *Conservator* agenda. In 1893 W. L. Sheldon wrote in “The Coming Labor Movement” that “we may look forward eagerly to the triumph of an eight-hour day over the civilized and the uncivilized world,” adding, “It strikes me that there is need of an organization of the laboring classes, irrespective of race, color, condition, and whatever be their wages” (4:22). Other articles in this vein over the years include “How to Aid the Unemployed” (4:181) and “Art and the Workingman” (20:39). Among the titles of dozens of books in this field covered by Traubel were *Boycotts and the Labor Struggle*, *Out of Work: A Study of Unemployment*, *Municipal Ownership*, *Synicalism*, *Industrial Unions and Socialism*, and *Financing the Wage-earner’s Family*.

On the subjects of sexuality and sex education, hotly contested in America beginning in the 1830s, the *Conservator* was bound to be (with a few intriguing exceptions discussed on 223–224, 321–322) courageously unbashful. In April 1894 one of the journal’s most prolific contributors, Isaac Hull Platt, made an early appearance with a review of Edward Carpenter’s *Sex-Love: and Its Place in a Free Society*. Platt welcomed the book, observing that “Carpenter has handled a difficult subject bravely, wisely and well, and deserves the thanks of all right-minded people” (325). Several months later, Platt also welcomed Carpenter’s *Marriage in a Free Society*, drawing the obvious *Leaves* connection: “All three of these essays are permeated with the same optimism and the same recognition of the purity of the human body and of sex, which so boldly distinguishes the thought of Walt Whitman” (5:139).

The April 1905 issue carried a notice of Dora Forster’s *Sex Radicalism*, in which Traubel asserted that “sex is the ABC of life. Corrupt sex and life is rotten at the root. That is why it is of the first importance to know about sex. To try every sex negation by every sex affirmation” (330). The following August, the *Conservator* came to the defense of the radical Chicago editor Moses Harman — *Lucifer* was the apt title of his journal — who was having his own
trouble with the postal authorities. “Harman knows that we come physically into this world by the gateway of sex,” Traubel editorialized. “He wants to keep that gateway open and wants to maintain it pure” (16:89). Traubel assiduously favored free-thinking books in his pages, among them Havelock Ellis’s *Man and Woman: A Study of Human Secondary Sexual Character* (1894).

Glimpses of future concerns about ethical treatment of one’s fellows and of the earth itself also figure in the *Conservator*. When calls began to be heard in London for the return to corporal punishment, Shaw ridiculed the notion in a letter to the *Humanitarian League*; under the title “Flagellomania,” Traubel reprinted the letter (10:41). Plans for Walt’s burial house in Harleigh notwithstanding, an article titled “Ethical and Sanitary Considerations on Cremation” appeared before the poet’s death; in it C. N. Peirce argued that the “graveyard, or ‘god’s acre,’ is not in harmony with the times. . . . Sanitary and moral, as well as economic, considerations demand its abandonment and removal” (2:59).

Let us turn now from political and social issues to the arts. The turn-of-the-century generation’s great “beginners” in the arts and in literature were lavished attention in the *Conservator*. In music, it found the still revolutionary prose and music of Wagner to its taste. Wagner extracts appeared a few times on the front page, and in 1895 Traubel reprinted a *Revue des Deux Mondes* review of a Paris *Tannhäuser* with this opening sentence: “Wagner is the first of composers to dare unchain the human breast for us” (6:99). There is also a breath of the next century’s invention of ethnomusicology in an article in October 1897 titled “Negro Songs in America” (8:116). William Kennedy’s 1900 article, “Impressionism and Finish in Painting” (11:88), must have been among the earliest American essays on the new movement in art.

The *Conservator*’s theatrical tastes were predictably cutting edge. In 1892 an article by W. L. Sheldon on the plays of Ibsen lauded the playwright for “endeavoring to show in what direction the new human society is drifting” (3:59). Years later, applauding *Ghosts*, Traubel wrote, “Ibsen pays a high compliment to his audiences. He assumes that they are willing to witness even if they do not approve an analysis. His hand is rough but it is never at your throat” (10:50). In 1907 Ibsen’s experimental *Peer Gynt* received a rave notice (18:88). Not only Shaw’s polemics but also his plays suited the pages of the *Conservator*. When *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant* appeared in 1906, the editor summed up: “I am glad to see him no matter how often he comes or what hour he chooses to call” (17:45). He was notably happy when Shaw’s “Preface for Politicians” from *John Bull’s Other Island* appeared (19:27). The first U.S. performances of Frank Wedekind’s daring plays were also greeted with
pleasure, notably *Earth Spirit* (25:188). When Max Nordau — whose *Degeneration* was so acidly despised in the *Conservator* — made bold to write a play (*A Question of Honor*), “T.” went on the warpath: “Anti-Semitism is cheap, cowardly and barbarous” (18:93).

Only socially conscientious novelists needed to apply for praise in the journal. Upton Sinclair’s rousing attacks, of course, were noticed, among them *The Jungle* (17:11) and *The Metropolis*: “The substance of Sinclair is right. He has fixed the social uppercrust in a just perspective” (19:45). Likewise, H. G. Wells came under occasional highly approving scrutiny, notably when *First and Last Things* appeared in 1908 (19:106). John Galsworthy’s novels eviscerating English class and capitalist structures naturally won raves. Of *The Man of Property*, Traubel gleefully wrote, “Galsworthy goes round with a knife, cuts society wide open, and says: See what a mess it is. So it is: an infernal useless unmitigated mess. Galsworthy is no pruner of dead trees. He is a root digger” (19:123).

In “Life and Labor as Viewed by Zola,” Traubel decried the “Puritan spirit abroad in our time which lacks in balance and fails in any delicate discrimination between good and bad. Zola, especially in America, has suffered from this partial judgment” (4:94). Years later he exulted, “Zola triumphant. Zola master of a state. Zola with a ‘great power’ in the dust at his feet, Zola, who demonstrates anew the supremacy of the spirit” (10:51). Aubrey Beardsley’s drawings and his outrageous *Under the Hill* sorely tested Traubel’s open-mindedness, but in the end he exercised his live-and-let-live philosophy: “Beardsley deserves a place of his own. He lived life on his own terms. Not on the art terms. On the man terms” (14:156). Traubel probably honored no author beside Whitman more than Tolstoy, whose words he extracted nearly forty times. In a 1901 Collect, Traubel summed up, “Tolstoi would bring back the state to man. Which is to destroy the state” (12:34).

If one were to single out a presiding soul mate, one dyed-in-the-wool beginner who was prominently featured in the *Conservator*, it would have to be the English poet, mystic, reformer, socialist, philosopher, and homosexual apologist Edward Carpenter (1844–1929). Traubel employed passages of his on the front page two dozen times, and he was featured, one way or another, in about thirty *Conservator* articles, with scarcely a discouraging word. In his 1901 review of a book on Carpenter, Traubel ended with this characteristically homespun paean: “The modern spirit articulates its best consciousness through Carpenter. With Carpenter, or any one his like, at home, the house is safe” (12:173). One of Traubel’s most potent performances is his short review of Carpenter’s *Ioläus: An Anthology of Friendship* (1902), an anthology on same-sex relationships drawn from anthropology, history, and literature (328).
Perhaps no *Conservator* article better captures its incitements to reform, its concentration on building the momentum for change, than Traubel’s “The Ethical Reasons for Social Reform,” which appeared in the March 1892 issue (it has pride of first place in this volume). Here Traubel takes aim at “the potential conservative forces of our time — the powers that be — the bayonets and guns of dominating institutions” (4) and also makes the thoroughly Whitmanesque point that “parlors tend to make cowards of us all” (5). Consult the second paragraph for a handy summary — in the mode of *Democratic Vistas* — of the focus the *Conservator* would follow for thirty years.10

As one begins to grasp the breadth of Traubel’s radical views and his eagerness to disseminate them and see them effectuated, the great difference between Whitman and Traubel becomes apparent. On the one hand is the famously “loafing,” wandering, and procrastinating bard, who kept his *Long Islander* afloat a matter of mere months. On the other hand is the practical and “lethally industrious” Traubel, as the *Phoenix* called him in 1916 (27:70). William English Walling managed to capture this difference in his *Whitman and Traubel* of 1916, and Traubel seemed to approve of the gist, for he reprinted this précis of the Walling book, which had appeared in the *Philadelphia Evening Ledger*: “Walling sums up Walt Whitman as an individualist; Horace Traubel he terms a humanist. Whitman is the idealist; Traubel the realist. Whitman was the prophet of democracy; Traubel is its philosopher. Whitman believed in the ‘idea’ of the bard; Traubel stands for the social movement of the age” (27:39). The bias in favor of political activism is underscored by the man Traubel chose to review *Whitman and Traubel* in the *Conservator*, Eugene Debs (307).

If one man could be said to capture the vigorous, get-up-and-go reformist politics of the *Conservator*, Henry Demarest Lloyd is the likeliest candidate. He certainly figures often in its pages; few writers were chosen by Traubel for his front-page extracts more often than Lloyd, who became, as a writer for the *Chicago Tribune*, what some have called America’s first investigative journalist. Lloyd became a major voice in the muckraking antimonopoly trenches, notably with his 1894 study of Standard Oil, *Wealth against Commonwealth*. Traubel was a gifted eulogist, and none of the many he composed is more impressive than the salute evoked by a 1912 biography of Lloyd (14). Traubel opens his paean in his usual close-cropped style, but, also as usual, he builds a real head of heartfelt steam: “Lloyd was one of the men who always went ahead. Who wasn’t afraid of contingencies. Who took his life in his hands every day. Who didn’t want to see what anyone else was doing. Who chose on his own hook. Who lived from the inside out rather than from the outside in. . . . He put on no flourishes. He made use of no oratorical flubdub. This

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The irony of this description is obvious: it could apply either to the “prophetic” bard Whitman or to the “philosophic” socialist Traubel himself.\footnote{11}

Now, it would be most unfair to leave the impression that the 
Conservator
never invited its readers to crack a smile. There can be no gainsaying that Traubel was a relentless believer in the true importance of being earnest. The great injustices and inequities of the world cannot otherwise be vanquished, he obviously felt. But while the 
Conservator
primarily radiates a sense of what Whitman would have dubbed “seriosity,” there is some fun to be had in its pages — and, of course, in many entries in the present collection.

I think, for example, of the amusing memoir of William Cauldwell that tells of Whitman’s emotional tenure at the 
Daily Aurora
in the 1840s or of Traubel’s wry and self-revealing “reviews” of biographies of himself (17, 33). Of David Karsner’s not-yet-published manuscript, the biographee observed in 1918, “I know a lot about Traubel’s personal history. When he was a young fellow he was a hot advocate of Whitmanism and went for Walt’s enemies baldheaded. Walt himself many times cautioned Traubel to ‘hold his horses,’ as he used to say. . . But Traubel was impetuous in his fiery propaganda” (33). His one modest proposal to young Karsner was to “take the manuscript home and substitute some more plausible name for Traubel’s throughout.” After doing that, the author will “find a publisher for it without delay” (34).

After cutting and opening the March 1897 issue for the first time, the most amusing erratum slip of my experience fell into my lap, to wit:

To the Reader:

On page 5, line 30,

\textit{hoforificabilitudinitatibus}

should be

\textit{honorificabilitudinitatibus}

Thereby hangs a tale. The debate as to whether Bacon or Shakespeare wrote the plays — opened now and then at Mickle Street (Walt wrote an unpublished poem about it, “Shakspere-Bacon’s Cipher”; see \textit{W1: 180}) — often spilled into the 
Conservator
. This, supposedly the longest word there is, appears in \textit{Love’s Labour’s Lost}, and Baconians — Isaac Platt being a fervent one — argued that it was a cipher or anagram for \textit{Hi ludi, tuiti sibi, Fr. Bacono nati}, Latin for “These plays, produced by Francis Bacon {are} entrusted to themselves.” See Ernest Crosby’s witty send-up, “The Whitman Cipher,” a ripe parody of all authorship wars (263).
More bittersweet is an essay by a librarian in New Zealand, William Trimble, that describes his heroic but harrowing efforts to make a Whitman concordance (20 : 133). After publishing his short *Walt Whitman and Leaves of Grass: An Introduction* in 1905 — Traubel’s review: “Trimble is a skillful and gracious introducer. . . . New Zealand votes Walt Whitman”— Trimble decided “in a moment of rashness and enthusiasm” to embark with his wife on this massive project. Trimble’s story of his various setbacks is delicious. But finally, “At 11:30 A.M. on the 27th of January, 1907, our work was completed.” Trimble ends his tale: “I am in a position to warn enthusiasts that a concordance can only be compiled with the expenditure of infinite patience and a great deal of time.” Sadly, publication plans collapsed, and Whitmanites had to wait half a century for Edwin Eby’s concordance to appear.

Many moments that evoke laughter are too fleeting to be amenable to this anthology’s format. But I cannot resist pointing to what must be the politest letter terminating a subscription ever penned. It was from a Quaker woman and was one of five such disheartening letters Traubel decided to publish early in the journal’s second year (2 : 19): “I see that thee does not give much notice in thy journal to the Society of Friends, whereof thee knows I am a member, and thee cannot expect me to pay my money to support a paper which ignores that body of Christians, especially the more liberal branch. Therefore, the spirit moves me to part from thee, and let thee go thy own way, hoping that one day the inward light will come to thee and guide thee in better paths. But peace be unto thee, for no doubt thee thinks thee means well.”

Then there is the 1906 article that asks, “Have the martians human form?” (telescopes were then being trained on the planet). In it William Kennedy exclaims, “How Roosevelt would make the dirt fly in his big ditch if he could import a few hundred projectiles full of big canal-diggers from Mars!” (17 : 120). Or the *New York Evening Globe* wondering, presciently, in 1914, “Are the ‘movies’ and the talking machines to be our future historians and biographers? Is Prescott’s occupation gone, and also Boswell’s? In the future shall we listen for the master’s voice and the roar of battle at the big end of the funnel, and shall we retrace the steps of genius and follow the march of armies on a cinematographic reel for the price of ten cents, shall we say, instead of ten dollars?” (25 : 73; be it sadly noted that the cost of seeing the latest bio-pic in Mannahatta is indeed now more than $10).

The funny bone is tickled most often in the material collected here where the cultural wars in which both Whitman and Traubel engaged are the hottest. There is much humor in the printerial fisticuffs in the items gathered in
“The Whitman Wars,” notably in the way Traubel sank his incisors in the ankle of Walt’s first biographer, Bliss Perry. Also entertaining are several of Traubel’s reviews of editions or books on Whitman that displeased him. The squibs and fillers gathered in part VII offer many hijinks, too, ranging from the Christian Register’s worry over Walt’s “mass of trash,” to Joaquin Miller’s memory of Walt’s pencil flourishing atop a Fifth Avenue omnibus (“I reckon Walt Whitman could write anywhere”), to Ernest Crosby’s feisty suggestion that, instead of installing Walt in a planned Hall of Fame up in the Bronx, the true homage would be, of course, a ferry boat named after him. I should add that, in the spirit of fun, I was sorely tempted to title the collection “The Traubel with Whitman,” not least because the trouble-Traubel wordplay appears more than once in the Conservator.

Finally, it would be a shame to turn our attention back to the Whitmaniana in the Conservator before offering just a few glimpses backstage at Traubel the man, the inhabitant of a chaotic editorial office and the convivial denizen, with his pals, at a bohemian Philadelphia eatery. The glimpses are, except for the last, all from the Conservator, for as the journal reached middle age, Traubel became sufficiently comfortable in the foreground to print on a regular basis items about himself and his works.

One of the most charming is a short piece by J. William Lloyd titled “This Traubel,” which appeared in 1905 (16 : 138; it was reprinted from the Massachusetts Ariel). “I wonder if any of my readers ever saw,” Lloyd begins, “walking the streets of Philadelphia or Camden, a short, stout, handsome man, with a leonine face, full lips, prominent eyes, and a slouch hat pulled carelessly over a bushy head of beautiful white hair, and knew that that man was Horace Traubel, the Boswell of Whitman and editor of the Conservator? A remarkable little man, this Traubel, yet a great one; a fire of sweet, great-hearted love for man, a boiling pot of words.” After calling Traubel “a poet, a prophet, a communist-socialist, and an incomparable editor of literary gems,” however, Lloyd goes on to roast the Traubel style: “He has a style that breaks me all up. I love the man, but all that is within me kicks at the style. My soul balks like a bad horse at the hurdle.” Lloyd confesses his Ariel article was born of a need to respond to a “lovingly inscribed copy” of Traubel’s first collection of poetry, Chants Communal. The “substance,” Lloyd says, is splendid, the act of “perusal” painful! “God knows I take no joy in ‘roasting,’ but when I am asked to criticize I am a witness in the box, under oath for the whole truth.”

Much later, in 1916, some passages from the Karsner biography-in-progress appeared (27 : 118). One offers a droll description of Traubel’s two-room editorial office at 1631 Chestnut Street (a site now occupied by one of...
Philadelphia’s tallest skyscrapers). The scene is pleasantly reminiscent of the paper maelstrom upstairs at Mickle Street:

In the back room there are cases of type from which he has not infrequently himself set up the *Conservator* in older times. Even today he makes up the forms of his paper with his own hands. There are huge, dust-covered piles and boxes of back numbers of his publication, while stacks of faded newspapers and magazines, together with a rather confused accumulation of printed matter are strewn over the floor. But it is in the front room that the chief interest lies. Numerous boxes, improvised bookcases, cover four walls and contain thousands of volumes on every conceivable subject under the sun. Hundreds of these are old imprints which any modern collector would consider a gold mine, while hundreds of others are autographed copies from authors. Such spaces of the walls as are not hidden by shelves of books are covered with old portraits, original paintings, drawings and cartoons and photographs of authors, poets, friends and children. On a dusty couch, and on equally dusty chairs, are Traubel’s hats and coats and trousers and so forth, and more books and newspapers and magazines. In the center of the floor stands a desk groaning under the weight of a literary miscellany. Lined all about this desk are more boxes containing clippings and cartoons, collected the last twenty-five years. In another corner by the window is Traubel’s work desk. Such a deluge of matter! Every pigeonhole and drawer aches with its compact treasure. I have often heard Traubel complain of the condition of his studio. When visitors come he will apologetically clear off a chair, place its load onto another, and explain that he will some day clean house, a promise he has no intention of fulfilling. Fastidious women especially are horrified at the apparent chaos of Traubel’s quarters, but they come again just the same.

When Karsner turns to speak of Traubel’s sociable habits, he makes the obvious Whitman connection: “New York had its famous oldtime Bohemia in Pfaff’s where freethinkers and writers gathered, but Philadelphia, no less, has its Knight’s (now McCook’s) where college professors, newspaper men, professional singers and tutors, and businessmen who are rigid in trade but free in spirit, gather at [the waiter] Tom’s table to ostensibly eat their meals but to especially tear the world into shreds and then place it safely back upon its axis.” Traubel was apparently the life of the party for lunches and dinners at Knight’s, which was located on Market Street near Nineteenth Street. “Unconsciously, Traubel’s personality is the motor that drives the current of free expression through the minds of these men and women.” Another small, but perhaps

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telling, “camerado” touch is Karsner’s remark that Tom “cuts a big figure on that spot. He is not only the waiter but the friend of Traubel, whom he has been familiar with at one restaurant or another in Philadelphia for thirty years.” A real flavor of the contents of the Conservator is caught by Karsner as he describes the scene at Tom and Horace’s table: “These diners and debaters run up and down the scale of human thought. Baseball, pugilism, Christian Science, Anarchism, Socialism, vaccination, literature, drama, art, labor and capital, prohibition and woman suffrage and many other questions are approved and disapproved in this peace and war of words.” Karsner notes that the group calls itself the Pepperpot Club, the title drawn from “one of Knight’s delectable dishes,” and then he adds wittily, “when Traubel is absent from these spontaneous sessions they are conducted as orderly as a meeting of a Ladies’ Aid Society. That does not mean that he does all the talking, but the hub is missing from the wheel.”

In a reminiscence composed in 1958, the Conservator’s longtime printer, William T. Innes III, recalled of Traubel, “We had occasional spats, but for the most part I avoided them, for he was a brilliant antagonist, especially if angry.” Then Innes goes on in Karsner’s warm vein about Horace’s conviviality: “I must add that while his attitude toward life was a deeply serious one, he had a wonderful sparkling sense of humor, available in an instant, always ready with a quip or a play on words. This, plus a mellow feeling toward life, made him a welcome guest or a member of any circle.”

With the Conservator’s publishing history and its boldly forward-thinking animating principles in view, we can turn now to the trove of Whitman materials that appeared in its pages. The extent of this omnium-gatherum can be suggested by drawing attention to a valuable adjunct to the study of the run that is also in the Huntington Library collection, the microform copy of the Complete Index to the Conservator Published by Horace Traubel, from March 1890 to June 1919 (Toronto, 1920). This index, typed and seventy-eight pages long, was prepared by Henry S. Saunders (1864–1951), who also produced the satirical anthology Parodies on Walt Whitman (1923). Only seven signed and numbered copies of the index were made (the Huntington photocopy is of number 2). Under “Whitman” in this index are eight columns of entries — nearly 400 of them. This, of course, does not account for the plethora of passing references to Whitman in articles on other subjects; nor does the index notice the appearance of Whitman in small filler items and squibs that went unindexed. These eight index columns, alone, might qualify Traubel for the title of “high priest of Whitman propaganda” that Tom Harned gave him.
Given his rabid anticlerical views, however, Traubel might have preferred “background man” to “high priest” — as one of his most heartfelt and revealing *Conservator* articles eloquently suggests. In February 1911 appeared a “T.” review of Joseph Newton's *Lincoln and Herndon* (11). William Henry Herndon (1818–1891) was Lincoln's early friend, his law partner in Springfield, the manager of his campaign against Stephen Douglas, and, much later, in 1889, the author, with Jesse Weik, of a three-volume biography, *Herndon's Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life*. Herndon's revelations of Lincoln's personal life proved highly controversial, humanizing the already mythic colossus.14 “Lincoln seems to violate a law of perspective,” Traubel wrote in the review. “The nearer you get to him the more colossal he is.” This book, however, drew an extraordinary homage to Herndon, in which Traubel played with the notion that “nobody is self-made. There are curious hands, mysterious souls, pushing him on, steadying him to his course.” Further on: “There are background men and foreground men. There is a root to everything somewhere. . . . The trouble with the common judgment is that it too often forgets the background men. It sees only the men out in the light.” And so Traubel praises Herndon: “Herndon was part of Lincoln's sky. The background people are often the best. Often the most devoted. Often the surest. They are more inevitably on the spot in pinches.”

The massive irony of these admiring words, of course, is that they apply perfectly to the superbly foregrounded Whitman and the willingly backgrounded Traubel. What Traubel says of Herndon — “He was always back of Lincoln. Always at his side. Always in his heart.” — exactly captures the essence of his own relationship with Whitman, for whom he was (the phrasing couldn't be more apt) “invariably on the spot in pinches.” Traubel makes it clear that he is alive to the parallel: “Herndon wrote about Lincoln. He wrote the truth. He did for Lincoln what Walt Whitman alive told me to do about Walt Whitman. He included all the hells and darns. . . . We see how Herndon was justified. How the resenters have disappeared. How Herndon has remained.”

And how Horace Traubel has himself remained — this most devoted and “lethally” industrious of Whitman's background men during his last years alive and the first generation after his death. In his review, Traubel acknowledged William O'Connor as the Herndon of Whitman's career: “In his later days Walt Whitman was always saying to me: ‘*Leaves of Grass* as it is would never have existed but for William O'Connor.’ I think Lincoln must be saying from the shades . . . : ‘The Emancipation Proclamation as it is would never have existed but for William Herndon.’” With the death of O'Connor in 1889, the mantle of chief background man for Whitman fell by rights to Traubel. Just the year earlier began the furious note taking that would result in *With Walt Whitman*.
in Camden, and later were to come several Whitman publishing projects supervised by Traubel, along with the other two executors, Bucke and Harned.

And then there is the Conservator. With it, Traubel stepped into the foreground to do what he could to transform Whitman’s tenuous foothold on fame into an immortal certainty. Traubel, in 1909, exulted that “Ibsen is no longer looked upon as a maybe or a perhaps. He is no longer a speculation. He is a fact” (20:77). All the Whitmaniana in the Conservator was aimed, finally, at encouraging the world to come to the same conclusion about Walt. Of course, not all of it could be (or deserved to be) included in this volume. My guess is that the “cream” here represents perhaps between a fifth and a fourth of all the Whitman material through which I have sifted. A few words about what has been included and excluded are in order.

The various species of Whitman-related articles offered in this anthology are discussed in more detail in the headnote for each part of the anthology. Part I puts the background man, for once, at center stage. It consists entirely of essays written by Traubel and is intended to provide a substantial introduction to the editorial mind (and pen) at work. These pieces, as well as all the others by Traubel in the following pages, in a sense constitute the probing intellectual biography of the man that Mildred Bain, Walling, and Karsner never quite managed to deliver in their modest, largely adulatory lives of Traubel. Part II demonstrates how fortunate we are that the Conservator was on hand to give its readers the chance to read memoirs from the steadily vanishing circle of Whitman intimates and acquaintances.

Part III offers a small sampling from the almost 150 essays on Whitman that appeared in the Conservator, some by his nearest and dearest (Bucke and Burroughs, Sanborn and Harned), others by the journal’s most prolific and skilled contributors (Crosby and Platt). The essays chosen address literary and cultural issues that resonated then and still do now. Considering that its editor was a custodian of Whitman’s literary estate, the Conservator naturally paid close attention to the physical form and contents of editions of his poetry and conversations. Under the title “Publisherial,” part IV gathers many illuminating items on Whitman bibliography. Part V, perhaps the most rambunctious in the volume, presents numerous battles — some deadly serious, others seriocomic — as partisans and antagonists attempted to fan or snuff the Whitman flame.

“Sex, sex, sex: sex is the root of all,” a fiery Whitman told Traubel in early 1889 (W3:452). For that obvious reason, but also because the cultural wars over sex (particularly adhesive sex) are raging intensely today, part VI gathers together several items under the title “Sex Morality,” a phrase taken from a book on sex education that Traubel reviewed in 1912. These essays, mostly
by Traubel himself, also throw retrospective light on the sexual agenda embedded in *Leaves of Grass*, whose “most sensitive spot,” Walt famously told Horace, was sex (W1:51). As already noted, part VII offers a serendipitous sampling of the shorter Whitmanic “gems” that Traubel used to plug empty spaces in his layout. Part VIII consists of the entire issue of May 1919 that exulted in Whitman’s centennial, a perfect climax to this volume, as it was to the lives of the *Conservator* and its editor.

Whitman materials not included here fall into several categories. For example, the reach of the *Conservator* was international, and it regularly reported on Whitman’s fortunes overseas in articles with titles such as “Walt Whitman in Germany” (14:167), “Walt Whitman in France” (20:165), and “Whitman’s Influence in the Orient” (30:55). Substantially superceded by the research of later scholars, these articles are not included.

I have also largely passed over a group of essays that fall into the category of “Whitman studies.” The dawn of serious scholarship on the poet is clearly visible in the *Conservator*’s pages: source and “influence” studies, variorum manuscript studies, biographical studies, a few prosodic analyses, as well as frequent assessments of Whitman’s current reception. Later twentieth-century scholarship has in nearly every case superceded the work of these scholarly pioneers, but a few of the more probing ones deserve at least a brief mention here.

For example, the rich tradition of Whitman manuscript studies could be said to begin with Tom Harned’s creating from the poet’s letters a narrative of the 1881 Boston debacle for a two-part 1895 article, “Walt Whitman and His Boston Publishers” (6:150). Months later, William Kennedy’s fascinating “A Peep into Walt Whitman’s Manuscripts” appeared (7:53). In it he recalls that, as Whitman told “a young Philadelphia friend,” his habit was “to jot down on scraps of paper ideas as they came to him, consigning them to an envelope until the subject was mature.” Then Kennedy reveals his possession of several examples of the “envelope method,” among them “six drafts of what is now the permanent motto of *Leaves of Grass*—‘Come, said my Soul.’” “Some ten years ago,” Kennedy writes, “I called Walt Whitman’s attention to the fact that this early stanza had been allowed to drop out of his later editions. He not only restored it, but made it the mystic inscription over the portal of his temple of song.” Kennedy then proceeds to compare the drafts.

Dr. Bucke displayed his strong scholarly bent with several “Notes on the Text of *Leaves of Grass*.” Among them is a careful examination of the literary source for the sea-battle passage in “Song of Myself” (7:40), a consideration of Whitman’s mastery of French (7:59), a comparison of two versions of

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“Grand Is the Unseen” (7:171), and a reproduction, with commentary, of the famous Whitman manuscript in which the poet brainstormed possible poem and sequence titles (7:185).

Challenged to find twelve passages in Emerson and Whitman that “show close parallelism of thought and language,” Kennedy brought forth in 1897 his article “Identities of Thought and Phrase in Emerson and Whitman” (8:88). It offers thirty pairs of passages with strikingly similar language — a tour de force of close comparative reading. Kennedy notes that most of the parallels are from the 1856 and 1860 editions, when Emerson was still Whitman’s “master,” and then expresses satisfaction that the poet quickly got over “this measles of discipleship.”

On one occasion Traubel’s Boston friend Percival Wiksell helped the Conservator rescue an early Whitman poem from oblivion. In a note prefixed to a reprint of “The Punishment of Pride” in the February 1902 issue, Traubel tells of once visiting an old man named Roe on Long Island, who tried to recall some verses Whitman made him memorize “in the period of his pedagogy.” Roe, alas, could “do more than haphazard through one verse of the poem” (12:189). Thanks to the discovery by Wiksell of an 1841 volume of the New York New World, Traubel said he was now certain he could “verify the disconnected and rather dubious quotation” of Roe. He notes that the New World poem was signed “W. Whitman” and reproduces it “without eliminations or changes.”

I have also excluded the first full-dress academic essay permitted into the Conservator, Fred Newton Scott’s “A Note on Walt Whitman’s Prosody” (21:70). Reprinted “with some alterations” from the Journal of English and Germanic Philology (which is easily accessible), it required three installments. Scott’s essay is perhaps the first to offer critical jargon for Whitman study: “In order to distinguish . . . types of rhythm I have applied to the rhythm of verse the term nutation, to the rhythm of prose the term motation.” In the essay’s most appealing paragraph, however, Scott lets his hair down with a quite unprofessorial and elaborate simile drawn, as Oscar Wilde’s Rev. Canon Chasuble would say, from Terpsichore:

When I read Whitman’s poetry . . . a fantastic myth passes through my mind. I seem to see in Whitman some giant-limbed old heathen god who has descended to the earth fain to take part in the dance of mortals. He begins by practicing the waltz, but soon tires of the mincing steps and quick gyrations. He wants a larger, freer movement. He then tries marching and running and leaping, only to find that what his soul hungers for is the undulating movement of the waltz. So, devising a kind of colossal minuet, he moves through
it with a grandiose, galumphing majesty peculiar to himself, flinging his
great limbs all abroad and shedding ambrosia from his flying locks, yet with
all his abandon keeping time to the music, and in all the seeming wayward-
ness of his saltations preserving the law and pattern of the dance.

This passage, surely, got Newton into the *Conservator*.15

It is fitting that the last scholarly essay in the *Conservator* was by Emory
Holloway, for, following upon Oscar Triggs, he was to become the next in a
line of “indefatigables” whose extensive and wide-ranging research was to
serve Whitman throughout the twentieth century (Gay Wilson Allen, Roger
Asselineau, Edwin Haviland Miller, Floyd Stovall, and, currently, Ed Folsom
would follow him). Holloway’s modest 1918 piece, “Whitman’s First Free
Verse” (29:74), reprinted from the *Nation*, establishes “Wounded in the
House of Friends” as the first poem in what would become his free-verse
*Leaves* style. In the course of his article, Holloway makes it clear he’s on an
executor’s good side when he gives a tantalizing hint of manuscript discoveries
awaiting future Whitman scholars: “A still more illuminating record of the de-
velopment of the famous first edition of *Leaves of Grass* is to be found in a note-
book of Whitman’s (now before me), dated 1847, the year before the poet’s well
known but much overrated visit to New Orleans.” Holloway adds, “This ma-
terial, together with a large collection of poems and prose pieces, all of which
have until now remained uncollected . . . will before long be published in a
form that will make them accessible to students of this poet, whose real devel-
opment has been so obscure to critic and biographer alike.”

A third category of Whitman material almost entirely allowed to stay on the
periodicals shelf is, to be blunt, the gush. When John Johnston sent his pam-
phlet *Notes of a Visit to Walt Whitman* to Camden in 1890, the flattered poet
wrote him a letter saying, “I endorse all,” but he added in parentheses, “barring
their fearfully eulogistic tinge” (quoted 28:109). The fearful tinge of adulation,
albeit genuine and heartfelt, makes heavy going of many a Whitman-related ar-
ticle or filler. A whiff of this overripe partisanship can be found in A. B. Drake’s
short piece, “Symmetry in *Leaves of Grass*” (9:2): “In Whitman, for the first
time in the history of the Anglo Saxon race, have been found in right propor-
tion and union, strength and delicacy, mass and grace — ‘things vastest and
things the most minute,’ things close to the common eye and things drawn for
one instant into the remotest ether of human ken.” Horace recalled that Walt
“was far more afraid of being made too much of than of being made too little of”
and warned Horace “to beware of the gushers” (23). Just a few charming eru-
ptions of gush will be encountered in the following pages.

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Finally, also missing are all but two of about two dozen *Conservator* poems, mostly of doggerel ilk, apostrophizing or eulogizing Whitman. Bemusingly, perhaps half a dozen are in the sonnet form that Whitman held in such low esteem. Several poems are by members of Whitman’s circle (John Clifford and Francis Williams) or regular contributors (William Struthers, with five poems, Mildred Bain, and Laurens Maynard). The two poems included here, from the Whitman centennial issue, are steeped in sentiment and must have seemed very poignant to loyal *Conservator* subscribers. Mildred Bain’s “A Lighthouse by the Sea” (385), picturing Walt as a lighthouse beaming “through the darkness in our being,” may get low marks for originality, but the cliché rings agreeably if one recalls the sea imagery in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” and “Proud Music of the Storm.” Bain’s conclusion certainly captures accurately the growing worldwide embrace of Whitman: “Your flame is tended by increasing numberless hands: / Hands that are white and yellow and black.”

Traubel’s much longer “As I Sit at Karsners’ Front Window” (386) is in his usual wry, prosaic style, yet still delivers a punch worthy of this climactic valedictory moment for his “highly emotional journal.” Composed at his biographer’s Manhattan apartment window, which looked out on the East River just south of the Brooklyn Bridge, the poem allows Traubel to reminisce with Walt about his “young days” and his missions to New York at Walt’s behest. He smiles sarcastically at the poet’s reception circa 1919 by “the solons and the priests” and the “literary sheriffs, police, hangmen.” Then the author of *Optimōs* looks to the future with his usual “crazy cheer” and finds himself “carried away in a flood of assurances, past the East River, past all seas and hills: / Yes, dear Walt, with you still sowing seed: sowing, sowing.” Toward the end, Traubel, seriously ill with heart disease and just months from death, writes:

Walt, there’s no end to the life before me:
And, Walt, there’s no end to your life:
You’d say: “Tell me about the East River: tell me about Brooklyn”:
And I’d do my best: but you knew all about it before:
But you said: “It’s like being told somebody loves you: you never get tired of it”:
That gave me wings . . .

Expressed in the preceding pages, I trust, are reasons enough for viewing the *Conservator* as an extraordinary resource for understanding Whitman, his oeuvre, his dissemination, and his impact during the fin de siècle and early twentieth century. By way of conclusion, two further general points can be made to encourage greater familiarity with Traubel’s journal.
The first reason to pay attention to the Conservator now is that the vistas American democracy affords in the twenty-first century have scarcely changed at all, in any fundamental way, from the vistas Whitman ridiculed in 1871 — or those that elicited all of Traubel’s “headshakings” after 1892. The conversations in WWC make it clear that Walt never departed from his coruscating views on American society and its leaders.17 Whitman’s instinct, however, was always to vocalize but to do so from his bardic easy chair. Traubel shared most all of Whitman’s views, but his instinct was to get up from his easy chair and go into the forum — to communicate in a more practical, systematic, and, yes, mundane fashion for real reform. As previously noted, his classic statement of purpose is in his battle-cry essay, “The Ethical Reasons for Social Reform.”

“To re-form, to re-make, is of course serious business,” Traubel wrote there. “It means new combinations, fresh inspirations, new heights scaled, broader moral altitudes attained. It means to re-mould the social and political world to the likeness of justice. It demands devotion, skill, thought, dream, sacrifice, courage, daring.” Unwittingly — or perhaps utterly wittingly? — Traubel was here capturing the thrust of the next twenty-eight years of Conservators.

What often makes the journal uncannily pertinent reading now is that Traubel’s antagonists are still on the American scene. He identified them in that same 1892 article: “the social ‘one true god,’ that is, political and religious and capitalistic orthodoxy” and the “conservative forces of our time — the powers that be . . . dominating institutions.” Thus the engagements of Traubel and his freelancers with the enemy often seem as if they could have been, with minor revision, an op-ed piece in yesterday’s paper. (This impression is aided by the fact that specific government figures and actions or contemporary news events — the sinking of the Titanic is an exception — are very rarely mentioned in the pages of the Conservator.)

Just a few examples will convey the remarkable way the journal speaks to present American vistas. In 1895, for instance, Traubel reviews a book titled The Coming Revolution, which included chapters titled “The Fruits of Privilege,” “The Institution of Inheritance,” “Corporate Abuse,” and “The Plunder of Trade” (6:77). Countless news stories today fall into these categories: the revolution, many would now agree, is still a-coming. In “Whitman’s Example in American Society” (176), Frank Sanborn derides “a snobbish and wholly un-American pursuit and enjoyment of material wealth” in “our dwindling and Mammon-worshiping age.” “We have reached a dismal, idiotic period,” he also complains, as many now do, “when our politics are base, and the organs of opinion in press and pulpit are disgracefully servile.” Also au courant is Sanborn’s disgust over his nation’s budding imperialism: “Washington,
where Whitman so nobly illustrated in act the doctrines of his life, has sunk into an Oriental submission to fictitious Destiny worse than that which pollutes Constantinople.” In 1906 Traubel printed Tom Harned’s “Walt Whitman in the Present Crisis of our Democracy” (183). Harned condemns the “present laws of distribution” and insists that “our democracy has reached a crisis. We are in the midst of this crisis. Some of us, most of us, do not realize it. Each of us — the poor, the humble, the lowly, the outcast, the oppressed, the criminal — is divinely here and entitled to a square deal. No preferences which wealth and power so tyrannically bestow, but equal justice to all — that is the problem of civilization.” America has not yet solved the problem; many think it is getting far worse. Rewriting Democratic Vistas today, one suspects, Whitman would be even angrier than he was in the early 1880s.

The first modern worldwide conflagration of militarism deeply distressed the Conservator, and numerous passages from the war years of 1914–1918 cause one to think of the current so-called World War III, the one against terrorism, or about the increasingly “imperial” behavior of the United States on the world stage. In the July 1915 issue, Traubel quoted a long passage from Nietzsche that, redolent of the atmosphere in the Middle East, begins, “No Government will nowadays admit that it maintains an army in order to satisfy occasionally a passion for conquest. The army is said to serve only defensive purposes.” In an attitude of wary fear, Nietzsche continues, “all States face each other today. They presuppose evil intentions on their neighbor’s part and good intentions on their own. This hypothesis, however, is an inhuman notion, as bad as, and worse than, war. Nay, at bottom it is a challenge and motive to war” (375).

Pacifism was a strong part of the Conservator’s personality. In a Whitman Fellowship address titled “Whitman and the America of Today” (28 : 86), Harvey Brown addresses the tensions between war and democratic ideals that are currently of such serious concern: “The problem which is most fundamental now is to give new birth to the soul of America in terms of a world environment. We must answer the question as to whether America can fulfill the deep promise of her soul, give expression to her pioneer promise and her democratic consciousness, in the world war and in the world peace which shall come.”

Perhaps the most striking and eloquent example of the déjà vu frisson one sometimes feels reading the Conservator is one of the very few full-dress articles by the editor himself. Titled “Walt Whitman’s America” (25), it appeared in the November 1917 issue. Several comments and recollections are timely: “I have even seen [Whitman] angry, or at least annoyed, by the display of cheap Americanism. It was never his notion that we should lord it over the world.” Or this Whitman remark: “I’d like to see America, my America, go
round the globe, gloriously, not with armies but in sacrificing humanisms: I’ve no enthusiasm about any other America.” At the article’s end, Traubel, as so often, lets Walt speak for himself, touching first on their essentially differing styles of advocacy and then offering his vision of America:

I don’t quite appreciate your methods — not quite: perhaps I misunderstand them: but go on, go on, go on: God bless you: our end is the same: we want a real America, not a counterfeit America: we want it by any name it may come: we want the fact: America is civilization: civilization — the equality of all, all, worst, best, middling: a mixture of hell and heaven: civilization, democracy: not great wealth set off against great poverty: no, not that, God help us: but great wealth as the benefaction of all: a world without thrones, without exclusions.

Earlier in the essay, Traubel recalls Whitman getting agitated at the assumption he believed his America was an accomplished fact: “My America is still all in the making: it’s a promise, a possible something: it’s to come: it’s by no means here.” It is quite safe to assume both Whitman and Traubel would pronounce exactly the same judgment today.

The second reason for Whitman lovers and Whitman scholars to attend to the Conservator is perhaps now obvious. It is that the range of materials is enormous: readers who bring particular personal interests, aims, or methodologies with them are very likely to find much of interest in its pages. This was certainly so in my case. As the author of a biography titled Walt Whitman: A Gay Life, I was fascinated to come upon many articles that pertain to the politics of sexual identity. Some were very fleeting: a reprinted snippet from the Independent apropos the trial of Wilde with this sentence: “The worship of Whitman’s vulgar animalism has found its logical conclusion” (6: 22); the several bits of praise for the magazine Poet-lore, whose proprietors were a lesbian couple; the little poem “To Walt Whitman” that ends, “I see your youthened form, and the wonder of your vast blue eyes, /And have your hand, Walt Whitman. / The whispering calamus rejoices in the wind” (9: 25); or the Stoddard letter mentioned earlier. Then there are the larger pieces, often requiring some reading between the lines, like the responses to Nordau, Wiksell’s frater ave atque vale to Doyle, and Traubel’s feisty reviews of Edward Carpenter’s books.

As a biographer also of Oscar Wilde, I was fascinated to follow Traubel’s several tussles with his works and books about him. Wilde’s brilliant subversions were clearly to Traubel’s liking. On Wilde’s death in 1900, the front-page extract conflated three passages from “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” one of which could easily have been a Conservator (or Leaves) motto: “The

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true artist is the man who believes absolutely in himself, because he is absolutely himself... Progress is the realization of Utopias” (11:155). When Traubel reviewed Wilde’s essay collection *Intentions* (8), he argued eloquently for Wilde’s legacy: “There was a decade during which Wilde was popularly looked upon as a fool. There was a decade in which he was popularly looked upon as a degenerate. A third decade has ensued. A decade in which Wilde is likely to be looked upon as a man who has something to say to at least several generations of men.” Now “the world is losing its puritanic accent. It is wisely gathering up the fragments of this man and putting them together.”

Traubel’s feelings about Wilde’s creative works, however, were vexed, as they were for Whitman himself (see W2:192). Traubel finally refused to countenance Wilde’s effemleness, snobbish connoisseurship, and deficit of, well, earnestness. His last extended efforts to express his mixed feelings about Wilde constitute two of the most perceptive, if distinctly harsh, short assessments of Wilde I have ever read. The first (24:137) was occasioned by Arthur Ransome’s *Oscar Wilde* and includes many aperçus, among them: “When he got into jail he got very near the truth. It singed him. It stung him. It flayed him. But he never arrived. He woke some. Or half woke. But his faculty refused to accommodate itself to the democratic intimations. It didn’t know how to fall in line. It demanded an isolated paradise. His genius was not fraternal.” The second meditation was evoked by Frank Harris’s *Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confession* (29:25), and it contains this plausible — and devastating — charge: “Wilde’s Socialism was not a desire to give the people the chance to be beautiful but the instinct to relieve himself from having to live in a world in which he was forced to contemplate ugliness.” Traubel was a very perceptive man.

Finally, among cherished personal trouvailles are many views that gratifyingly chimed with my own. My conviction about the philosophical likenesses binding Whitman and Nietzsche (and Wilde), for instance, was pleasantly seconded in a “Recent Study” squib taken from the *International Journal of Ethics*: “Nietzsche’s style is uncouth and noisy, and wantonly paradoxical. There is, moreover... a megalomaniacal conceit that outdoes Walt Whitman — who is, by the way, a curious pendant and counterpart to Nietzsche” (10:9). As one whose biography of Whitman was faulted by some for too much authorial presence, I was much amused by the fun Traubel had with a book lacking precisely this quality. T. T. Munger’s *Essays for the Day*, he wrote, “is about to become a Munger book and does not become a Munger book. I would like to save Munger. He is a good traveler while he lasts. But his wind is so short. Few men who write books get acquainted with themselves in their own books. They are not in their books. They hide behind their books.

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A real book has a man in it” (15:93). On the other hand, I was not amused to come upon Traubel complaining about a book with too much biographer: “Binns comes on the scene too often with his own explanations. Whitman disappears and Binns performs. . . . If I am painting a portrait I have no business to get my phiz so mixed up with the phiz of my sitter that when the job is done nobody can tell whose portrait, his or mine, is on the canvas” (274).

Since I share Tom Harned’s high opinion of the third edition of Leaves, I applauded his admonition that “every student of Whitman should own a copy if possible” (6:151). And as one whose early love of opera strangely evanesced in later years (as did Whitman’s), I was bemused to come upon this Traubel admission, in a notice on Henry Krehbiel’s new Book of Operas: “I was inebriated with operas at the start. Today I suffer opera nausea. . . . I could hear the whole opera instrumental and vocal but to be compelled to see it turns my stomach” (20:109).

In 1914 Traubel self-servingly quoted the London Nation as saying of WWC that “no definitive life of Whitman can ever be written till this series of records is complete” (25:29). This was amiable to read, since my biography was in fact the first to appear after the publication of volumes eight and nine in 1996. As the editor of a “selected” Whitman who has ignored the famous “deathbed” stricture, I welcomed the very small hint that I was “right” to do so when I read this Traubel sentence: “Whitman had a right to his own Leaves of Grass even if he was wrong” (28:92). Likewise, being on record as filled with “dubiosity” about Whitman’s habits of revision, I was pleased to find William Kennedy to be among the first, in 1896, to point out an excellent example of Walt’s revision being “a weakening rather than a strengthening process” (7:53). He finds that the “magnificent burst of naive and spontaneous self-assertion” in the first section of “Proto-Leaf” in the 1860 edition gives way later to “the mild respectability of prose.” In the September 1897 issue, Traubel ran, as a brief filler, an even more radical assertion by Philip Hale from the Boston Journal: “To the true lover of Whitman the only edition of Leaves of Grass is the first. . . . The deep-laid, substantial, ever-abiding foundations of Whitman’s philosophy are to be seen at a glance” (8:107).

Finally, I will note one item in Traubel’s “emotional” journal that packed a specially emotional punch for me. When I reached the November 1916 Conservator, my eye was caught by the name Walta Whitman. My interest was piqued because during research on Traubel several years ago for my Whitman biography, I came upon the charming fact that Karsner was such an enthusiastic admirer of the poet that he and his wife named their daughter Walta Whitman Karsner. Early in 2000, through serendipitous e-mail communication with an admirer of

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the biography, I learned that Walta Whitman Karsner Ross was still alive and residing in a health-care facility in Oakland, California. My informant offered to arrange a meeting. Recalling from his Karsner poem that Traubel was a presence in the family, I decided to pay Walta a visit in hope of garnering a child’s recollection of Traubel (but mainly, in truth, simply to make a tenuous connection with the man, his daughter, Gertrude, having died in 1983). On August 15, 2000, the visit took place. A witty and ebullient woman, Walta’s memory was, alas, not up to the specific questions I came armed with. A short time after, I received an e-mail from my friend saying that Walta had died the previous day, November 7.

Three years later, I was nearing the end of my trek through the Conservator run and came upon Karsner’s biographical excerpt of 1916 (27:118), from which I have already quoted. You can imagine the lump that formed in my throat when I read the following passage on Traubel’s habits of correspondence:

Little children who do not yet know the alphabet receive his notes of endearment and picture postal cards. Here is what he wrote on his birthday to our little baby girl, Walta Whitman, who was then barely a month old:

New York, December 19, 1914

Dear Walta, old lady:
I’m fifty-six years young today. And you’re no years old today. Across all discrepancies of age and experience I pass myself to you and you pass yourself to me. Who can penetrate the mystery which has brought you here for me or kept me here for you?

Horace Traubel

Choosing a gem from the Conservator with which to conclude is difficult. One is tempted, first of all, by several passages from Traubel’s marvelous Whitman centennial Collect (380), with its admonition, “This is a good time for Whitmanites to confess. Not to the authority of a priest. Not even to the authority of Walt. But to the impressive authority of the self.” Or perhaps its challenging interrogation: “Is he a volume of poem words or the flaming tissue of a challenging reform? Has he become a book of reference or a way of life?” Or its list of those with whom Walt was intimate: “With the forgotten. With those who if they’re ever named at all are only included apologetically. The and-so-forths. The oh-yeses that we never invite in unless someone shames us into hospitality.”

Another choice candidate for a coda might be something from Helen Keller’s homage to Traubel — “chiefest” of Whitman’s lovers, she called him — at the last Whitman dinner of his life (401). “The truth is, I love Horace Traubel,”
Keller said, “To discuss him in this public fashion is, therefore, somewhat embarrassing, especially as this is our first meeting.” Or perhaps the haunting, elegiac end of the last paragraph on the last page of the last Conservator, by Percival Wiksell: “Confucius said: ‘I would that all men might write a book about God. Time so spent would be profitable to the soul.’ Leaves of Grass — biography of a man — is the biography of God” (403).

But instead I will draw attention to an article in the August 1918 Conservator on the twenty-fifth annual meeting of the International Walt Whitman Fellowship (311). Highlights of the convivial day-long May 31st affair at the Hotel Brevoort in Greenwich Village, Fred Hier reported, included a paper in which “Whitman was psychoanalyzed”: “Thomas Libbin, who has spent years in Europe with Jung and other authorities, got after the Good Gray Poet’s complex and chawed it all to pieces.” A dinner in the evening with sixty-five attendees began with “a discussion of Whitman’s sex poems and their great and important liberalizing effect.” How times had changed! After that came “the miracle” of Helen Keller speaking “like a spirit from another planet about Walt Whitman. On her beautiful face shone out the lights and fires from her hidden world.” Later, a resolution was passed “to consider the manner and means of having a bust of Walt placed somewhere appropriate in his beloved Mannahatta.”

The event, however, was bittersweet. On the bitter note, Traubel, evidently not well enough to travel from Camden due to a stroke, was not present: “Each person as he came to the door . . . cast an anxious glance inside and asked: ‘Where is Horace?’ It was something unheard of for him to be absent.” Hier adds, however, “I think in a strange way his inability to come intensified the love that all have for him.” On the sweet note, Hier begins his report with this assertion: “Ninety-nine years after Walt’s birth, the feeling about him and the interest in him is {sic} stronger and more significant than ever. . . . {T}he interpretations were as many as the speakers, and on account of the bow-string tension of war the feeling ran unusually high. Walt’s universality, many-sidedness and timelessness were thus unconsciously demonstrated by each speaker’s insistence on his own essential view.”

Horace Traubel and the Conservator can take much credit for fostering this healthy and multifarious appreciation of Whitman and his works. The prophecy in an 1894 poem, “Succession” (5:57), evoked by memories of sitting at Whitman’s deathbed, was now fulfilled:

O my great dead!
You had not gone, you had stayed — in my heart, in my veins,

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Reaching through me, through others through me, through all at last, our brothers,
A hand to the future.

The “telegram of love and greeting, signed by forty persons,” that was sent to Traubel from the Hotel Brevoort to Camden was thus extraordinarily well deserved.

Exactly two months before he died, Walt Whitman rose suddenly from his pillow and, according to Traubel, spoke solemnly of Leaves, “as if with the air of a charge and farewell” (W9:389). As the eloquent outburst subsided, the old man added, “I loved it! — oh! so much! — and now an end! But the book, Horace: there are things resting on you, too, to fulfill — many things — many — many. Keep a firm hand — stand on your own feet. Long have I kept my road — made my road: long, long! Now I am at bay — the last mile is driven: but the book — the book is safe!”

The charge was brilliantly fulfilled. By the time the last mile was driven on Traubel’s own self-made road, Leaves of Grass was not merely “safe” but well on its way to becoming impregnable — the supreme document of American poetry. The Conservator played a crucial role in this achievement.

NOTES

2. The run to which I refer is in the Henry E. Huntington Library at San Marino, California. It is not only complete, but it also was unread in the half century it has resided there. The pages of almost every issue had to be cut. The library’s accession card reveals that the run came as a gift in November 1954 from “Charles E. Fienberg [sic] in memory of Horace & Anne Montgomerie Traubel.” It is plausible to assume that the great Detroit Whitman collector came to possess the set through Traubel’s daughter, Gertrude, whom he encouraged and assisted in her editorial efforts to follow up, decades later, with the fourth volume of WWC that appeared in 1953 (she edited the fifth volume, which appeared in 1964). She and Feinberg are listed by the Library of Congress as having made joint gifts to its massive Whitman holdings over many years, beginning in 1955. Another likely hint of the source of the run appears in the March 1916 Conservator, which offered prepublication passages from David Karsner’s 1919 biography of Traubel. Here Karsner recorded a visit to the journal’s editorial office, where “huge, dust-covered piles and boxes of back numbers of his publication” were visible (27:119; see the full quotation on xxxix). It is appealing to assume the Huntington run was once a part of this Chestnut Street chaos. I have also consulted a complete
run of the *Conservator* in the Alexander Library at Rutgers University, also a gift from the Feinberg Foundation “in memory of Horace and Anne Montgomerie Traubel.” The locations of other complete, or nearly complete, runs are given in appendix 2.

3. Dr. William Innes Homer, one of Gertrude Traubel’s three executors and the grandson of the *Conservator*’s longtime printer, William T. Innes III, notes this pronunciation in “Gertrude Traubel: Keeper of the Flame” *Mickle Street Review* 16 (online).

4. For this information and a few other details elsewhere, I am drawing from an unpublished eighteen-page typescript introduction (circa 1980) for a proposed retrospective on the *Conservator* that never came to fruition. The author, Joseph Niver Sr., was a close friend of Gertrude Traubel’s (and an executor for her). A copy of the introduction was kindly provided to me by Dr. Homer. The introduction is also in Niver’s papers, deposited in the Special Collections of the University of Iowa Library. Niver’s manuscript notably quotes from the text of an unpublished speech (now in the Library of Congress) given by Gertrude Traubel at a 1929 memorial to her father, in which Anne Traubel is given credit for suggesting the WWC project: “At the time Papa was courting my mother he used to call on her in the evenings after spending some time with Whitman. . . . ‘Why don’t you keep a record of these days with Walt instead of that list of books?’ For Papa had a little red notebook that he carried in his pocket in which he listed the books and the magazine and newspaper articles he had read. Mother recognized the value of the reading but knew that the listing was pale and lifeless compared to the vivid hours with Whitman. And soon Papa began to spend the first half-hour of his visits to ‘pretty Annie Montgomerie’ in what they soon called ‘the Whitman diary’” (6–7).

5. Niver, 9–10; William Innes Homer, “The Rose Valley Press and *The Artsman*,” *Mickle Street Review* 16 (online). There is no record of a print shop at Rose Valley. Homer communicates to me that Gertrude Traubel said to him “your grandfather was the Rose Valley Press.”

6. Niver, 12. Homer also reports that David Karsner, a Traubel friend and his biographer, said the press run never exceeded 1,000.

7. In September 1918 the *Conservator* reprinted a highly approving article from a March 1918 issue of the *New York Call* titled “Horace Traubel” (29:23); its author, Fred Hier, chose this paragraph as exemplary of Traubel’s style.

8. We learn from a short item in the April 1906 issue that William E. Smith thought the Traubel style was “like a coat of soot on a window” (17:25). The New Zealander W. H. Trimble responded to this attack, but it must be said his praise is a trifle backhanded: “Of course Traubel has the faults of his qualities; so has every writer. Whitman at his best is like the ocean; at his worst is like a puddle. Traubel at his best is like a piece of heavy ordnance; at his worst he is like a pop-gun.”

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9. The subject is visited eloquently in “Whitman’s Example in American Society” (176) and “Whitman and the America of Today” (28:86).

10. With the Conservator in its tenth year, a doubtless gratified Traubel reprinted a flattering précis in the same vein, which had appeared in the Knoxville (Tenn.) Journal and Tribune (see 368). At Traubel’s death, St. George Burgoyne summed up, in a short article, “Walt Whitman’s Apostle,” in the Canadian Bookman (Oct. 1919, 38–40): “He devoted his life to the welfare of the multitude crowded out from the rights and privileges which the upper crust of Society enjoys.” He also recalled Traubel as “a picturesque figure, of medium height, with clear blue eyes, and a wealth of snow-white hair . . . a trifle reminiscent of Mark Twain.” A valuable description of the integration of Whitman into the early twentieth-century liberal-socialist movement is Bryan K. Garman, “‘Heroic Spiritual Grandfather’: Whitman, Sexuality, and the American Left, 1890–1940,” American Quarterly 52 (2000): 90–126.

11. Traubel also contributed regularly to the Worker, a socialist weekly in New York City. An excellent thumbnail sketch of Traubel’s life and politics, at about midrun for the Conservator, is an article from the Munich Post by O. E. Lessing. It was translated and ran in the August and September issues of 1906 as “Horace Traubel: An American Communist” (17:88). Traubel must have assented to Lessing’s view that “the official press . . . treats him disparagingly as a mere imitator, a sort of tail to the Whitman kite.” Lessing also writes, “Whitman had Socialist ideas without being in fact a Socialist. . . . Whitman did not believe in the agrarian socialism of Henry George. Traubel goes farther, to logical communism.”

Another important summary of Traubel’s worldview (too long to be included here) deserves note because it comes near the end of the run, in 1918. Fred Hier’s “Horace Traubel” (29:23; reprinted from the New York Call of March 10, 1918) begins by associating Whitman, Carpenter, and Traubel: “They are supremely the democratic force in literature.” But, he adds, Traubel “is more virile than Carpenter and more dynamic than Whitman. To miss him puts you behind the earth-move of men. You might as well have missed Isaiah in 725 B.C.” Hier ends with a rousing coda: “Traubel sounds the alarm to those asleep or indifferent. A brazen alarm to those who fatten on other men’s blood” and then concludes by quoting from the end of the last poem in Optimos. The last two lines are pure Whitman: “Something is moving us on: I feel it: its arms embrace me: its kiss is on my lips. / Something is moving us on: we all seem to be moving together.”

12. Dr. Homer kindly provided me a photocopy of his grandfather’s holograph manuscript titled “My Contact with Horace Traubel,” in his possession. Hier, in a later essay on Traubel (29:23; see note 7), clearly agrees that Traubel was exhilarating company: “To know Traubel . . . you must see him with a gathering of his friends. Then the great nervous energy has free sway. He is incomparable across a table and

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can outlast anybody. . . . He has an anecdote or a joke out of life for every occasion. He never goes fetching and borrowing for his stories, lugging them in for effect. They grow into his discourse out of his experience. Now his eyes flash open in anger at some untruth or injustice; now they close in laughter to squeeze out the tears of enjoyment. He laughs much, but never with his voice, always with his eyes and shoulders.”

13. Saunders’s index is also helpful in gauging the importance of particular contributors and in following the activities of writers with special Whitman connections. Among the most frequently bylined were Isaac H. Platt and Ernest Crosby, with more than 60 entries each; William Salter has 52 entries; William Struthers, 39; the novelist and sonneteer Edgar Fawcett (1847–1904) made 30 contributions. Mildred Bain (39) and Helena Born (15) were among the most regular women writers. Among the most important Whitman-related items, unsurprisingly, were those contributed by members of the poet’s intimate circle: the champion in this regard was William Kennedy (64 entries); other familiar names are Robert Ingersoll (more than 35 entries plus 15 quoted extracts), John Burroughs (32), Francis Williams (29), Richard Bucke (27), and John Clifford (21). Traubel’s favorite authors also fare prominently in the index: Edward Carpenter is featured 30 times and quoted 26; Tolstoy is quoted 37 times; Jack London is quoted or has works discussed 28 times; Bernard Shaw, 35 times. The index for Traubel himself has more than 1,000 entries. For libraries holding the microform of the index, see appendix 2.

14. The controversy over Lincoln’s private life has recently flamed anew (and in ways pertinent to Whitman studies) with the appearance of C. A. Tripp’s *The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln* (Free Press, 2005), which seeks to adumbrate the same-sex economies of Lincoln’s affectional life. Particularly apropos to the new controversy is William Sloane Kennedy’s remark (in his review of Bucke’s edition, *Calamus; A Series of Letters*, see 197), “The Peter Doyle letters are such as Abraham Lincoln might have written to Ann Rutledge or to his partner Herndon.”

15. Scott’s jeu d’esprit reminds one instantly of Max Beerbohm’s caricature of Whitman dancing. That balletic Dionysian, Friedrich Nietzsche, is also lurking here: “I would believe only in a god who could dance” (*Thus Spake Zarathustra: The Portable Nietzsche* [Viking, 1954], 153).


*Walt Whitman in the Conservator* lvii
Struthers (17:68); “Insight: to WW,” Hyacinth Smith (17:84); sonnet, Estelle Duclo (18:29); “WW,” George M. Hartt (18:52); “Before I Knew the Leader,” Francis Howard Williams (18:53); “On Reading Traubel’s WW,” Clifford (19:41); “Dear Walt!” Struthers (20:4); “WW,” Harry Weir Boland (21:21); “WW,” Benoy Kumar Sarkar (28:116); “Of Walt,” Struthers (29:101); “A Lighthouse by the Sea,” Mildred Bain (385); “As I Sit at Karsners’ Front Window,” H.T. (386).


18. “The Ballad of Reading Gaol,” he said, “belonged to all years”; the confessional *De Profundis* “belongs to yesterday. . . . I think too much of Wilde to think much of the confession” (16:12). Of the Beardsley-Wilde *Salomé*, he wrote, “love does not come to me out of them. I get something less vital. The extra-vellumed culture of superior people” (19:109). Traubel did reprint the whole of Wilde’s very *Conservatorial* poem “Humanitad” on his front page to kick off the third decade (20:1), but when Mosher brought out a new edition of Wilde’s 1882 *Poems*, he dismissed them: “The people no longer love humbug. . . . They hiss the old elocution off today’s stage” (20:45). When a Boston publisher brought out Wilde’s wretched early costume drama *A Florentine Tragedy* in 1910, Traubel’s notice begins, “This is poor stuff,” and then professes his displeasure at “the silk stockinged gentleman side” of Wilde. “The world has other reasons for finding Wilde worth its fixed good will” (21:140).

19. A more substantial hint from Traubel that Whitman might have been “wrong,” of course, was his allowing the publication of a new *Leaves* with variorum readings at the bottom of the page, prepared by Oscar Triggs — an edition Whitman almost certainly would have quashed.

20. A very impressive hint of the approaching impregnability of *Leaves of Grass* came just a few years later, when the *New York Times Book Review* published a long feature article, “One Hundred Critics Gauge Walt Whitman’s Fame” (June 10, 1923, 6). In it, the author, James Waldo Fawcett (three of his poems appeared in the *Conservator*), sent out an international query to one hundred “representative men and women of culture” asking for views on Whitman’s current popularity. The strong consensus was that Whitman’s star was rising.
In perhaps the most revealing and poignant article reproduced in this volume, “Lincoln and Herndon,” Horace Traubel explained his pride in being a “background man” to the spectacularly front-stage center Walt Whitman. In spite of the three early twentieth-century biographies by Mildred Bain, William English Walling, and David Fulton Karsner, Traubel has remained a largely unfamiliar figure — recognized among Whitman scholars, with a mixture of awe and disbelief, only for his staggering hoard of dictation. He has remained decidedly in the background.

With the appearance of the Conservator and Whitman’s death, however, Traubel stepped vigorously, imaginatively, one might even say brilliantly into the foreground of the Whitman “movement,” not to mention many other forward-thinking political, social, and cultural movements. It is therefore fitting to allow him center stage at the outset and to present the personality, the editorial worldview, the writing style — as well as the passion, common sense, and wit — of the editor of the Conservator. The following sampling of Traubel’s editorials, articles, and reviews will serve to introduce a remarkable liberal thinker and relentless, if frequently quixotic, advocate for the political, social, and cultural agenda largely set forth in the poetry and prose of Walt Whitman.

Paradoxes come to mind in trying to capture Traubel’s editorial personality: a polite, even-voiced lion rampant, his aggressions were wreathed in an air of diffidence. These qualities are notably on view in his two amusing reviews of the Bain and Karsner biographies of him. Particularly telling, in Traubel’s whimsical-melancholic late style, is “Why Men Write,” an essay on the furor scribendi that plays on the title of Bertrand Russell’s Why Men Fight. It is a wry meditation on the book “disease” and the “book illusion,” which he says is “hard to kill.” Traubel, who clearly suffered from the writing disease, makes this splendid point germane for anyone thinking of writing a book: “No man has a
right to write a book till he’s tried not to write it.” The items gathered here also offer an ample introduction to the Traubel and Conservator style, which (also paradoxically) builds up an eloquent, locomotive head of steam worthy of Whitman, but with a compact, plebeian vocabulary, the homeliest metaphors and similes, and none of the poet’s penchant for flamboyant bardic gestures.

March 1892 (3:4)

The Ethical Reasons for Social Reform

Horace L. Traubel

Reform may take the shape of destruction or development, or development may be regarded as a more subtle form of destruction. But if reform has its thousand variations, illustrations, activities and influences — of one weight or purport or another — it has common and general features, wherever it operates, which divide men between hatred and adoration.

Reform impeaches, questions, accuses, initially and to the end. It solicits institutions to produce their credentials. It demands that property shall submit to just ownership — that labor shall have its exact due — that science, art, literature may perform their best functions for society — that men, in fact, in all their relationships, whether to other men or to principles, shall have the largest opportunity, and, where mistakes or wrongs have been committed, whether historic or personal, the promptest and most generous redress.

But my friend, the merchant, who sat down to talk this thing over with me the other day, shook his head at all my notions. Said he: “You disdain peace, equanimity, order, law, the past; you prefer unrest; you prefer a pretender — that is to say, present an unreal life to usurp the place of the real. You call your work reform; I call it disaster. You try to argue yourself into a millennium, and only succeed in making worse a world which you already have condemned as bad enough. You are not satisfied to let those who now enjoy peace continue to enjoy it. You play the unbroken role of an unruly party to the social contract. You forget all the good we have in your hunt for blessings to come or yet to be achieved. Your hand spares nothing. You strike against the sacredness of the home by a claim that the area of woman’s freedom should be enlarged. You shock and shatter the pieties and holinesses in religion by your ridiculous logic of religious succession and development — by your pretense that one religion is as good as another, or at least as holy as another. You would heedlessly substitute humanity for God, and the ethical verities, as you call them, for those
eternal revelations which enshrine and guard the person of Jesus Christ. You laugh at time, as if all it had so far done was arrant folly — as if it was at best only preparation and entrance — as if it was in effect a prologue to a play. You teach men to rebel against conditions. To your peculiar constitution of mind, any question, any denial, is anywhere of equal cogency and right, society, or its status, having no reserves, no unimpregnable foundations or principles. With you nothing is fixed — everything is fluid — we are all in movement — society is an emigrant — we plant a standard on one spot to-day, and must advance it to-morrow. You knock at the door of capital and demand an equal place in its hospitality and benefit. No book, no class, no race escapes. You instill into innocent minds ambition, greed, discontent, irony. Once men were satisfied to live on grasses — to make life as simple as nature seemed to design it — to respect proprietary divisions — to see in poverty such a charm as made them grateful, if not eager, to accept all its burdens.

“From you and yours came the French Revolution — a carnival of blood, inexcusable in inception and effect, an apt and graphic foretaste of what would again result with your success. If you are right, everything is wrong; if you are wrong, at least something in current institutions is right. You never seem to realize the measure and gravity of the issues you raise. Their contest will disrupt society. To you church, state, are absurd — men must be self-dependent, self-sufficient. You rob the citizen of his city, the patriot of his country, the religionist of his church — and you say to him that these are all trickeries, doing him no good, either in this world or the next, and that for him exists no resource but the path of individual effort and social self-denial. You strip the sky of hope, inject a doubt into the future, seize and cast away the motives to right conduct, disarm philanthropies — substituting a meagre figure of Justice, an idealist’s skeleton, for the flesh and blood of a vital belief. If you had your sweep, if your broom had its boasted handle, you would brush all the stars out of the heavens and all inspiration out of the heart, and leave to man but the narrow strip of present disappointment for performance and duty. I cannot think of an institution to which, at one time or another, or in some form or another, or on some pretext or another, you have not addressed impertinent questions. What have you to do with foundations, anyway? Isn’t it enough that the building is here? Occupy it, and make the most and best of it! Delve and hammer and suspect in your insane curiosity, and you will pull the whole structure down upon your head. I am tired of revolutionists and revolutions — of the cries of the dissatisfied — of these incessant complaints against conditions — of the unsexed women who clamor for ‘rights’ which don’t exist, and of the worse men who measure themselves against their betters and jealously protest.
against privileges and pleasures they cannot share. You urge workingmen to organize. You press the infidel classes into union and combination. You flatter them all with an unction that never will give them peace in life hereafter. You regard any effort to protect law and order and existing institutions with animosity. Who have first rights? Not you — not the trespassers — not the community of saints and tramps with their perpetual finger of rebuke. I resent being taunted with the future, as if present and past were of no account — as if the things we think and do have no value or place. Your schemes are the effervescence of conceit. Let the earth have its content. It had an Eden once, and the revolutionists burst over the boundaries and destroyed all the crops. Man has had sour fruit or no fruit ever since.”

Take my friend as typifying the potential conservative forces of our time — the powers that be — the bayonets and guns of dominating institutions. By ways subtle and direct, question is resented, the present is exalted into the perpetual. We are invited to worship the social “one true god,” that is, political and religious and capitalistic orthodoxy, and the “son whom god hath sent,” that is, the state and the church and capital. If we blaspheme, woe be to our future. It will be all thorns, all refusal and contumely, all hatred and submission — if the “one true god” have his way.

To re-form, to re-make, is of course serious business. It means new combinations, fresh inspirations, new heights scaled, broader moral altitudes attained. It means to re-mould the social and political world to the likeness of justice. It demands devotion, skill, thought, dream, sacrifice, courage, daring. It sets one hour for silence and another for speech; it names one place for one man and another for his co-worker; it fixes values, times, situations, as never before; it in fact possesses, commands, sustains, ennobles.

My merchant-man shrinks from the trial. He is not so certain of his condition that he invites the winds to blow and the artillery of reform to play upon him. After all, he lives in a glass palace, whose fragility must lie in wreck at last.

What does it indicate, this cry of the human heart for a better future, for kinder fates: of the unhoused and unclothed for houses and clothing, of the over-loaded for rest, of the slave for freedom, of the prisoner for opportunity?

My merchant again smiles upon me. “You flaunt your ethical reasons,” he expostulates. “It is an ugly red rag. I do not like it, and its legend is socialism, anarchism, murder. Ethics means rest, and you bring war in its name, and I protest.” “But what of your gentle Jesus? Did not he, too, project the sword?” My friend shakes his head. “He did not, his followers, alas! too often!”

Lift the secret from a few specifications of the program of reform.
To reform society to a juster acknowledgment of woman: what does it include? Her enfranchisement — not as a voter (the paltriest of the debts due her), but as an individual. It asserts and defends her integrity as a unit in the social compact — as a figure one, to be counted forevermore in the list of spiritual populations. No longer left to hang upon the life and favors of men, or absorbed and lost in some other individuality, sinking power and vista in the slavery of domestic thrall-dom, we cannot deny her all the opportunities which her brain and heart may seize and profit by. This will add to the sum of her and of the race’s life. This is not destruction.

What will reform bring the workman? Again, a larger field, and not the favor but the justice of god. It will translate man back or advance him to his estate as man — it will forever end his career as a machine — it will forswear for him all service for which he has not due — it will broaden and lift and sweeten his life — it will give the dim, laborious ways the aromas of sympathy, give the laborer the instant wealth of self-respect. Is this destructive? It will adjust man with man, or tend so to adjust the social angles. Out of it will spring a peace. It will give and spur the workman to a spiritual activity impossible under prevailing conditions. It will put the emphasis on the worker, not on his product. It will esteem the soul above all estrangements — all attempts to confuse it with money-making and greed, with foolish and suicidal accumulation.

Reform in literature will take books from the cloister and closet and give them to man — will fit beauty to use, dream to fact, and make it brave in its declaration, broad in its purposes and affections. It will invite the scholar out of his library to the urgent, throbbing highways of the actual.

Reform in social life will induce us to rate the singer above the echo of his song, to respect individuality as much in the parlor as on the forum, to deal out the currency of a full regard. It will lead us away from dress to men — from trappings, from trimmings, from china, from big dinners — from the satiety of artifice to the constant stimulation of art, and then from art to nature, where all appeal is final. It will not honor a man for his set, but for his character; it will not applaud an outworn chivalry, a gilt-edged gallantry, but will insist upon frank speech and upon the inner and essential heroism. The parlors tend to make cowards of us all; but by and by will come a new order by which a man visiting his neighbor will not be asked to leave his honesty and his opinions in the hallway with his hat. And this is but the door to the temple; for in the domestic privacies it will institute a thousand changes, vital for the development of a saner, sweeter, more fertile manhood.

And in political economy? Suppose all government were done away with by the decree of reform, would not humanity be left with all due provisions for its

_Horace Traubel’s Editorial Style, Credos, & Worldview_
safety? — for the same humanity which creates these governments when they are fresh and young and react fire upon its enthusiasm, may learn to despise the grayed and fossilized institution when at last it blocks and baulks or would aim to halt the march of progress. This is not destruction. It calls upon first principles. It throws man back upon himself, there to question and make life redolent of noble effort. It solicits of the heart and the brain to know where more vitally than with them can lie the weapons of labor, the streams of moral affirmation.

These are only indicative lines. But we are required to ponder them. They do not mean destruction. They mean life, renewed life — a morning and a fresh day dedicated to discovery, to those eternal facts of the soul with which alone come health and eternity. Do not believe the doubters. Do not linger with disease. The past has served us well. It has taught us things to do and things to avoid. But aspiration is not content to stay in the old household till its walls totter and fall. Its days are sworn to freedom, for ever-added stores of moral fact. Society is built upon its moral forces. The usual reasons for reforms are the totality of experience. Experience apprises us of mal-adjustments, of disorders, of ineffectiveness, of social waste. Repair, rebuild, fill the sunshine with faithful practice! Is life for the meals we eat and for sleep, for the sensual, for the abandonment of passion, for the amassing of money, for the accentuation of divisions and differences? or is it for character? If it is for character, then reform finds its ethical reasons deep-based in the influences which will enrich character. Man will not “mortise himself in granite,” as has been said, till his wandering ambitions and ideals find fulfillment in the majesty of personal endowment. This is what we have proposed to discuss to-night.

MAY 1892 (3:39)

Rhodes Triumphant

Horace Traubel

Before you get up from your knees let me throw in a few gratuitous reflections. While you are still eating dust let me remind you of a history and a situation. I have nothing against Rhodes. Rhodes is dead. My fight is never with a man’s self but with his mistakes. Sometimes the motive of a villain’s crime is purer than the motive of a saint’s virtue. I am not concerned or willing to weigh Rhodes or pass upon him as a scoundrel or gentleman. But there are events we may not forget. While we remain on our knees we may regard the still small root of his vicious seedplot.
Rhodes bequeasts power, money. From what source did he draw power and money? You think it a miracle of philanthropy that he has created a few paltry international scholarships. But of what are his scholarships constituted? Remember the economic history of South Africa. Remember Rhodes. Analyze his record. Remember the dead Boers. Remember the living Boers. Yes, remember the dead and living Englishmen. They haunt this dead man's will. They agonize in his benefactions. The scholarships will cry out for mercy to an outraged humanity.

You too easily forget. I do not ask you to remember in order to revenge. I ask you to remember in order to be merciful. To be merciful, not to the crimes of the oppressor, but to the souls of the oppressor first and then of the oppressed. For his victims do not really need mercy. Rhodes needs mercy. Rhodes dropt over Africa like a shadow. He sowed hatred. His successors will reap what he sowed. The soil will give back his venomous impulse.

You too easily forget. You see this man's dollars. But I would rather you saw his deeds. If I robbed your brother on the highway and offered you the result you would scorn my felony. But if I rob your brother in a style less vulgar you smile over my gift and award me a laudatory epitaph.

Do not hate Rhodes. Hate the things he did. Do not denounce Rhodes. Denounce the principles he generated. Some men bleed and die for their country. Other men bleed other men and rob for their country. Rhodes belonged to the malign. He was a thumb of tyranny. Nero burned men who were in his way. Rhodes found Kruger in his way and decreed his removal. You have lived as a contemporary and witnessed the dire process of this removal. You cover your face with bloody hands but you cannot shut out the picture of your crime. Your crime. My crime. For somehow I feel responsible whatever the circumstance or whoever the instrument of an oppression.

Make as little of your criminal as you choose. But do not ignore or make merry over his crime. There is everything to be said for the criminal. There is nothing to be said for the crime.

Rhodes has died less rich than other men who die penniless. The world has fallen prostrate before the splendor of his restitution. It forgets his larceny. It only sees the grandiose restoration. But as long as the human heart, the mortal brain, can recognize the square and the round of conduct only in merely superficial manifestations, justice must go short of its harvest.

It is little your business how men dispose of property, of money, even of their thought and their affection. It is much your business to know how men get their property and money and through what difficulties they think and what grief they love.

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A few tawdry scholarships. So many dead Boers. So many dead Englishmen. So many dead ideals. So much treasure gone up in smoke. So many dead live people. So much amity envenomed. So many on their knees blessing the suicidal benefaction.

While you are still bowed at this incongruous shrine, remember, weep.

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NOVEMBER 1904 (15:137)

Intentions

“T.”


It is always too early to speak of a bad book and never too late to speak of a good book. There was a decade during which Wilde was popularly looked upon as a fool. There was a decade in which he was popularly looked upon as a degenerate. A third decade has ensued. A decade in which Wilde is likely to be looked upon as a man who has something to say to at least several generations of men. I am conservative when I say that the man who could have written “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” was intrinsically of sure and unpolluted grain. Do not cheat yourself with your often foolish morals. There is something greater than morals. Morality is greater than morals. Wilde tripped over morals and stood firm with morality. If Wilde had been as justly applauded as he has been justly hissed Wilde would have said, as I say, that the applause and the hiss were to be respected. But the world kept itself so busy hating it forgot to love. We ought to be very stern with sin and very gentle with the sinner. Instead of that we are very stern with the sinner and very gentle with the sin. Wilde was one of the men who was supposed to have no virtue because it was granted that he had some faults. After certain things in Wilde have been forgotten and have found their place certain other things will be remembered. He committed some perishable deeds and said some imperishable things. I do not think Wilde needs to be apologized for or to be flattered. No more than God needs to be apologized for or to be flattered because God made Wilde. Be as good as you choose, dear world, our master. Be very good. But do not turn your goodness into a rod. A man said to me: “I am done, done forever, with Wilde.” I listened further. I expected to hear him say: “I am done, done forever, with God.” Hell does not explain anything. Evil does not explain anything. Hell is a makeshift. Evil is a makeshift. Heaven is logic. Goodness is logic. The final logic of Wilde is heaven and goodness. Now, then, drop the
damn's and the saves from your Wilde vocabulary. Let them settle their peculiar issue between themselves. What of Wilde? What of his printed words? Have they roots? Do they add anything to the scriptures of life? Running underneath all his cynical driftwood is a clear stream. Wilde was not finally disposed of in the fury of the social storm aroused by his legal inculpation. After all the debts of iniquity and of scapegoatism were paid a big bit of Wilde remained. Society collected its debt. Took its last cent. Then society threw the rest of Wilde to the dogs. But the world is losing its puritanic accent. It is wisely gathering up the fragments of this man and putting them together. It sees that after all he is worth keeping. I think that Mosher was not only a publisher when he produced this book in such a serious form. I think he was also a man. Also a lover of justice. That he felt like showing Wilde that Wilde was not to be destroyed because censured and showing the world that it must not throw good wheat after bad in its haste to sacrifice the whole Wilde harvest to the hounds in the chase.

{Among the more than 800 editions Mosher published between 1891 and 1923 were nineteen Wilde titles and several Whitman titles, including Memories of President Lincoln (1904), The Book of Heavenly Death (1905), a facsimile of the 1855 Leaves (1919), and Anne Montgomerie Traubel’s anthology, A Little Book of Nature Thoughts (1906).}

February 1908 (18:188)

**The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche**

“T.”

The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. Boston: John W. Luce and Company.

Nietzsche is contradictory. Nietzsche is erratic. Nietzsche follows “no” so close upon “yes.” Nietzsche expects you to believe and to not believe in the same breath. People come to me growling that way about Nietzsche. I am not bothered by his contradictions. I am not baffled by his changes of front. If I went to Nietzsche looking for a master I would come away ungratified. But I go to Nietzsche without demands. I go to him for what he can freely give and I can freely take. I dont know Nietzsche well enough to know how well Mencken has done his work. The book sounds mainly true. Here and there I seem to detect the rattle of loose joints. But these do not nullify the fine merits of the narrative. What do we make out of Nietzsche? I can say for myself: Many things, not one
thing. Some of them cosmopolitan. Some of them parochial. I make out Nietzsche’s superman. The superior brute living on the backs of the crowd: the herd, as Nietzsche calls the crowd. The superman, acknowledging no obligations to the people. Magnificent, imperious, taking without squeamish doubts his utmost fill of life. Shaw, too, has a superman. And other dreamers and thinkers have had supermen. Shaw looks for a race of supermen. Nietzsche scorns the idea that the race at the full can ever acquire the ascent. The supermen will always be exclusive. Always the freeman on the top. Always the slave below. But I dont see how that tub will hold water. The man on top can never be free until the man below is free. Nietzsche says somewhere that the superman owes nothing to the past or to the present. Yet he also says somewhere that the superman must be prepared to sacrifice himself for the sake of the unborn generations. Nietzsche talks magnificently about the individual. And in so far as he contemplates the individual in the crowd he is final. But when he portrays the individual set off from the crowd, disavowing the crowd, he has put him on a quicksand. Nothing could be nobler than his declarations, his demands, intended to describe the status of the superman. He enriches me with triumphant inspirations. But his rejection of the inferior, the men still to come on, the evolutionary laggards, requires a supplement. Nietzsche dont seem to pretend to know it all. And yet he inferentially does so when he disdains the esoteric, the mystical, as though any fooling in that direction was not only idiotic but an act of degradation. In Beyond Good and Evil he sounds a deep sea. But he dont bring up the best fruit of the sea. I have always felt that getting beyond good and evil was necessary before a man got to be a man. I welcome Nietzsche’s general proposition. But I foresee a racial as well as an individual migration. Nietzsche stops with the enfranchisement of the superman. I would never be satisfied either to leave the race behind or be left behind. All worlds are my worlds. All advances are my advances. And there’s no reason why every man should not say that for himself. Nietzsche appeals to me elementally as a masculine partial force. He is not all round — not conclusive. He is very much lamed (on) one side. His philosophy was born paralytic. Of course we dont have to accept it whole. To insist upon it for every day of the year and every mood of the spirit. There’s a certain significant total of fact which Nietzsche does not include in his summing up. The stars hid in space. The veiled footways of dreams. The life not described in calendars and stock reports. Nietzsche takes the physiology of men for granted. He seems to admit there is more to be accounted for. But he scorns the speculation that would lead to it. Yet we find that in moments of exalted emotion when he is asserting the claims of the superman he has led himself without intending or acknowledging it far past his own
extremest frontiers. It would be foolish to deny that Nietzsche is a luminary. It would be equally foolish to declare that he is a cosmos.

FEbruary 1911 (21:186)

**Lincoln and Herndon**

“T.”


Cedar Rapids, Iowa: The Torch Press.

No man stands alone. Every man has his setting. The race is back of him. His mother and father. His comrade wife or his comrade sister or brother. Somebody. He never stands alone. He is not built up out of himself. Other lives contribute to his life. Not always in the same measure but always. Some men speak of themselves as self-made. Are proud of themselves because they are their own creators. Look at themselves in the glass. Throw themselves bouquets. Pat themselves on the back. A cynic has said the self-made man has relieved God of an awful responsibility. Well, nobody is self-made. There are curious hands, mysterious souls, pushing him on, steadying him to his course. The boys gave Debs a dinner in Altoona in October, 1909. Gable sat on one side of Debs. I sat on the other. I was asked to speak. I said: “Anybody who wants really to know Gene Debs has got to know his wife and his brother Theodore. Gene wont deny it himself.” Gene didn’t deny it. He got right on his feet and with tears in his eyes said: “That’s so, boys: so you have.” And so he went on. If I was asked to speak about Lincoln I’d say: “Anybody who wants really to know Lincoln has got to know Herndon.” And if Lincoln was alive he would say: “That’s so, boys: so you have.” Newton gives us a chance to know Herndon. To know a star you’ve got to know something about the sky. Herndon was part of Lincoln’s sky. The background people are often the best. Often the most devoted. Often the surest. They are more inevitably on the spot in pinches. They give up everything for what the world calls nothing. They are satisfied to see a cause working itself out. They are satisfied not to be seen working at it. They must work. But they need not be seen. This is not from fear. It is from the impulse of the workman. The workman would rather do than shine. Herndon was that sort. He was pleased to have Lincoln do the shining. He was always back of Lincoln. Always at his side. Always in his heart. Herndon was also in the more curious contingencies of the spirit always ahead. He was out and out. He was more for the ultimate. Too often neglected the stones on the road. Saw the heavens. Did not see the
things in the way. Lincoln saw both. Heaven not so clearly as Herndon. But saw it. But the things in the way: he saw them: he knew absolutely how to dodge them. I have tried with myself to put this aspect of Lincoln into a line or two. I might say it this way. I might say Lincoln was not a leader of leaders. I might say he was a leader of followers. Herndon was way off in remote distances. Consorted with the radicals. Edged towards the farther issues. But he was never impatient with Lincoln. Would go ahead. Would try the bridges. Would watch for lurking dangers and enemies. But he saw it was best for Lincoln to go slow. Herndon felt the way for Lincoln. They were a perfect team. He was where the eye could see. Lincoln was where the feet could go. Lincoln would not deny Herndon's visions. Herndon would not deny Lincoln's cautions. Herndon saw fast for Lincoln to go slow. He was himself a hurrier. But he gave Lincoln time. Between the two of them everything was provided for. Herndon was with the anti-slavery men from the start. With Parker. With the impossibles. The impos-sibles that in the end are the only possibles. He was with them. Yet he saw it would not do for Lincoln to break loose ahead of the hour. Herndon's corres-pondence with Parker, here included, shows how far along he got and how clearly he saw all the pros and cons. Herndon. He never asked for anything. He was the junior partner but he was the senior seer. He had some things stronger which Lincoln had weaker. He lacked Lincoln's all-aroundness. He was not as Lincoln seemed to be, the master of all surprises. Nothing seemed to bowl Lincoln off his feet. He could turn any corner without shock. He was never taken unawares. He might not know what was around the corners. But he turned them without quailing. Lincoln was whole. When things happened he did not turn up a fragment now a fragment then. He was all there instantly alto-gether wherever he was. Lincoln was adequate. He was not self-sufficient. No man is. He was race sufficient. He was time sufficient. He was not self-sufficient. Lincoln emerged sufficient. But look what he emerged from. Just here we are seeing how for one thing he emerged from Herndon. To say that Lincoln would have been the same Lincoln whether or no. To say he would have been the same Lincoln if everything had happened some other way. If north had been south. If left had been right. That would be to fly in the face of sense and history. That would be to isolate him. To set him apart. To say that Lincoln would have been the same Lincoln without Herndon would be like trying to cut a man loose from his origins. It may be impossible to tally Lincoln. Or you or me. We cant tally a man. But we may take looks in on him. Maybe you never included Herndon in your Lincoln before. Do it now. Maybe you thought Lincoln just occurred and just grew. So he did. But how did he occur and why did he grow? Study Herndon. That will help you to know why and how. Lincoln is a figure in a
romance. He is as real as life. The best romance life. Not something added to life. Nothing can be added to life. Just life. Lincoln dont need to be romanced about. He is enough just as he is. Enough mysteriousness. Enough beautiful. Enough faulty. Enough magnificent. He dont need to be added to or subtracted from. Lincoln seems to violate a law of perspective. The nearer you get to him the more colossal he is. We say a man cant get rid of his mother. He cant. Nor can he get rid of his comrade. Lincoln cant get rid of Herndon. Whitman cant get rid of O’Connor. Lincoln should not be manufactured. He should be studied. He should not be veiled. He should be disclosed. Herndon wrote about Lincoln. He wrote the truth. He did for Lincoln what Walt Whitman alive told me to do about Walt Whitman. He included all the hells and demons. Then the worshipers got busy. They said Herndon lied. They said he betrayed his friend. They said he was jealous. O God! He loved Lincoln. Because he loved Lincoln he told the truth about Lincoln. Or, rather, because he loved the truth. And because he assumed that Lincoln was a part of the truth. He was not afraid that the truth told about Lincoln would hurt him. That has passed. The quarrels over that. We see how Herndon was justified. How the resenters have disappeared. How Herndon has remained. He refused to lie for his friend. For this friend who always refused to lie against his enemies. In his later days Walt Whitman was always saying to me: “Leaves of Grass as it is would never have existed but for William O’Connor.” I think Lincoln must be saying from the shades as he must often when here have said in his heart: “The Emancipation Proclamation as it is would never have existed but for William Herndon.” Stedman said to me: “O’Connor sacrificed a career for Walt Whitman.” Sacrificed? Or made? Others have said: “Herndon sacrificed a career for Lincoln.” Sacrificed? Or made? There are background men and foreground men. There is a root to everything somewhere. Who can say one sort of man is greater where both are equally necessary? The trouble with the common judgment is that it too often forgets the background men. It sees only the men out in the light. It has no power to go back to causes. To estimate collaterals. No man in himself is more than half a man. Where is his other half? Look for it. If you dont find it at once keep on looking for it. You are sure to find it. In his crowd. In his ancestry. In the dreams of his mother. In the fierce allegiance of lovers. Men, women, children, comrades, are his other half. Newton helps me to find Lincoln’s other half. Was it Herndon? I dont know. But Herndon belonged to it. Herndon was a hot in the collar man. Like William O’Connor. He blazed up and around regardless. He threw himself into fires. He did not care what the result was. He did not calculate the returns. He kept Lincoln going when he might have stopped. Herndon was never a stagnant pool. He was always running water. He was not a listener at keyholes.
for gossip. He had the ear of God for principles. When Lincoln went to Washington he asked: “Billy, what do you want?” Billy said: “Nothing.” He had it already. He had had it even before Lincoln. They had had it together. He has it still. They both of them have it still together. Who is big, who is little, in such a partnership?

AUGUST 1912 (23 : 91)

Henry Demarest Lloyd

“T.”


Lloyd was one of the men who always went ahead. Who wasn’t afraid of contingencies. Who took his life in his hands every day. Who didn’t want to see what anyone else was doing. Who chose on his own hook. Who lived from the inside out rather than from the outside in. Who took desperate chances. Who welcomed extreme situations. Yet Lloyd was a still stream, too. He was without bombast. He put on no flourishes. He made use of no oratorical flubdub. This don’t mean that he wasn’t eloquent. He was. It only means that his rhetoric was never permitted any usurpations. He was a heroic figure. He walked up the street looking like everybody else. But he was really about a hundred feet high. And he really looked like nobody else. Lloyd threw himself body and spirit into the labor fight. He didn’t ask what his chances of victory were. He didn’t ask whether a man of his family and precedents could afford to ally himself with so unpopular a cause. He simply made his excursions without ostentation. He acted no part. He lived a part. Did you ever see Lloyd? There was something convincing in the way he carried himself. There’s the same air in what he wrote. He fails in the letter sometimes. But he never misses the spirit. Lloyd died just at the moment when Socialism in America was about to assert itself potently on the political field. He had determined to demonstrate his sympathy with political revolt. Lloyd had some individualistic reservations. But he said to me: “There’s nothing left for us to do but join the party: nothing left for us to do but get down on the ground and work.” He got on the ground all right. He died on the ground. Died doing such work. Lloyd didn’t spare himself when he had once made his plans. He didn’t say go. He said come. He led. He didn’t follow on. Lloyd said of one of our eminent mutual friends: “He always wants me to put my feet into the water to see if it’s cold.” Lloyd didn’t care, cold or warm. He didn’t expect a
velvet journey. He knew he’d have to rough it. His life was a dedication. Everything seemed to pull him the other way. Everything but his own insight. He went with his insight. Ease was no temptation to him as against the truth. No self-indulgence qualified his faith. He believed all in all. He lived all in all. He saw the new big thing come up red in the east. He didn’t quite make it out. But he knew it for something that had to be calculated for. Lloyd never quite arrived in technical economics. But his sensing of idealisms was inerrant. He made no mistakes in what he said we were to get. He was not always clear as to the process. He was mediatorial. He stood between the trades union consciousness and revolution. He reached back to archaic industrialism and forward to consummating communisms. He asked me once: “Do you mean to say that reason will never stop short of the commune?” I said: “Yes.” He added after a ruminating hesitation: “I don’t know but you are right. But how long will it take humanity to be reasonable?” Lloyd was not one of the postponers. He was not afraid of having the good things happen right here and now. Yes, right this year. Yes, with people as they are. His only regret seemed to be that they can’t happen at once. We had hundreds of talks together. He never once said we’ve got to change human nature before we can readjust the systems. He was willing to trust the truth to human nature as it is. Lloyd was not a materialist. His men and women were elusively mysterious not automatons. He saw destiny working out its results with spiritual integers. He had a religious mind. He was reverent. He didn’t stand off everything. He took the universe for granted. Took its finalities for granted. Its eventuations in beauty and joy. I never knew a man who could consistently be more gentle and more stern. He never made a noise. But he was unequivocal. When the blusterer was all out of breath and collapsed Lloyd was still serenely journeying on. Lloyd could go wrong as well as right. But he could never be wrong as well as right. He could only be right. His approach to life was always elevated and hospitable. If he failed any time it was in what the eye missed seeing not in what the heart wished to occur. Lloyd went to New Zealand. He studied New Zealand when the new industrial experiments there were just being inaugurated. He could not think anything but success for them. He came back to America convinced. Well, the New Zealand experiments didn’t turn out as Lloyd thought they would. New Zealand after is almost where New Zealand was before. Why? Not because the intention of the experiments was false. No. But because the experiments did not attack the root of the evil. Lloyd had not himself at that time intellectually grasped what became patent to him towards the end. He felt straight. He hoped straight. He served straight. He loved straight. But he didn’t see straight. Russell went to New Zealand and saw an effect. Lloyd had got no farther than a cause. To the cause the effect looked inevitable. To the

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effect the cause looks impossible. But Lloyd’s miscalculations in no way reduced his stature. He was not primarily a technician but a poet. He was ultra impressional. When Lloyd wrote on what he called “the new conscience,” he gave us an industrial magna charta. I know Socialists who never make a mistake in their Socialism. They are right from a to z. But they are not democrats. Lloyd made some mistakes in his prognosis. He wasn’t right from a to z. He went astray on o or w maybe. But he was a democrat. As I go over this pungent record by his sister I get more and more gratefully the taste and the smell and the sound and the sight of my royal friend. When the Coal Commission sat in Philadelphia Lloyd and I took what he called a constitutional out Chestnut and up Broad Street late every afternoon upon the adjournment of court. He was always sort of let down during those walks. He seemed to have all his doors wide open then. And he seemed to invite me in anywhere. And I went in. And felt welcome. One day he said to me: “Traubel, I wish you would call me comrade.” I had heard him demur a bit to “comrade” with others and said so. “Did I demur?” he asked; “well — that must have been because I dont like a perfect word like that wasted. It connotes so much to me I want to reserve it for precious moments and persons.” I asked: “Why shouldn’t we so use it as to make any moment and any person precious?” He was quiet for a while. We were walking on. Then he turned to me and put his hand on my shoulder gently. “It’s a beautiful amendment; I accept it,” he said. And after a pause which I did not interrupt: “I suppose our democracy should have no factitious reserves.” Lloyd is scriptural. He will be cited for inspiration long after he has ceased to be quoted as a historian. Lloyd was one of those liberated men who dont seem to have motives good or bad. Life supplanted all motive in him. He was not good. He was not bad. He was. A man gets a little farther on than a man. Then it would be offensive to say he means well. His consciousness means nothing. It has no designs. It holds no night courts to hurry along justice. It simply lives. It breathes out its amities as the wind blows itself free in a storm. Lloyd was in this area beyond. Had passed the frontiers. The little contentions no longer controlled him right or left. He shed light and heat like a sun. That’s what a sun is for. That’s what Lloyd was for.

{Extracts from the writings of Henry Demarest Lloyd (1847–1903) appeared often in the Conservator. A lawyer, he became a writer for the Chicago Tribune and, some have suggested, America’s first investigative reporter. He fought notably for women’s suffrage and trade unionism and against child labor. With his 1894 study of Standard Oil, Wealth against Commonwealth, Lloyd became a major voice for muckraking antimonopoly forces.}

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We ask two questions of a book. First, is it worth doing? Second, is it done right? It's sometimes possible to answer one of these questions or the other. It's not always possible to answer both of the questions. In the present instance it's easy to answer yes to the second question. And most people would answer no to the first question. As it took a long while to make me I think it will take a long while to dispose of me. Whether such a man is worth being a book or whether a book is worth being such a man is a question which cannot be answered wholesale. I have come. I am here. I challenge you. What have you got to say about it? The world has been asked some questions before. Here is the questioner again. It's not up to you to call this man names. Keep your names to yourself. Answer his questions. Or if you choose to call names instead of answering questions dont flatter yourself that calling names is a substitute for answering questions. It dont matter how tall this man is. Nor how broad. Nor how much brains he has or hasn't. Nor whether he’s the successor or follower of Walt Whitman. Nor whether he writes just the way you like writing written. Nor whether he’s greater than anybody or smaller than everybody. Such things dont matter. What does matter is the problem he's putting up to you. He has no pride in himself. And he has no shame in himself. He’s more interested in loving than in being loved. He’d rather be lost in the crowd than found among the elect. He's very brave. For he’s not afraid of the world. He’s very cowardly. For he’s afraid of himself. He writes a lot. But he has lived more than he has written. And he never looks with desire at monuments and medals. He only looks with desire at men and women. There are men whose books it may be said everybody reads. He is a man whose books it may be said nobody reads. His interest is in causes not in himself. And his principal is where his interest is. He has no wish to shine. Nor is he anxious to be eclipsed. He takes the ups and downs of fate as they come. He has black streaks in him. There is nothing blacker. And he is as white as sympathy can make a man. Nothing could be whiter. It's not difficult to write about this sort of a man. Even I can do it. For he dont mind having either the worst or the best said about himself. He says if he’s all right nothing can kill him. He says if he’s all wrong he should be killed. He has served a miscellaneous and severe apprenticeship. He has been
knocked down so often he’s a past master in getting up. He don’t want to be singled out anywhere. He wants to be doubled up everywhere. If anyone was to say to him: How much the crowd owes to you! he would say to anyone: How much more I owe to the crowd! He has come out of the past loaded to the brim with its hells and heavens. He can be as rotten as the foulest. And he can ascend with Christs to any cross. This is not because he’s singular but because he’s like all the rest. He has loved the body’s passion. But he don’t want to burn up in its fires. He has loved the soul’s denials. But he don’t want to be frozen in its frosts. He’s not remarkable. He’s not commonplace. He’s only a human interrogation. He goes about asking questions. He wants these questions answered. Not because answering will help him but because it will help you. He’s not lifted an inch by flattery. Nor is he cast down a hair by vituperation. He knows that it’s far less important that you should like him than that he should like you. Far less important that you should admire him than that he should admire you. You may say to him: You can’t write. He will only say: I can love. You may say to him: You’re no poet. Or you may say: You’re no sort of a man. He will only say: I can love. You may say to him: You have sinned. He will only say: So I have, but I can love. You may say to him: Why do you fill your magazine with yourself? He will only say: What else have I to fill it with? You may say to him: They have all passed you. He will only say: I can love as well in the foothills as on the mountain top. What does he mean by this? He means that the answer to all the shadows is love. That the answer to all the eminences, all the prides, all the castes, all the sciences, all the arts, is love. Not a sickly mush of sentiment. He don’t call that love. No. He means what the full measure of the body and the soul mean. What that means in the fiercest passions and the sublimest dreams. He says his reply to all the skepticism of the world is himself. If he was worried about being big or little, things like whether it’s raining today or not or whether the twentieth of January next year comes on Thursday or Monday would keep him guessing. But he don’t spend good time for bad. He is too busy lighting torches. Too busy giving himself away. He don’t go to any one asking: What have you got for me? He knows they have got everything. He helps himself. He goes to them saying: Draw on me at sight for anything you need. He is not appalled by institutions. The only thing that awes him is love. It looks soft and silly for a man to go round talking about love. To go to the stock exchange. To the board of trade. Into the offices and stores. Warning people everywhere: Whatever you do don’t forget love. He finds the preacher talking theology. He finds the professor talking figures and codes. He finds mothers and fathers
talking success. He finds the papers saying: You may be President some day. He
finds everybody saying: Get money. He breaks in. He says: Excuse me — you
have forgotten something. Forgotten something? What is that? Love: you have
forgotten love. That’s his question to the world. Love’s question. To material-
istic science. To disciples of guts and greed. To ambition. To politics. To the
state. To profit and loss. That’s his question. You have forgotten love. He may
be the poorest stick of a man alive or dead. Or he may be the sunburst of a new
era. It matters nothing either way. Answer his question. Have you forgotten
love? For if you have forgotten love you have forgotten the sun that shines. He’s
nobody in himself. But he loves. He has not forgotten love. He may have missed
everything else. But he possesses love. He may have gone without any other in-
heritance. But he has inherited love. As a man he is what? I dont know. A
woman once said to him: You are the nastiest and the nicest man I know. He
asked: What can I do to make myself altogether acceptable to you? She an-
swered: I’d rather have you remain as you are. So you have it there. He is nas-
tiest and nicest. Or he is nastiest and not nicest. That dont count. What does
count is his love. He may be the least significant of writers and thinkers. That
dont count. What does count is his love. Rank him above or below. That dont
matter. What does matter is his love. The beautiful woman who wrote the beau-
tiful book saw to the heart of the man. She may make too much of him as an in-
tellectual light. She may make too much of him as a revealer of life. But that dont
matter. What does matter is that she makes it clear that he can love. What does
matter is that she makes it clear that he has been a helper to those who have
struggled against tides. She has done that. That does count. Counts in the man.
Counts in the book.

JUNE 1914 (25:58)

John Addington Symonds

“T.”


New York: Mitchell Kennerley.

A man may have more book learning than he knows what to do with. It may
be in his way. Books may supplement life. But they never serve in place of
life. Symonds struggled against his early culture. He had been stuffed full.
He wanted to disgorge. He never could. The trouble was too deep-seated. It
had become a disease. But he did his best. He wrote Whitman as he wrote me

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deploring his sophistication. He said once: “Do what I may that Oxford pack is still on my back.” He staggered about under it. It threatened him with ruin. When he went over to Switzerland he mixed up with the mountaineers and tried to undo what had been overdone. He was a scholar. He did a scholar’s work. He did it well. But he was after more. He was ambitious to create. He wanted to start something. He was not satisfied with only keeping something else going. But the mischief had been accomplished. It was too late. He may have been mistaken. He might never have done better. But he believed it would have been possible. He became famous. He was given high rank as a critic. But if what a man has is not what he wants he remains unhappy. So Symonds always continued unappeased. His poetry just fell short. His philosophy just didn’t arrive. His art just failed perfection. Schools have many sins to answer for. They may do good. But they are capable of much harm. Knowing much is not enough in itself. Knowing little may be knowing all. Symonds may have attributed effects in his individuality to Oxford for which it was not responsible. But he felt very keenly that his complaints were the bottom truth. He would say to us that *Leaves of Grass* saved him if he was saved. He ascribed what was finally wholesome in his work to Whitman. The university had killed his spirit. Whitman had resurrected it. He may have overstated the result. But he was convinced that his native genius had been schooled to death. He congratulated me upon my lack of a college education. “I doubt if you know what you have been spared.” Symonds was a brand plucked from the burning. Whatever may have been lost much was won. There was always plenty of Symonds left. He didn’t leave all his treasure in the classroom. He took with him into the world, into literature, rare intuitions which were reflected in channels of rich human influence. He may have laid aside his enthusiasms when he started to study but he certainly took them up again when he started to live. It’s true that he was limited by extreme reserve at times. He wrote me a letter and tore it up. He then said: “Now I see that I should not have done so: I thought it would be regarded by you as too forthcoming.” I suspect that America has developed freer and easier habits of intercourse. I feel like warning everybody who goes to a school. And I warn those who write and paint and sing. Don’t let school and writing and painting and singing kill you. Here was a big man whom the schools would have made little if he had not happened to be big enough to overcome their nullifications. He became one of the accredited scholars of his age. And yet he declared that Oxford had irretrievably marred him. I can’t say of him what he says of himself. But I can say that schools are capable of doing what he says they did for him. He spent his life, full as it was of achievement, under the shadow of this haunting regret. Schools do educate people. But they
often educate good things out of a man and bad things into a man. No one can know what might have been. We guess. But guessing after all leaves us empty. Symonds was always conscious that he had not written anything that would live. A few lines maybe. He might last for some time as a name. But he would not be read. He would gradually recede until he had disappeared. He expressed this idea in his letters — sometimes to Whitman, now and then to me. Why he should have cared about it either way I do not know. He was so loving in spirit, so graciously illuminated, it seemed pitiful that he should ever have busied himself with his own future. Brooks has realized this interior struggle. Symonds assumed that his fate might have been entirely different under other auspices. It might have been. But he might not have gone higher. There is no way by which to clear up such a mystery. Symonds was an aspirer not an inspirer of men. Yet there was no reaction or fear in him. He knew Whitman for instance before most others. Not only knew him. He was unqualifiedly frank in saying so. He didn’t seem to have any or had very little professional hauteur. He accused himself of sins that were not obvious. Brooks measures Symonds without extravagance. He neither adds anything to nor takes anything from the man as he finds him. It would be fallacious to portray him as popular or of increasing significance. But that he was endowed with qualities that profoundly affected certain contemporary circles should go without question. I personally have every reason to second Brooks in his affirmations and to add a few of my own. After he has said all he can I find something more to say. The principal figure in this book, as it must be in any Symonds book, after Symonds, is Whitman. There’s not only an intimate Whitman chapter but Whitman’s name recurs everywhere. Whatever may become of Symonds in the general history of literary Europe he will always star in the Whitman heavens.

**JULY 1915 (26:72)**

**Walt Whitman and His Poetry**

“T.”


Symonds once wrote me a letter and destroyed it. That was before he knew me. Later he knew me. I asked him why he didn’t send me the letter. He answered: “I was afraid you’d consider it too forthcoming.” And he added: “But now I see that I made a mistake: now I know you would have liked the letter.”

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I have never thought of that letter, I cant even think of it now twenty years later, but with the resentful notion that in burning it up Symonds had robbed me. When Binns produced his first book about Whitman, the bulky biographical work of which the present little volume is an abstract, I enjoyed its fervor. But Binns evidently came to the conclusion that he was too forthcoming in that instance. So he’s taken most of the heat out of his supplementary miniature. I feel that he’s robbed me. I’d rather have Binns fiery than judicial. I dont like careful stories. Not that I prefer crazy eulogies. I dont want my men made gods nor my women made angels. But I want blood. Some flush of rampant indignation. Some righteously vehement endorsements and espousals. Binns wears the wig and gown of a justice. Of course this must not be taken as implying that he hasn’t done a good job. He has done it. I find no fault with its general efficiency. It gets there. Only it gets there with its boots blacked rather than with mud on its uppers. It’s a good thing for a man to be forthcoming. To let himself rage. To take it for granted that his audience would rather listen to a living torrent than look at its face in a dead pond. I may be all wrong. But I get the impression that Binns makes some deductions from his earlier estimate of Whitman. A lawyer asked a student for his definition of a court. And the student described it as a place in which justice was judiciously dispensed. So if I asked what a biography is I might have it named to me as a book in which the truth is judiciously dispensed. When Gilder read the manuscript of the first volume of With Walt Whitman in Camden he wondered if I had been wisely reticent. But I told him I hadn’t been reticent at all. I wasn’t interested in making Whitman good or bad but in getting my records straight. The consequences were to take care of themselves. Crosby was disturbed because I hadn’t dressed up the English of the dialogues. Some wanted everything but the literary material excluded. But others wanted everything but the literary material included. The idea all around was that I hadn’t edited the story. I was without taste. Burroughs thought it should be cut down two-thirds. Gilder thought it should be as long as it pleased as long as it was as good as it proved to be. Francis Wilson said to me: “You’ve written the only honest biography.” I asked him: “What about your Jefferson?” He replied: “Well — I cut out too much. I accepted Gilder’s advice when he asked me: ‘Francis — why perpetuate anything that’s ugly?’” So the bad in Jefferson is gone. Only the good remains. But in my book the bad had to take its chances with the good. And then the good had to take its chances with the bad. People were shocked by the swear words. Joaquin Miller said he’d cut them out for California — “we’ve got hells and damns to burn out here” — but concluded that “they’d no doubt please fastidious Boston.” Burroughs appealed from me to Walt. He said Walt wouldn’t have liked me to retain them.
But I wasn’t trying to please Walt. I was only trying to please myself. To please myself by neither overdoing nor underdoing my picture. But there were Dowden and Rossetti who wrote me about the same time: “I can hear the old man breathe.” They didn’t take exception to the improprieties. The Quaker girl who sat in my office and did the typing of one volume was a bit shocked by Walt’s language. “He wasn’t always elegant,” she said. I said: “Nobody is.” She asked: “Do you think so? I dont read such things in lives of other men.” I was stubborn. “That’s because the other biographers lie and I dont.” When she was through with the job she said to me: “After all he was wonderful and beautiful, wasn’t he?” And she added: “I’m sorry I’m done with it: I wish I could go on without stopping.” So I say to all biographers: Put the worst in with the best. The worst is in every man with the best. It should be in every book about a man. The fairy perfections of an idealized portrayal will never stimulate the jaded nerves of the world. We want the touch of hands. We want the kisses of passionate lips. We want the embraces of uncompromising and unapologetic desire. If I dont feel hungry enough about a man or a woman or a cause to pour myself unqualifiedly blood tissue and vision into my shameless confessions then I dont want to undertake the task for which I’m so little qualified.

JUNE 1916 (27:60)

Walt Whitman as Man, Poet, and Friend

“T.”


One night Walt said to me: “I dread a Whitman literature: I’m afraid of expositors: do all you can to discourage the explicators.” And on another occasion he said: “We may be completely forgotten: in that case nothing’s to be provided for: but in the other event, if we should continue, look out for the interpreters: dont let them get in the way.” But he couldn’t escape. He had to go the usual course. Expositional studies have appeared one after another since his death. There’s already a whole Whitman literature. Walt hated the idea of being deified and hated the idea of being explained. He was far more afraid of being made too much of than of being made too little of. He was always warning me to beware of the gushers. It’s an awful job to have to dig your way to an exceptional man through a mountain of biographers. In some moods he would say that he had just got a foothold: that was all. In other moods I think he foresaw
the inevitable. I don’t quote these memories to discourage Elliot. Elliot does no
talking himself. He lets others talk for him. Outside of a few introductory notes
he hands Walt over to his friends. And these friends on the whole preserve a fair
balance of judgment. Nobody goes the limit. And nobody denies him every-
thing. The night of the day Walt was buried a bunch of us loafed together
at Boothby’s cafe in Philadelphia. Burroughs was there. And Bucke. And
Garland. And Brinton and Harned and Frank Williams. And some others. No-
body was crying. Nobody was mournful. It didn’t seem to anybody as though
Walt was lost. It seemed almost as if he was for the first time won. But that night
we compared personal impersonal notes much as Elliot has had Walt’s friends
do in this memoranda. And as I now read these characteristic letters, brought
nearer to me by being reproduced in the handwriting of Elliot’s correspon-
dents, I seem to repeat in some measure the emotions that stirred me in that
reminiscence. Walt wasn’t a man apart from men. He was a man among men. He
was not a leader. Nor a teacher. Nor a trimmer of lamps. He disliked being
called a master. “I’m afraid of books about myself,” he said to me. But I asked
him if he didn’t realize that books about himself were bound to multiply. No;
he wasn’t sure of that. But if they did he’d think each one might make him
by so much more impossible and gratuitous. If I could have done With Walt
Whitman in Camden first I might have saved Walt the trouble of writing Leaves
of Grass. But if by some catastrophe Leaves of Grass went out of existence and
my book remained the world would know still the sort of book Leaves of Grass
was through the sort of man I portray. Or, rather, through the sort of man who
portrays himself in my record. Elliot has done with his book what I’ve tried to
do with mine. He’s kept himself out of it as much as possible. I find that as I grow
younger in growing older I think less and less of great men and more and more
of great peoples. I single out individuals less and generalize on mobs more. And
this irreverence attaches to Walt as well as to others. As I grow to love him more
as a brother I love him less as a god. And as he becomes more acutely personal
he becomes more fraternally illuminating. I classify the new Whitman books by
their response to this test. I want them to make Walt a better man and a worse
god. Walt himself says that if you want to understand him you’ll need to apply
from him that lesson by which he is himself destroyed. That is, killed as a god
and resurrected as a man. Elliot has done a job that comes well within that sav-
ing horizon. After all Walt himself might turn out to be a burden and an ob-
struction carried on as an idolized genius in defiance of his own vehement phi-
losophy. Von Sternberg, who is one of the masters of music as well as a master
of other things including himself, once said to me: “When I hear someone else
playing the piano I’ve just got to literally force myself to forget that I’m a player
myself.” He knows too much and too little about the piano. When I hear another man making love to Walt I have to force myself to forget that I love him myself. I know too much and too little about Walt. So I go through this tussle with every Whitman book. I must force myself to forget what I know about other Whitman books. I’ve no right to bring myself stale to a book. I must bring myself fresh to every book. I cant be honest with the book or with myself if I dont. It’s easy to say of writings like these: This has all been said before. Just as it’s easy to say in the morning: We’ve had just as beautiful sunrises before. But we might as reasonably object to more sunrises as to more books. It’s sort of as if Elliot had brought a bunch of roses into the house. We’ve had roses there before. But the perfume of these fresh roses is none the less delicious for that.

November 1917 (28:134)

Walt Whitman’s America

Horace Traubel

I’m receiving almost daily questions having to do with Walt’s problematical attitude towards the war. What do I know about it? Nothing. Writers ask me this: What would Lincoln think about the war? I received this inquiry on a postcard the other day: What do you imagine Nietzsche would say about the war? I dont think. I dont imagine. I dont know. I dont see that it matters what the dead would have thought about the war. What do the living think about the war?

Walt was never as strong in talking about war as he was in talking about America. He had very high ideas of America. Not of the America that we were but of the America we might be. The America of idealisms and dreams. The America of noble manners and magnificent soul. The welcomer of the oppressed. The asylum of the poor and downtrodden. He loved to dilate upon that America. He was often misunderstood. He was taken by literalists to be a partisan of geographical America. To be a bragger and boaster. To swell his chest out and lift his head in the air and tell big stories about ourselves. Carlyle and others thought of Walt as a man who thought he was a big man because he lived in a big country.

Well: let’s take a face to face look at Walt’s America. I discussed the thing with him often. I never heard a phrase of bluster or vainglory from his lips.

“Horace,” he said to me: “why do you suppose the people who dont want anything to do with me are so inclined to misrepresent my point of view? It’s as if they didn’t want me to be what they must know I am.”
What was he? I asked him that.

“Oh!” he went on: “I mean my special interpretation of America, the republic, our experiment in democracy. Certainly I’ve never written or spoken of it as an achieved thing: never! never! Did you ever know me to do it? Did you? Did you?” I laughed and shook my head.

“My America is still all in the making: it’s a promise, a possible something: it’s to come: it’s by no means here. Besides, what do I care about the material America? America is to me an idea, a forecast, a prophecy: it may evolve to noble fruition or end as an incommensurable disaster. I don’t want to be tied to the little conclusions of a petty nationalism. America will extend itself as an idea, never I hope in conquest. I’d rather anything should happen to us than that we should add one inch of territory to our domain by conquest.”

I put in. “Yes, Walt. I don’t want us to be just another nation like all the other nations. I want us to stand for something spiritually universal. Why can’t we do something no other nation has so far done? Why can’t we be freer? juster? more fraternal? Why can’t we even be a great fool nation for once, departing from the principles that have heretofore stood for national wisdom in the world?”

Walt laid his big hand on my shoulder affectionately and smiled.

“Hurrah!” he exclaimed: “Hurrah to that — every word of it!”

He always insisted upon the larger differentiations for America.

“If we can’t be something better why should we be at all?” I asked him.

“True,” he answered: “something better: not a superiority of manner or a blind, hateful, overbearing conceit: no, not that: but the something better that circumstance makes it humbly possible for us to be: that: that’s the thing I suppose you mean and I’d say amen to.”

When Walt spoke of America it was more abstractly than concretely. America was a dear faith to him. A fact, still. But a fact such as a well fortified aspiration may be. I have even seen him angry, or at least annoyed, by the display of cheap Americanism. It was never his notion that we should lord it over the world. He was concerned to have us set an example. Not, however, in pride but in humility. He thought we’d had a better chance. Therefore we should pay our bill. Paying our bill was helping Europe to become what Europe had made it possible for us to become.

You couldn’t interest Walt in the wealth of America. He’d always go back to his original question: But what kind of men are we raising here?

He wanted America to give the crowd the best chance it ever had. To give it the only chance it ever had. You can only grasp his highly spiritualized conception of America by remembering that. And then remember more. Remember that at bottom America was that chance. If some other country having another
name gave the crowd that chance first he’d call that country America. And if our geographical America forgetting its high purpose should deny the crowd that chance Walt would cease to think of it as America. The steadfast picture in his attitude towards America was that of a modernized everyday promised land. America was to pay the note of the ages. It was to make that true in life which so far had only been true in words. It was not to repeat the old class divisions but inaugurate an era of essential democracy.

Walt would see a picture of somebody, he might be of any race and color, and he’d exclaim: “How American he looks!” Or he’d see a picture of something and exclaim: “How American that looks!”

What did he have in mind? The natural thing. Simplicity. No medals. No office. No college decoration. The man who worries about a crease in his trousers has a crease in his mind. Walt was always for getting down or up to people stripped of all extraneous paraphernalia. Such people were always America to him. Do you begin to see what his word “American” signified?

Walt spoke of loving the “powerful uneducated” person. He wanted America to be the powerful uneducated country.

He didn’t object to education because it was education but because it wasn’t.

If the sun wasn’t light he’d object to the sun too. If men weren’t brothers he’d object to men too. If America wasn’t a democracy he’d object to America too.

Instead of being what Carlyle thought he was he was distinctly what Carlyle thought he wasn’t. Instead of thinking he must be big because he lived in a big country he frankly admitted that he might be the littlest sort of a man and live in the biggest country or be the biggest sort of a man and live in the littlest country.

But he wanted America to be as big as its size. He wanted it to be as big as its promise. As its words. As its spirit.

“It makes me sick to hear our orators and read our writers telling us how miraculously we’ve grown beyond recognition. We’re a vast body without a soul—we’ve accomplished incontrovertible ends by our mechanical genius, our materialistic concentrations, our mad haste: but after all that may tell rather for death than life.”

And he’d shake his head over our financial exploits. “No, no, no: a thousand times no: that’s all been done over and over again to the detriment of the race: all of it: what we need is the prosperity of the common man: I cant think of America as repeating the mistakes of Europe, of Asia, of the past: I cant contemplate it contentedly: it tears my heart out: it defeats my proudest hopes — makes me almost despair: yes, even despair, Horace: for America has been a religion with me: a religion: I’ve devoted myself passionately to it: not the

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America of the very rich and the very poor, of the upper crust and a forlorn proletariat: by God! no! no! no!"

I heard a Whitmanite once defend pan-Americanism by quoting a passage from *Leaves of Grass* in which Walt saw America in his mind’s eye extending itself to “the archipelagoges of the Pacific.” This disputant asked triumphantly: “Who can say now that Whitman was opposed to conquest?” I said: “Whitman wasn’t predicting conquest but conviction.” When I told Walt the story he nodded to me and said: “Yes: it’s obvious enough to anybody who knows the language I talk. I’m glad you rebuffed him as you did: not conquest but conviction: that’s very good: it goes to the core of the matter. I’d like to see America, my America, go round the globe, gloriously, not with armies but in sacrificing humanisms: I’ve no enthusiasm about any other America.”

At one of our Whitman meetings in New York, during the period of the Spanish war, this text was again quoted as if it had put Walt on record as condoning a physically militant Americanism.

“What have you got to say to that?” I was asked. As I was a reputed Whitman man I was bound, my inquirer supposed, to second him whether or no.

But I recalled the older incident and said: “I have the best of reasons for saying Walt never wrote the line quoted with any such thought in his mind. My best of reasons is his own disclaimer to me when this very matter involving the very line discussed was brought up in his presence. And while I’m speaking I’d like to add that I’m not the kind of Whitman man you think I am. I take Whitman right not Whitman wrong — though I do find him mostly right. But if *Leaves of Grass* justifies conquest then all the worse for *Leaves of Grass*. But it don’t. Civilization is going straight down the road and all the better for Walt and his book if they go with it. But if either has to be left behind it won’t be civilization.”

Towards the end of his life Walt got more deeply interested in the industrial problem. He never developed any theory. He kept fingering round till the last with vague ideas. But even here seeing a need he hoped America would establish a leadership. “I hope America will show the way,” he said to me. But he had his fears. “We seem to have gone far astray,” he remarked: “we’ve gone ghastly distances in the other direction: God knows where it will lead us: but something must happen: I still cherish my old hallucination, if you want to call it that: my fervent, votaristic, mystical, demand that America, our own country, should start first, arrive at something first, call up all the rest in triumphant joy!”

You see he was always looking towards the transfigured America. The America of his imagination was built upon the masses. Upon the development of the crowd. Upon the general welfare and vista. Not upon the fortunes or the culture of selected persons. Not upon an exception but a rule. Not being made
contingent upon what a minority may do but upon what the immense total may learn and assert. Not upon the professional classes but upon the crowd. That crowd. The dirty clean crowd. The ignorant informed crowd. The crowd. The major force of his America. The fountain head of its emancipated life.

Where that all is there’s America. Where that’s not there’s not America. He had no clear idea how he was to get his America. But he was persuaded that it would come. It was due. It would come in America if America was faithful. It would come somewhere else if America was faithless. It would come. It was in what he called “the inherencies of things.”

In one of our last talks he said to me: “You’re working in your own way for that which has been the inspiration and consolation of my life: you are using your own eyes to discover the path; I don’t quite appreciate your methods — not quite: perhaps I misunderstand them: but go on, go on, go on: God bless you: our end is the same: we want a real America, not a counterfeit America: we want it by any name it may come: we want the fact: America is civilization: civilization — the equality of all, all, worst, best, middling: a mixture of hell and heaven: civilization, democracy: not great wealth set off against great poverty; no, not that, God help us: but great wealth as the benefaction of all: a world without thrones, without exclusions: an average man’s world: your world, my world. That’s what we’re both after, Horace, disagree as we may over the processes leading to it: so go on, go on, go on: God bless you!”

Walt wanted an America from the people up and from the people down. He wanted the crowd superstructure as well as the crowd foundation. He thought America would give the world such an America. He had some fears that it wouldn’t but he had more confidence that it would. But one thing was above all sure. If our America didn’t give the world such an America some other America would. And his American idea, perhaps by some other name, sometime, somehow, would lead our much harassed world of mistaken animosities out of its shadowy tangle into fraternal acknowledgments and recognitions.

November 1917 (28:140)

Why Men Write

“T.”

I’m reading Bertrand Russell’s book: Why Men Fight. Why don’t somebody write a book called: Why Men Write? For writing a bad book may be as bad as fighting a bad war. And books may be as brutal as guns. All the frightfulness we
may have to condemn in war we may have to condemn in books. If the book is wrong. If it is sophistical. If it hates instead of loves. If it raises a club when it should raise an appeal. If it divides men instead of uniting them. The rifle is sometimes gentler than the pen. A book may have a keener edge than a knife. Keen for cutting. Keen for mischief. Books become a disease. It’s generally assumed that almost any book’s a big thing. A man who’s written a book, no matter what book, is above any man who’s not written. The superstition of the book is so profoundly rooted that it has been a fearful burden to the spirit. Everybody who used to come to see Walt Whitman in the days I was next him had written a book or books. Almost everybody. It came to be a horror to Walt to encounter new people. They’d always announce their books. A young man came on one occasion and talked with Walt a long time without mentioning a book. Walt must have been expecting to hear of the book any minute. Finally he asked: “And, pray: what book have you written?” The young man answered at once: “I’ve never written a book, Mister Whitman.” “What!” exclaimed Walt in surprise: “Never? Are you sure of it?” The visitor laughed and said: “Yes, sure!” Walt smiled, shoved his right fist forward, and said: “There: let’s shake again!” On another day, when Walt was not feeling so well, a man who came to the house was told that Walt couldn’t be seen. The caller was indignant and said to me: “Please tell Whitman who I am. Say I’ve written a book myself and have read his stuff!” When I reported to Walt he was quite hilarious in spite of his illness and said to me: “Excuse me to him: tell him that though I’ve written a book myself I haven’t read his stuff!” I’ve said time and again that the worst man was a more profound reality than the best book. Which should make books modest. I’ve of course explained further that the first thing after the worst man came the best book. I allow a good deal to books. But not the first place. No man has a right to write a book till he’s tried not to write it. The literature of the war is more barbarous than the war. Soldiers tell us that after the furloughs they’re glad to get back to the trenches. In the trenches, they say, is no bitterness. No revenge. Only dedication to a job. And forgiveness. Men have been killed by books. The injustice of literature is an unforgettable anomaly. We are apt thoughtlessly to assume that books lead the race. A few books maybe do. Most books certainly don’t. They follow. They come after. They don’t point the way. They come along when the way is sure. When the road is flat and solid and oiled. When I’m asked: Why shouldn’t I write a book? I ask: Why should you write a book? Why should I write even these lines? Why? Books have things to say to me about myself. I have things to say to books about themselves. If they say to me: How dare you? I may also say it to them. If I try books out they may also try me out. A book may bore me. I may bore books. Life and books are in the end tested by each other.
Monet shocked the world when he destroyed a group of his paintings. The world couldn’t understand it. He wanted to close the door on that period of his art. Sometimes, when we see how books are a bar to books, how they place themselves as obstacles in the path of books, how the instant a book becomes a classic it asserts itself against the work of fresh inspiration, we feel like resorting to the protest of Monet and making a bonfire of all the libraries in the world. Why do men write? Why do they have children? Why do they encourage any of their instincts? When we read some books we ask: Why don’t all men write? And when we read some other books we ask: Why does anybody write? Walt Whitman was fondly appreciative of Emerson and said countless times to me: “He’s so noble he excuses the whole writing tribe.” So you see he thought the tribe needed some extenuation. To write may be bad. To not write may be worse. There may be nothing finer to do. On the other hand nothing could be more offensive. The book illusion is hard to kill. People have an inexplicable respect for books. But coward books. And lying books. And books that array peoples against each other. And books that lie and steal and murder. And books that persecute. And Harry the innocent. And make light of social iniquity. And are a burden to the body and spirit of a man. Books that come too early or too late. That are not eyes to the blind nor lips to the dumb. That are an unlit torch or no torch at all. That savagely assail new points of view. That break faith with the crowd. That presuppose enemies and friends instead of comrades. That emphasize species rather than the universal race. Why do men write such books? Why do they disclaim all human responsibility? Can you say? Can you tell why they think that some theory of art is enough to palliate the absence of actual concern for the welfare of democracy? There are thousands of books. And there is only one book. There are thousands of writers. And there’s only one man who can write. You may be educated. But are you educated right or wrong? So you may write. But do you write false or true? Is your book a service or a sacrilege? Are you playing down or up? Do you bring disease or health? It’s not enough for you to say you’ve written a book. Why and what have you written? Have you proved your claim to pen and ink and to be listened to? Hadn’t you better go way back and sit down than go way forward and stand up? Why do men write? Do they write fair? Do they write with their eyes open or shut? Do they write with their hearts open or shut? Do they write for academic glory or in the effort of sacrifice? Is the man who writes more interested in himself than in others? We used to be told that God wrote a book about man. Confucius suggested that every man should write a book about God. That wouldn’t help God any. But it’d do a lot for you and me. War is one of the suppositions of progress. Books are one of the suppositions of revelation. We may outgrow both. When we have
learned to live we will stop writing. When we have learned to love we will stop fighting. We may come close enough together in the end to reach into each other without a written or spoken word. I hate to say anything against any book. Books are so essential and beautiful an utterance and explanation of man. But man is always prior. If books help men to get nearer men they have established their title. But if they add bars instead of taking them down they are to be deprecated. A worshiped book is liable to provoke spiritual indigestion. Read no book without blasphemy. Meet no man without unqualified faith. We’re required to declare the extremest valuations in order to achieve a fair balance between men and things. We can’t omit a single man from our worship or a single book from our irreverence. Why do men fight? Because they know less. When they know more they wont. Except in the upper realms of the soul. There they’ll fight more than ever. But fight as friends instead of enemies. In fraternity instead of revenge. Why do men write? Because they know less. When they know more they wont. Except in the upper realms of the soul. There they’ll write more than ever. But write as friends instead of enemies. In dedication to discovery rather than for cultural renown. We’ll come to both results. We’ll get some things out of our system and arrive with light baggage. In his lecture on Russia Steffens says the Russians are on to our psychology but that we’re not on to theirs. He says the trouble with us is that we are educated. That is, falsely educated. That is, we have built high but on wrong foundations. We’ve got to commence all over again and start right. There’s nothing to be said against culture. But culture must tend towards unifying not dividing people. One of our troubles is books. It’s writing. It’s words and phrases. We’ve built high with them, but wrong. We’ve ascended Babel-like into confusion. The higher we get the more tangled we are. The trouble is not with books. The trouble is that we’ve written the wrong books. Not that we’ve any rules for writing. Or any advice to give. Or any penalties to exact. No. But that a book lacking the fundamental human and democratic perspective is a mere blot in literature. It’s a fleck in the vision. And that’s why some scholars who read much and unwisely end with having more fleck than vision. End in utter blindness. It’s as if you shut all your windows and turned all your lights out inside and then complained of the darkness. Foolishness often asks questions that make wisdom look cheap. I find many people who lack the foundations of what is usually regarded as culture but who possess something an empty learning would give all it knows to inherit. Take care when you talk. Or write. Or paint. Or chisel a statue. Or do any of the esthetic or ornamental things in what are called the arts. Don’t get too far away from the fount. Go back there and drink often and till you’re drunk. The people are the reservoir of all beauty and sense.
I’ve been allowed to see this bit of genuinely good work of Karsner’s. But is Traubel worth such serious attention? One of Karsner’s best friends and a man who knows who’s who in literature said to him one day: “Believe me, boy, he’s not entitled to it: you’re wasting your time.” But Karsner kept stubbornly on the job till he got it more or less satisfactorily finished and seems to have some preposterous notion that he can secure a publisher for it some day. Traubel himself, while appreciating and reciprocating Karsner’s devotion, has tried to dissuade Karsner. He said to Karsner: “Don’t publish it now: wait five years or so.” Karsner asked: “Why?” Traubel replied: “For two reasons: first, it’ll give you time to study out and solidify your statement; second, it’ll give you a chance to change your mind.” Why should Karsner commit himself to an enthusiasm he might in a few years regret? But he made light of all entreaty and continued. Who would publish a book about Traubel? It would have to be a man who believed in him against fate. Where is there such a man? Traubel has no market for his own books. Why should there be any market for a book about him? I’ve been informed lately that Karsner intends writing about Dreiser. Now, there’s a man the world wants and enjoys being told about. Dreiser has a market. And a Dreiser biographer will find that market waiting for him. I know a lot about Traubel’s personal history. When he was a young fellow he was a hot advocate of Whitmanism and went for Walt’s enemies baldheaded. Walt himself many times cautioned Traubel to “hold his horses,” as he used to say. That is, go slow. That is, not claim too much. But Traubel was impetuous in his fiery propaganda. Karsner is much as Traubel was in all that. But the circumstances are different. Traubel had a rich nut to crack. But Karsner has a shell without a kernel. Walt’s after fame justified Traubel’s passionate protest. But nothing has happened in Traubel’s career to justify Karsner’s choice. The first thought I had in reading Karsner’s quite flowing and vivid narrative was that it was a shame, as his friend had warned him, to waste all that skill in a direction which was likely to foredoom it to oblivion. John Burroughs years ago wrote Traubel a frank letter in which he said: “That part of your work which does not make me laugh makes me mad.” At the best Traubel’s only known to a handful of people. And even with that handful of people he’s only rated as Walt Whitman’s...
errand boy. His own writing is either totally ignored or wholly despised. No magazine in America would print anything he writes. Even the newspapers have no use for him. To the college he’s uncouth. Just the other day he showed me a letter he’d got starting “you dear old fool,” and ending “you’re a loving old ass, of course, but an ass, nevertheless.” Traubel gets me all tangled up and confused. I can't make anything out of him. I should be prejudiced in his favor. But he often provokes me to the profoundest contempt. So I can well understand why the critics never take him seriously. A lawyer said to Traubel: “You’re all right, old man, for now and then, but you’re writing’s damned rot!” It argues well for Karsner’s courage that in the face of such facts, and an interminable list like them, he still contends that his hook’s not caught in some snag in the mud but that he has a genuine fish on his line. Publishers will reject his book because they have no interest in Traubel. But if he'll take the manuscript home and substitute some more plausible name for Traubel’s throughout I predict he'll find a publisher for it without delay. How a man as cute (i.e., acute) as I know Karsner to be could have been betrayed into such an infatuation it beats me to explain. But then we know every man marries the woman none of his friends would have chosen for him. And every woman marries the man none of her other lovers would have chosen for her. When the man marries we say to him: “Believe me, boy, you’re wasting your time.” And when the girl marries we say to her: “Believe me, dear, you’re wasting your time.” Perhaps it’s not so true that everything’s a mistake to somebody else as that everything’s different to somebody else. But we marry in spite of everybody’s pity. And we choose our books in spite of everybody else’s choice. And our pictures. And songs. And what we eat. And no matter what you can think of. We do as we please. And we please to do what we must. And so in the universal scramble everything gets a chance. Every lobster of a man. Every rotten egg. All the godforsaken monstrosities in art. No man is left behind. No thing. There’s an apologist somewhere for every derelict, no matter how feckless. It’s by supposing such a saturnalia of idiocy in which the brainiest people participate with the crudest that we can if not understand at least excuse Karsner’s delusion. Why, Karsner, in a series of chapters of undoubted force and pungency, actually constructs a sort of Traubel myth, in which we discover to our surprise that the man we’ve always only tolerated as a fair to middling ordinary companion in the commonplaces of life is after all gifted with uncommon spiritual graces. It’s a theory too outrageous to be considered, constructed and propounded with gravity and logic. I concede the importance of the significant exceptional individuals the world over who accept Traubel if not at Karsner’s valuation at least as voicing a forceful democratic seership and international
vision of fraternity. And I also consider that Traubel has a loving heart whatever mistakes or exaggerations or willfulnesses his head is guilty of. But even with such qualifications allowed for, this problem still remains open, and I’m not the man to settle it. He’s shown me some of the extraordinary letters he gets from day to day exhibiting this side of his case. But he always does so with the air of a man unconvinced if not unconcerned. He frankly says he’s a much greater tangle to himself than he would be to anyone else, enemy or friend. I feel finally like saying of Karsner’s book what Burroughs said of Traubel: “That part of it which does not make me laugh makes me mad.” Though I dont really allow that any of it makes me mad. But it certainly makes me laugh.

{Karsner’s *Horace Traubel: His Life and Work* was brought out by the New York publisher Arens in 1919.}
In 1896 Laurens Maynard began his appreciation of William Sloane Kennedy’s just-published *Reminiscences of Walt Whitman* with this assertion: “It is, I presume, an admitted fact that the time is not yet when the definitive life of Walt Whitman can be written. At present the best service that can be performed to Whitman’s cause must consist in putting on record the knowledge and estimates of those who stood in personal relations or in spiritual rapport with Democracy’s prophet-poet” (248). This service was frequently performed in the pages of the *Conservator*: in countless reminiscences en passant, especially by Traubel and members of the Whitman circle; in memoirs — some short, some long — scouted out in other periodicals or books and reprinted by Traubel; and in memoirs not hitherto published or delivered to him at his Chestnut Street office. Several of the most remarkable are reproduced here.

In “A Visit to West Hills,” Daniel Brinton records an 1894 visit by Isaac Platt, Traubel, and himself to Whitman’s childhood haunts, where two informants still clearly remembered Walt: “Of both we inquired whether Walt was a gay lad among the lassies of the village — a beau in the rustic society of his day — and both returned the same reply: ‘Not in the least.’ ‘He seemed to hate women,’ said one of them — a hard, and, I am sure, quite too strong expression, but one which forcibly shows how alien even to his hot blood of twenty summers were all effeminate longings.”

For the 1895 “Birthday Number,” Traubel gleaned from *Harper’s* William Dean Howells’s well-known recollection of his meetings with Whitman, notably at Pfaff’s, and in March 1896 appeared a letter from Whitman’s old British friend J. T. Trowbridge reminiscing about his first meeting in the Boston office of Thayer and Eldridge in the spring of 1860 and confessing his “falling away from my old-time admiration of Whitman’s work.” Charles Eldridge read
this piece and was emboldened to send a long letter refuting the charge, “evidently emanating from the icy precincts of Harvard University,” that Emerson was “greatly shocked” at the publication of his famous letter to Whitman. Then Eldridge reminisces about arranging the first Boston meeting of the two. Of course, it became a *Conservator* article.

In 1896 appeared, under the title “Another Recovered Chapter in the History of *Leaves of Grass*,” a very long letter to the editor of the *New York Tribune* written by William O’Connor, dated September 16, 1882. With his usual verve, he lambastes Anthony Comstock (he of the “ubiquitous and omnipresent nose”) and the Boston postmaster, a Mr. Tobey (the Massachusetts attorney general, “servile cats-paw of a malignant chimpanzee”), for the legal furor over *Leaves*. In an editorial note Traubel explains it was never published and had recently come to him from O’Connor’s widow. He also points out that it originally carried the “playful title,” “Tobey or Not Tobey? That Is the Question.”

A “few impressions” of Whitman by the book illustrator and political cartoonist David Cronin (1839–1925) are fascinating because they touch on a notoriously mysterious period in the poet’s life, the spring and fall of 1857. Cronin’s memories of Whitman at Pfaff’s are more revealing than those of Howell. An interview with John Burroughs that appeared in July 1896, “Walt Whitman and the Younger Writers,” contains memories on a variety of topics, notably Walt’s private relations, his elusiveness, and his oddness: “His idiosyncrasies were rather Socratic.” A hilarious paragraph describes Whitman’s frequently very tardy Sunday visits for greatly admired buckwheat cakes at the Burroughs home in Washington.

A particularly illuminating memoir is that of the noted abolitionist, journalist, biographer, and philanthropist Franklin Sanborn, which tells of his first laying eyes on Whitman in 1860 in a Boston courtroom, as Whitman listened to arguments for the release of Sanborn from confinement, the case involving John Brown. Sanborn also recalls the day in the summer of 1855 when Emerson introduced him to *Leaves of Grass*: “It is a remarkable mixture of the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *New York Herald*,” Sanborn recalls Emerson saying. In November 1899, a month after the death of Daniel Brinton, Traubel ran a recent interview with the “old and tried friend of the poet.” It touches vividly, among many topics, on their first meeting, on Walt’s conversational style, his life in “a rather unsavory part of Camden,” and on Brinton’s constant fears of a conflagration amid the litter “almost knee deep” at Mickle Street: “Expostulations were fruitless. Whitman with habits unmodified went serenely on his way.” Brinton’s last interview with Whitman is also poignantly described.
In a 1900 *Conservator*, a budding poet named Leon Mead describes being taken by Joaquin Miller in September 1881 to meet Whitman in his “comfortable apartments at Mrs. Moffit’s caravansary” in Boston. “Quoting from memory,” Mead re-creates the Whitman-Miller dialogue, which focuses on Whitman’s recent visit to Emerson in Concord and Miller’s recent visit with Longfellow. Miller brings tears to Whitman’s eyes, Mead noticed, by repeating several Longfellow compliments to the poet. Whether Mead followed Walt’s one bit of advice — “wear a shirt with an open bosom, so that ‘the summer breeze could get at’ me” — is not disclosed.

In the July 1901 issue, William Cauldwell offers a rare glimpse of Whitman in his editorial years. Cauldwell writes that, at the age of seventeen, he was a typesetter at the *Daily Aurora* when Whitman was its editor. His thumbnail sketch certainly presents an unaccustomed vision of the young poet in 1842: “tall and graceful in appearance, neat in attire, and possessed a very pleasing and impressive eye and a cheerful, happy-looking countenance. He usually wore a frock coat and a high hat, carried a small cane, and the lapel of his coat was almost invariably ornamented with a boutonnière. This was some years before he indulged in *Leaves of Grass.*”¹ The death in March 1907 of Peter Doyle evoked a reminiscence by the Boston dentist Percival Wiksell. In addition to sketching Doyle as a perfectly Whitmanesque man — “He held no pose. Cared not a hang for anyone’s opinion. Lived a free sane life and hated appointments. Spoke only of things in his knowledge. Never faked up any good-sounding phrases.”—Wiksell recalls several vignettes from years of acquaintance on the Boston end of Doyle’s run as a railroad baggage master.²

In the November 1909 *Conservator*, William Hawley Smith recounts a visit with his wife to Mickle Street on a “hot August afternoon” in 1889. The couple had “no letters of introduction, or credentials of any kind” and just knocked on the door. The stars were aligned, and a cordial visit ensued. “Wife has always said he looked like a god. Never having seen a god, I cant say whether she is right or not.” In 1914 Traubel presented an extract from a manuscript autobiography by William Thayer found after his death. This memoir touches on the highly successful biography of John Brown published by Thayer and Eldridge and then on how they approached Whitman about what was to be the third edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Their letter to Whitman (“a stranger to us”) so impressed Whitman that he showed it to Emerson at Concord: “The latter praised it, and said there was hope for freedom of thought and a free press when such a publishing house . . . dared to take up the defense for the poet who had been so savagely criticized.”

³⁸ *Memoirs of Walt, Leaves of Grass, & the Whitman Circle*
In 1917 appeared an interview with Francis Howard Williams, who was close to Whitman for about fifteen years. He discusses the local prejudices in Germantown against the poet (“neighbors of mine wouldn’t let their daughters come to the house when they knew Walt was there”), Walt on the subject of marriage (“Walt was sensitive when people asked him why he never married.”), and the woman in New Orleans that Whitman “refers to . . . in the poem ‘Once I Passed Through a Populous City.’” This was just three years before Emory Holloway discovered a manuscript version in which the encounter is with a man. The final memoir, “Walt Whitman’s Personality,” appeared in the last Conservator from the last Whitman literary coexecutor to survive, Tom Harned. It offers his memories of Whitman’s arrival in Camden and several telling or amusing anecdotes. Several additional but more fleeting reminiscences can be found in the “Fillers and Squibs” section.

Notes

1. This sketch accords well with possibly the earliest known photograph, from the early 1840s, of Whitman, where he is seen with cane and a frock coat but no boutonnière. See Ed Folsom, “‘This Heart’s Geography’s Map’: The Photographs of Walt Whitman,” WWQR (1986–1987): 7, 43. Folsom quotes a self-description that appeared in the Aurora, which includes mention of a cane (“a heavy, dark beautifully polished hook ended one”) and a frock coat (“a gray one”).

2. The irony of Gustave Percival Wiksell’s poignant performance is rich, for there are letters in the Library of Congress that strongly suggest Wiksell and Traubel carried on a passionate affair for several years circa 1899–1905. In fact, Traubel and Wiksell posed for photographs that mimicked the famous “love-seat” photograph of Whitman and Doyle. Wiksell presided over Traubel’s memorial service. See my Intimate with Walt (xxix–xxx) and Ed Folsom’s introduction to the ninth volume of WWC (xx). In addition to six short poems (10:52, 13:69, 13:101, 14:36, 16:20, 18:4) and a poem marking the death of Bucke (13:5), Wiksell figures in the Conservator several times: he is one of the eulogists of Robert Ingersoll (10:89); Traubel is reported being Wiksell’s guest for several days in 1901 in Boston on one of his “annual visits to these acres” (12:125); in 1902 Wiksell discovered an early Whitman poem, “The Punishment of Pride,” in an old 1841 periodical, and Traubel published it (12:189); in 1905 he reviewed Hamlin Garland’s The Tyranny of the Dark (16:105); he is mentioned as having been present in Boston when the notorious biographer Bliss Perry interviewed Traubel (284); a short essay on connoisseurship, “Pots and Laces,” appeared in 1909 (19:184); the last item on the last page of text of the last Conservator, rendering homage to Leaves of Grass, was authored by Wiksell (403). After Traubel’s death, the Canadian Bookman (Oct. 1919) reported of the funeral at the People’s House.
headquarters of the Rand School of Social Science: “Dr. Wiksell, of Boston, a very old friend, was in the chair throughout.”


November 1894 (5:135)

**A Visit to West Hills**

*Daniel G. Brinton*

Three of us — Dr. Platt, Traubel and I — started one Sunday morning to visit the birthplace of Walt Whitman, at West Hills, Huntington township, Suffolk county, Long Island.

The train carried us at first through miles of kitchen-gardens, which cover the plains outside of Brooklyn and Long Island City, and later into a hilly, rather sterile-looking landscape, wooded with low forests and gashed deep with ancient fiords, until we stopped at the town of Huntington.

From the railroad station the land stretches southward in a gently undulating plain to the foot of the West Hills — gracefully rounded piles of glacial gravels, two or three hundred feet in height, wooded from base to summit. The road, like the adjacent fields, is bounded by continuous hedgerows of low oak, chestnut, locust and hickory trees, with a wild undergrowth of briars and vines. Here and there a frame house, shingle-covered, its wood weathered to a soft gray, blends with the stronger hues of the leaves and late flowers. By the side of one of these our driver reins in his horses, and we are before the birthplace of Walt Whitman.

An elderly woman, with kindly face and a soft voice, appears at the door of the kitchen, and, at our request, takes us through the house. The ceilings are low, but the rooms are spacious — a parlor and bed-room to the left of the hall, a dining-room to the right, neatly furnished and marvelously clean. The house, too, in good repair, and likely to last a century yet. Outside, across the lane, an orchard with russet and red-streaked pippins, peering from amid gray-leaved boughs. At the end of the lane, a straggling row of wagon-house and shedding, beneath which a wain filled with immense pumpkins, buff and golden, hints of the harvest-home of the year.

The high road wound onward between its tall forest hedges, curving southward toward the foot-hills; but we left it to reach them by a shortcut, and on
their outermost knoll to stand beside the uninscribed stones which mark the resting place of the earliest Whitmans of the town.

It is but an arrow’s flight from the primitive cabin in which they passed their lives. Parts of this still remain — huge joists, squared true with the broad-axe, hand-split shingles, still defying storms after nigh a century and a half, the outlines of the great fireplace spanning its width — but most of it has been sunk out of sight in its modern use as a wagon-house.

Across the road stands the “big oak,” which Walt loved so well, scarred and beaten by storm and time, but strong and majestic still; and close by the “grove of black walnuts,” hale and graceful with their pendant fronds, neath which he joyed to throw himself upon the grass, at full length, throat and breast bared to the free winds, and drink deep draughts from the font of universal life, the dugs of All-Mother Earth.

Beyond the old cabin a stream flows down from the hills and in uncounted ages has worn for itself a shallow valley eastward across the plain. By the roadside, where we ford this streamlet, the height is sufficient to carry the eye miles across the lower levels toward the sunrise. Numerous copses and hedge-rows conceal the cultivated fields and the steadings, so that the prospect is that of a wild, scarce-cultured scene, imparting a sense of rude nature and free growth to the mind.

Here, on this spot, I believe I caught what I had hoped I might — the inspiration of the scene, which, unconsciously to himself, had moulded Walt’s mind. I say unconsciously, for once I asked him whether the landscapes of his boyhood still haunted his dreams and formed the settings and frames of his nightly visions, as mine do with me, but he returned one of those steady glances and vague replies with which he was wont to turn aside the curious, leaving me in doubt whether such was not the case, or whether I had approached with shodden feet some holy ground in the fane of his mind. Whatever the answer might have been, now I know that the peasant sturdiness of that landscape, its downright lines, its large sweeps, its lack of set forms, created the mould into which his later thought was cast. Neither years of wider life nor witnessing grander beauties altered him from what the West Hills had made him.

Amid the deep revery of nature on that mild October afternoon we returned to the village of Huntington, there to meet the few, the very few, survivors who recall Walt’s first appearance in the literary world as the editor of The Long Is-lander, nigh sixty years ago (1836). Two of these forefathers of the hamlet clearly remembered his powerful personality, brimful of life, reveling in strength, careless of time and the world, of money and of toil, a lover of books and of jokes, delighting to gather round him the youth of the village in his printing room of
evenings and tell them stories and read them poetry, his own and others’. That of his own he called his “yawp,” a word which he afterward made famous. Both remembered him as a delightful companion, generous to a fault, glorying in youth, negligent of his affairs, issuing *The Long Islander* at random intervals — once a week, once in two weeks, once in three — until its financial backers lost faith and hope and turned him out, and with him the whole office corps, for Walt himself was editor, publisher, compositor, pressman and printer’s devil, all in one.

The house where the paper was published by him still stands — a homely frame structure, now moved back from the roadway and turned into a stable. It was on the main and only street of the village of Huntington, a pleasant-featured old place, nestling amid orchards and elms in one of those valleys which, without a rugged line, sink between the hills to the placid waters of the northern Sound.

We asked our venerable informants of Walt’s parentage. Neither remembered his mother, but both his father — a large-limbed, heavy man, even taller and broader than Walt; strong of arm and slow of speech, a “woodyer,” as one of them called him, who chopped and hauled loads of cord-wood to exchange for groceries at the country store; a taciturn Colossus, who attended no church and did not seek the society of his fellow townsmen.

Of both we inquired whether Walt was a gay lad among the lassies of the village — a beau in the rustic society of his day — and both returned the same reply: “Not in the least.” “He seemed to hate women,” said one of them — a hard, and, I am sure, quite too strong expression, but one which forcibly shows how alien even to his hot blood of twenty summers were all effeminate longings.

Walt had told one of us [Traubel] that if he ever should go to Huntington, not to waste his time in graveyards, but to see the harbor and the shore. Mindful of his advice, we spent an hour or two threading the roads which wind around the hills above the strand, watching where they dip to the inland sea in many a soft curve and cosy nook. The sun was westering, and its rays struck myriad shafts of glitter from the tiny waves. Along the valley road, old trees shaded older houses; for this was the first site of the town’s settling, and a “common,” open in perpetuity for the use of all, told of another and more ancient mode of life and of laws than that known among us. From every coign of vantage on the hill-summits the Sound spread its smooth waters to the eye — east, west and north — a peaceful inner-water, flecked with the white sails of various craft.

Amid such scenes Walt was born, passed his first five or six years, returned from time to time on visits, and definitely, when sixteen or seventeen, first to teach a district school, and then to edit *The Long Islander*. That position
terminated by the action of his long-suffering backers, as above stated, Walt wandered away from his native town at twenty years of age, not to see it again for forty years, — the lad, bubbling over with animal life, transformed into the palsied gray beard of three score. Youth and health had alike gone forever. Of his family, which for two centuries had been as adscripts of the glebe in Huntington town, not one of the name survived in it anywhere; their broad five hundred acres at West Hills had to the last rood passed into alien blood and unlineal hands.

Of this visit he himself tells, and I need not quote; but what he does not tell, and what we found every where among those who met him then or knew him in his early years, was the sweet and deep impression, the genial and kindly remembrance, which his personality left on his fellow townsmen, whether in his teens or in his sixties.

March 1896 (7:4)

Whitman Inspired and Uninspired: And His Eroticism

J. T. Trowbridge

I hardly know how I have merited at your hands the kindness of which I am reminded each month, when the Conservator comes a welcome guest to my table. I always find something in it to interest me, and never fail to read the discussions of Walt Whitman and his works, whether they throw any new light upon that inexhaustible theme, or merely illustrate the limitations of the writers. I was one of the earliest and most ardent admirers of Leaves of Grass, with which I became acquainted soon after the first edition appeared in 1855 — the thin small quarto that astonished the critics by its uncouth typography, by the appearance of formlessness, almost of illiteracy, in its long, irregular, ill-punctuated lines, most of all by its nonchalant treatment of a topic tabooed in modern polite literature, as well as in polite society.

I first met the author when he was in Boston, in the spring of 1860, putting the Thayer & Eldridge edition of his poems through the press. He visited me in Somerville, where I then lived — came out one Sunday morning, and spent the day with me in such hearty and familiar intercourse, that when I parted with him in the evening on East Cambridge bridge, having walked with him thus far on his way back to Boston, I felt that a large new friendship had shed its glow upon my life. After that I saw him many times, oftenest in Washington — in the
hospitals, in the Attorney General’s office, in his own humble lodgings, and among his friends, a little group of whom, including John Burroughs, used to meet at the house of that eloquent and altogether delightful man, Walt’s fiery champion, William Douglas O’Connor.

From the first, my warm personal regard for Whitman and my estimate of his earlier writings never altered. America has not produced a larger, more generous nature; and there are in his works passages which in scope and force are unsurpassed in modern literature — perhaps one might say, in any literature. How any one reading him with open vision can deny his tremendous power, I do not understand any more than I do the failure of so many of his admirers to discriminate between his best work and his worst. His good work is incomparably good; his bad is often hopelessly and flounderingly bad. He wrote — as Emerson said of Wordsworth — longer than he was inspired. The best of him in prose and verse is still comprised in that first thin volume of 1855, and in what is called the Fowler & Wells edition of 1856 — the edition which Fowler & Wells undertook, but recoiled from putting their imprint upon when they came to see it in type; the edition that contained, along with the original Leaves, the superb “Sundown Poem,” the “Poem of the Road,” the “Broad Axe Poem,” and other pieces almost equally good, which Whitman afterwards re-edited and re-named so often, to the bewilderment of his readers. Each subsequent edition seemed worse than its predecessors, in the rearrangement of old materials and in the additions of unleavened matter to the incongruous mass. On the other hand, his largeness of view, his magnificent optimism, his boundless love and faith, gave always a certain value to his least inspired prose and verse.

I have been accused of something like apostasy, in falling away from my old-time admiration of Whitman’s work. What is great in it is still as great and wonderful to me as ever; but I have no more sympathy with the bibliolatry of which it has become the object than I have with any other bibliolatry; and if in his later years I was not so near to him as formerly, it was because I drew aside from the ever-increasing press of his followers, and preferred remaining an onlooker to keeping step with the procession.*

I did not set out to say all this, but to thank you first for numbers of the Conservator, and then to comment briefly on the Whitman-Osgood correspondence printed in two of your recent issues. It confirms the impression I have always had, that Osgood & Co. acted honorably in the affair of the suppressed edition, and took the only course open to them after receiving the District Attorney’s ultimatum. They were doing business on a narrow margin of capital, and could not afford the expense of litigation for what seems to have been,
after all, quite as much a matter of pride as of principle with Whitman himself. He was willing to cancel objectionable passages, the absence of which would not be noticed by the casual reader; “the whole matter to be kept quiet” in the publishing-house; “the change to be silently made”; the book “to look just the same,” and so forth. He had already done something of the sort, “silently,” in previous editions, as careful readers of him are aware; and he had authorized W. M. Rossetti to edit for the British public a volume of *Leaves of Grass* selections, from which, it was expressly understood, were to be excluded all such passages and allusions as that public might find offensive. The District Attorney’s action was ill-advised, and founded upon ignorance; but when his objections were narrowed down to only two pieces, Whitman might have consented to their excision, since hundreds of lines were still left to bear witness to the eroticism which he claimed to be so vital a part of his work. I think the District Attorney would have backed out of the bad business altogether, if he, too, had not felt that his pride was involved; he might at least have been brought to confine his official surgery to the more important of the two pieces. “A Woman Waits for Me” was the one great blemish in the Fowler & Wells edition, in which it originally appeared under a still more startling title {i.e., “Poem of Procreation”}. It was chiefly this poem which gave such offence to Emerson, who was made unwittingly to endorse it in the sentence from his now famous letter to Whitman — “I greet you at the beginning of a great career” — printed in conspicuous gilt letters on the back of the volume. Whitman expressed surprise that I, too, should object to the piece — as I did in one of our talks — since I had not objected to the more passionate manifestations of the virile impulse which occurred in some of his other poems. I replied that it was not the subject I objected to in this instance, but his way of treating it. I said: “It is as prosaic in some of its details, as if, in writing a devotional poem, you should tell us how carefully you place a cushion under your knees when you go into your closet to pray.” As I regarded the poem then, so I regard it now. It has no “divine nimbus,” no “flames and ether,” no veiling metaphor, to clothe and irradiate it and transfigure its gross animalism. Value it may have as a physiological exposition, but it has none as poetry, and Whitman might well have sacrificed it to the misdirected zeal of the District Attorney.

*In one feature of his criticism the writer would doubtless find a recent paragraph in the *Christian Register* much to his mind: “Is it possible to have music when you take away melody and have simply rhythm, or is it possible to have music when you have melody without rhythm, or when you have noise without either? That is the experiment Walt Whitman tried...*
with poetry. He tried the effect of melody without rhythm and rhythm without melody, and sometimes discarded both, and gave us nothing but the noise of his ‘barbaric yawp.’ Certainly there is material for poetry in his lines, just as there is material for architecture in the rude blocks of marble cut out of Pentelikos. But to pile these blocks in a heap does not make a Parthenon. Every one of them may contain a Hermes as good as that of Praxiteles, but it needs the artist to bring it out. Whitman was a quarryman, not a sculptor; and we cannot pay for his marble, rough and unpolished, what we pay for the finished statue. We must decline to worship at the shrine of his colossal egotism, before which now certain young men are swinging their incense.” — Editor.

MAY 1896 (7:38)

“A Woman Waits for Me”: The Personal Relations of Emerson and Whitman

Charles Wesley Eldridge

I was pleased to see in your March issue a letter from my old acquaintance, John T. Trowbridge (see preceding “Whitman Inspired and Uninspired”), in regard to Walt Whitman. I know Trowbridge as one of Walt’s old and valued friends, and I believe he was so esteemed by Walt to his dying day. Trowbridge is himself a charming poet, and one of the best story-tellers that America has yet produced. No apology was necessary from him to the other friends of Walt Whitman, even if he did quail under the Adamic frankness of some of Walt’s poetry. I, for one, am willing to acknowledge that the poem entitled “A Woman Waits for Me” was pretty strong meat for persons reared in a generation which had been for so long dominated by literary prudery. Mr. Trowbridge can see nothing in the poem but “gross animalism.” It is interesting and fair to place side by side with this opinion the estimate of his eloquent friend, William Douglas O’Connor, which I quote from a letter long ago printed in the New York Tribune:

Nothing that the poet has ever written, either in signification or in splendid oratoric music, has more the character of a sanctus; nothing in modern literature is loftier and holier. Beginning with an inspired declaration of the absolute conditioning power of sex — a declaration as simply true as sublime — the poet, using sexual imagery, as Isaiah and Ezekiel, as all the

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prophets, all the great Oriental poets, have used it before him, continues his dithyramb in exalted affirmation of the vital procreative effects of his book upon the women — that is to say, upon the future of America. And this glorious conviction of a lofty mission — the consciousness, in one form or another, of every philosopher, every apostle, every poet, who has worked his thought for the human advancement — the faith and the consolation of every sower of the light who has looked beyond the hounding hatreds of the present to the next ages — the eminently pure, the eminently enlightened, the super-eminently judicial Boston District Attorney considers obscene!

I am glad to call attention to this brilliant defense of a much-abused and misunderstood poem, for the further reason that it gives me an opportunity to record my conviction that O’Connor was the ablest and most accomplished polemic writer who has appeared on this side of the Atlantic. His was the power that was able, at will, to wield the thunderbolt of satire like a Junius. His writings all had a rhetorical glow and cadence, a felicity of phrase and epithet, combined with a wealth of historic and literary allusion, only equaled, if equaled at all, in the pages of Macaulay. He was my dear and life-long friend, and I am only reconciled to his failure to receive his due meed of appreciation from his countrymen by the fervent belief that his fame is bound up with that of our great poet, whose earliest and most defiant champion he was; and as Walt Whitman takes his march down the centuries, the chivalrous knight who fought so many battles in his cause cannot fail to be recognized at his true worth by every gallant heart in every age.

Walt Whitman said to me once, during the later years of his life, referring to Leaves of Grass: “I have either done a very great thing or it is nothing at all.” I am one of those who believe that he has done, or attempted to do, several great things, and one of the greatest of these was the attempt to uplift the whole subject of the sexual relations of men and women out of the reeking mass of filth and falsehood to which it had been consigned by the common consent of a so-called Christian civilization. The period of the appearance of Leaves of Grass was, probably, the most prudish of which history has any record. Can it be wondered at that in such a society the Biblical plainness of speech found in Whitman’s poems caused a prodigious sensation?

There is no doubt but that Emerson was shaken by the storm that arose, but he never retracted a single line or word of his noble greeting to Walt Whitman — of that unexampled letter which will probably be regarded by posterity as Emerson’s chief title-deed to fame, and will stamp him as the profoundest critic of his generation.
Walt’s publication of this letter has often been alluded to in terms of censure by comparatively friendly, as well as hostile, critics. It has been called the unauthorized publication of a private letter. But a letter from a total stranger is not usually considered a private letter. Especially when a book is sent to a critic between whom and the author no previous acquaintance exists there is a tacit understanding that the reply, if one is made, is intended for use in furthering the circulation of the work. There was nothing whatever in the tone of this particular letter to indicate that it was intended by Emerson to be private; indeed, from its general terms, its evident deliberateness, the splendor of its diction, every presumption was the other way. Even as it was, Walt hesitated to publish the letter until assured by Charles A. Dana, then editor of the New York Tribune, who desired to print it in his paper, that such communications were, as a matter of course, intended for such use.

Soon after Walt’s death I noticed, amid the various comments on his career, an item in the New York Critic, not vouched for by any name, but evidently emanating from the icy precincts of Harvard University, which stated that Emerson was greatly shocked at the publication of his letter, and never forgave Walt the offence.

To show the malignant falsity of this statement I will refer first to the fact that there was not a year from 1855 (the date of the Emerson letter and its publication) down to 1860 (the year Walt came to Boston to supervise the issue of the Thayer & Eldridge edition of Leaves of Grass), that Emerson did not personally seek out Walt at his Brooklyn home, usually that they might have a long symposium together at the Astor House in New York. Besides that, during these years Emerson sent many of his closest friends, including Alcott and Thoreau, to see Walt, giving them letters of introduction to him. This is not the treatment usually accorded a man who has committed an unpardonable offence.

In further refutation of this abominable falsehood, I will refer to the relations subsisting between Walt Whitman and Emerson during Whitman’s first visit to Boston in 1860, concerning which I am competent to bear testimony from personal knowledge. Soon after Walt arrived in Boston Emerson appeared at the counting room of the Thayer & Eldridge publishing house and said that he understood Walt was in town, and he wanted very much to see him. He stated also that he had previously been away out to the South End, where he understood Whitman was lodging, but had failed to find him in. I immediately conducted Emerson up to the top story of the Boston Stereotype Foundry’s building where Walt was engaged in reading the proofs of his book, and so brought them together in Boston for the first time.
I know that, afterwards, during Walt’s stay in Boston, Emerson frequently came down from Concord to see him, and that they had many walks and talks together, these conferences usually ending with a dinner at the American House, at that time Emerson’s favorite Boston hotel. On several occasions they met by appointment in our counting room. Their relations were as cordial and friendly as possible, and it was always Emerson who sought out Walt, and never the other way, although, of course, Walt appreciated and enjoyed Emerson’s companionship very much. In truth, Walt never sought the company of notables at all, and was always very shy of purely literary society. I know that at this time Walt was invited by Emerson to Concord but declined to go, probably through his fear that he would see too much of the literary coterie that then clustered there, chiefly around Emerson.

Before I close this reference to the relations of Emerson and Walt Whitman, I wish to put on record what I remember hearing about the famous walk and talk on Boston Common, in which Emerson pleaded with Walt for the omission from his forthcoming edition of *Leaves of Grass* of the poems relating to sexuality. I know that Walt has written an account of this conversation in which he makes the statement that though Emerson’s arguments were unanswerable, he persisted in retaining the objectionable passages in obedience to an irresistible impulse. It is probable either that Walt had forgotten a good deal of what occurred, or that in the largeness of his charity he was willing to forgive much to the memory of his friend, for I cannot forget Walt said to me at the time that Emerson’s principal arguments were directed to showing that if the objectionable passages were retained it would interfere with the general circulation of the book, and thereby impede, if not wholly prevent, his early recognition as a poet. That men would not buy the book and give it to women, and that it would scarcely be allowed under the conditions to lie on parlor center tables. Walt frankly acknowledged that he was saddened to find such temporal considerations the chief arguments offered by so great a man as Ralph Waldo Emerson.

**JUNE 1896 (7:57)**

**A Few Impressions of Walt Whitman**

*David Edward Cronin*

When I was a young artist of eighteen, on the lookout for everything odd or picturesque, I often saw Walt Whitman. His personality left on my mind so
deep an impression that I can recall him now, as if I had seen him but yester-
day, standing with a couple of friends at the edge of the sidewalk, waiting for a
bus. I recall his exact figure, bearing, the slope of his rather broad-brimmed
felt hat, the bare throat, the stalwart manhood expressed in every movement,
the superb color of health in his face, his smiling, friendly eyes. I can see him
hail the driver, who apparently knew him — see him give a hearty nod of his
head to his friends as he mounts to the driver’s seat.

Several times afterward I saw Walt Whitman riding beside drivers on
Broadway stages, and I always took a good look at him, because I understood
he was “studying life,” and this seemed to be detecting him in the act.

In the spring and fall of 1857 I frequently saw Whitman in Pfaff’s restaurant,
on Broadway, near Bond Street. Sometimes I sat near him at table and heard
him talk. As I took one or more meals at Pfaff’s almost every day, for months, in
that and the following year, I came to know, by sight and name, all the habitudes
of the place — the coterie of literary men, newspaper reporters, artists, who
helped to make the place somewhat famous. As a group, they probably ap-
proached nearer the descriptions given of the better class of Parisian Bohemi-
ans than any similar gathering ever seen in a New York café. Whitman was by
no means so well known then as some of the other writers I met there; as, for ex-
ample, George Arnold, Fitz James O’Brien, Henry D. Clapp, William Winter,
“Doesticks” Thompson and Charles Dawson Shanley. It was Whitman’s im-
posing personality and unconventional attire that made him the most notice-
able figure of the whole group. But, though a frequenter, he could scarcely be
considered an habitue of the place. That is, he was not one of the everlasting sit-
ters, some of whom did their writing there. He came, not every day, but occa-
sionally; always appeared to treat his friends in a cordial, yet dignified way; did
not seem to linger, and was prone to go off to ride on a Broadway bus.

My impressions of Whitman then, considering him as a poet, were derived
from the remarks of two of my intimate companions, my seniors by several
years. One was a writer, belonging to a literary family: the other, an artist
and a scholar — somewhat cynical, as became a thorough New Yorker and
man of the world, yet, as I believe, fair and even generous as a critic. From
my literary friend, I received the impression that Whitman was a mere
eccentricity — a volunteer fireman of ordinary attainments, trying to write
verses. My artist friend gave me a different view. He described Whitman as a
printer, a self-educated man with literary ambitions; the owner of a newspaper
somewhere on Long Island, a worker who was not to be confounded with
the loquacious sitters who spent the whole day and part of the night at
Pfaff’s. This artist had read some of Whitman’s verse and understood it.

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In short, he gave me the impression that Whitman was a man to respect, not to deride.

About this time there appeared in the *United States Magazine* a review of *Leaves of Grass*, which I read with a great deal of interest, because I was acquainted with the editor, Mrs. Elizabeth Oakes Smith, and always read everything in it. American magazines were few in those days. If I remember correctly, it was a highly appreciative notice, though strongly condemning and ridiculing the eroticism of the book.

The first enthusiastic admirer of Whitman I ever encountered was my artist-chum in Düsseldorf, Germany — Charles Shoemaker, brother of the well-known sonneteer, Dr. W. L. Shoemaker, of Georgetown, D.C. He was a lover of poetry and an accomplished reciter. In a vague way, I understood from him, for I had not arrived at any independent judgment in such matters, that Whitman was really a great poet, but was far ahead of his time.

At length, I read *Leaves of Grass*, myself, and under peculiar circumstances. In the winter of 1861–62, at Camp Stoneman, near Washington, I occupied a wall-tent for several months with a brother officer. The only book in the tent, if not in the camp, was the handsome folio edition of *Leaves of Grass*. It must have been left there by a former occupant of the tent. At least, I never knew to whom it belonged, and in those days it did not much matter. Books were of little account. We had nothing else to do that winter but drill once or twice a day. I read the book through, and some of the poems several times. I may say that I never made the common mistake of supposing that the “I” in the book meant the individual — Walt Whitman. To me it meant I — the abstraction, the poet. I became familiar with *Leaves of Grass*; admired many passages, tried to admire more, in a receptive way, but failed, of course, at that immature period of life, to find “the great poet, ahead of his time.”

I was greatly interested in Dr. Bucke’s thorough refutation [in the June 1895 *Conservator*] of the careless charge of “degeneracy” preferred by a pseudo specialist against Whitman. Many years ago, when, so far as I know, Dr. Morel was the only one who had recognized “degeneracy” as a tendency as well as a disease, I happened to learn the meaning of the term. His work was printed in 1857. My attention was called to it by the surgeon in charge of the Virginia State Lunatic Asylum at Williamsburg, where, for six months, in 1864, I was Provost Marshal.

Nordau uses the term “degenerate” as an epithet; Morel, to describe a constitutional disease affecting chiefly the brain. As many do not understand the absurdity of the term as applied to Whitman, and as so much clamor has been raised over his eroticism, I wish to describe a real degenerate under my charge.
in Williamsburg — a lunatic who was allowed, in the daytime, the liberty of the streets.

And, first, let me say that if there is anything that distinguishes the degenerate from the natural man, it is this: the natural man is characterized by virility of thought, speech and action. In the true degenerate, virility, sometimes through accident, but generally through congenital defect, is either feeble in degree or altogether absent. No modern poet has shown greater virility, more masculinity, than Whitman.

“M.,” the lunatic I describe, then about forty years of age, was almost a giant in stature. He was committed to the asylum at the age of twenty-nine, from a town in West Virginia. He had been a strangler of women. His malady did not disclose itself until he was sixteen or seventeen years of age. Before that period he had been a diminutive boy of amiable disposition, fond of his books. With his sudden, rapid physical growth, he began to exhibit an abnormal, or rather an emasculated, sense of propriety, so pronounced and aggressive that it was called to general attention by his acts. He took upon himself the special championship of women, something after the style of Don Quixote, who, had he been a real character, I should say, was afflicted, in milder degree, precisely as “M.” was. Before he was twenty-five he had been repeatedly arrested and fined for assault and battery. It was not an unusual thing for him to knock a stranger down in the street for observing admiringly a pretty woman passing by, or for using what he considered improper language. In short, he was always resenting, by rebukes or blows, quite imaginary insults to the other sex. But he differed from Don Quixote in this: while he was the champion of woman he was also her severest censor, and woe to any woman, either acquaintance or stranger, whose conduct, however innocent, he might construe into an “attempt at flirtation,” as he termed it. He pestered the magistrates of his native town for warrants of arrest for women perfectly well-bred and in high social standing, charging them with “indelicate behavior.” He sent a petition to the Legislature urging the adoption of a law regulating the style of dress women should wear. He was arrested once and heavily fined for breaking into a medical college and destroying valuable charts on anatomy and physiology and crushing to pieces a costly manikin. This ferocious prude, remember, had strangled two or three women. To one of them he had been betrothed. A wealthy and politically powerful family, by establishing his insanity, saved him from the gallows.

Some of his symptoms are manifested in the “esthetic” poetry of our day. You can find no trace of them in the works of Walt Whitman. If there was ever a natural man it was Walt Whitman. And no man ever pondered more fearlessly on the profoundest problems of life.
The last time I saw Whitman was in Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, during the war. I turned to look at him. He had aged perceptibly, but was still stalwart, erect and noble-looking as ever.

{David Cronin (1839–1925) became a well-known book illustrator and political cartoonist.}

July 1896 (7:69)

Walt Whitman and the Younger Writers: An Interview with John Burroughs

Walter Blackburn Harte

John Burroughs was an intimate friend of Walt Whitman for nearly thirty years — from 1864 to the time of his death in 1892. It is with some sober consciousness of the fortuitous chance which in literature sometimes saves some ephemeral record as the stuff of a page of impartial history, that I transcribe these notes of a delightful morning spent with John Burroughs. I give Mr. Burroughs’ picture of Whitman just as he gave it to me, with all the small details that hold the poet in the every-day of human life. Whitman, who occasionally allowed his desire to spiritualize real things to plunge him almost hopelessly into catalogue-making, would appreciate this sort of biographical record, for his philosophy was broad enough to appreciate The Autocrat’s aphorism, “Everyman his own Boswell,” in its whole scope and audacity, as perhaps few of The Autocrat’s admirers have accepted it. And no man in American letters demands the Boswellian treatment more than Whitman, for the man himself was elusive as the democratic spirit he stood for and voiced in poetry.

Walt Whitman was a constant visitor at the home of Burroughs in Washington, and one of his favorite days for a call was Sunday. He was very fond of Mrs. Burroughs’ buckwheat cakes, and he used to drop in to her Sunday breakfast. But he was never an early bird. He was one of the slowest moving men on earth, and he moved in a large easy fashion altogether out of character with the nervous activity of the type that we usually think of as the representative American. The characteristics of the American hustler were not such as to arouse his emulation, for he saw life in meditation, and went about his simple pleasures and business with deliberation and leisureliness as if he had all eternity to move in. Thus he often kept Mrs. Burroughs’ breakfast waiting, and caused no little agitation in the kitchen, for perfect buckwheat cakes are the creation of
a momentary exercise of genius almost as much as poetry itself. Sometimes the breakfast waited for an hour or more, but after watching one car after another, the patience of the watchers was always duly rewarded. A large gray figure would swing off a car, and, with its hands in the side pockets, come rolling along towards the house. Thus Whitman would sail in, unruffled by conscience or clocks.

Whitman was a large clean man, and had always about him a childlike sweetness that gave his presence a powerful magnetism. His touch was wholesome and pleasant, and his physiology generally seemed to give one the index to his glorification of the body in his poetry. He was a large, finely made, muscular man, and he felt the miracle of the mechanism of the body. His attitude on this particular phase of human life has been much criticised, but it was well illustrated in his own recreations, and especially in bathing. There was something large and significant and peculiar in his embrace of the sea. He gave himself to it like some sportive reverent ancient Greek, and it was typical of his resignation and acceptance of all the immensities and ironies of nature and human nature.

These Sunday mornings were spent in talk, until noon, and immemorial talks they were. It was an education, a profound spiritual experience, to listen to the poet, who seemed to hold all the sweetness and bitterness of human life in his large vision, and whose serene acceptance of everything braced more rebellious minds to sufferance and patience. On all questions he was invariably wise, broad, sympathetic, genial — he had no sudden, unexpected, deep-rooted prejudices and narrownesses, which are so frequently the very marrow of genius. His idiosyncrasies were rather Socratic, and all his opinions were those of an exceptionally strong and broad intellect that lived above the storm and stress of the day — large, tolerant, profound and ever tender. There was never any bitterness in his speech or criticism, and there was never any shade of repining at his own fortunes. Occasionally he would launch into fiery denunciation of the politicians, but for the people he displayed infinite charity and patience.

Sometimes Whitman would spend a week or so at the Burroughs farm on the Hudson, and Mr. Burroughs says of those long days of summer walks and talks that it gave him the delightful sensation of being a modern man with Plato on the premises — an intellectual pleasure enhanced by the sense of the nearby roar of New York, and the incongruity between its aims and those of the poet of democracy who found inspiration in its streets.

During these days of profitable idleness Whitman, who delighted in the country, would saunter about and sit under the trees with his host, or alone, and
it is probable these idle hours yielded as much to both men as many hours of industry. They were broadening, deepening in intercourse and intimacy, and mellowing in thought away from the distractions of the follies and the squabbles of the contemporary literary world. The same wind-blown freedom is in the pages of both men. And in reading much contemporary literature in the light of Whitman’s indolence and untroubled large possession of leisurely days, one can see that it is this serenity, this self-poise, these sun-lit hours of care-free meditation, that it lacks. Our contemporary writers, with a few exceptions, do not saturate themselves sufficiently in life and the inspiration that insensibly and intangibly colors the work of the man who is imaginative enough to be idle with nature. It is such periods of meditation that so many of our writers need. Old Walt Whitman was at his grandest, largest and tenderest in the woods, and with his great gray figure he looked like a strange fantastic seer of some old fiction.

Whitman’s utterances on the relations of the sexes and the beauty and dignity of the sex principle have caused the severest criticism on his work. In his private life and character he was quite different from the popular conception. Mr. Burroughs describes him as a man of singularly clean and refined speech, a man of too broad and too philosophic a temper to have any toleration for lewd stories, which belittle and degrade the great things of life. All sexual matters were too sacred to him to be profaned or treated with levity. He recognized in this mystery the source of love, poetry, religion and all the virtues of human character, all the dignity of human life, and those who have accused him of wanton impurity of mind and imagination spoke and wrote in ignorance of the exalted ideals and profound religious character of the man. Mr. Burroughs declares that in the thirty years of his intimate acquaintance with Whitman there were no entanglements, or suspicion of any such, with women, so far as he knew, and such relationships are apt to become known to a man’s masculine intimates. Whitman was somewhat cold and reserved with women with whom he was unacquainted, and in a certain way, in his private social character, he was more a man’s man than a woman’s man. He felt he could give himself more unreservedly in intellectual intercourse to his own sex than he could with women, for as he never contemplated marriage, he felt some diffidence with women, not on his own account, but because women are so apt by nature to misunderstand intellectual familiarity and friendliness for something deeper and more serious. On the contrary, Mr. Burroughs suspected that certain mature women of the world had designs upon the poet, who certainly received from women letters peculiarly frank and unconventional.

In the free confessions of his poems Whitman speaks as the poet and artist. It is just here that the confusion has arisen in the minds of many readers, and,
indeed, of many critics, from whom we should have expected a greater measure of insight. Whitman identifies himself as an artist with the sexual passion and glorifies it, and takes all its sins and joys and blessings and excesses upon himself as a type of perennial humanity. He identifies himself with his theme, after the manner of other great artists, and it is his aim to show the contradictions and complexities of nature, and so whatever men have done under the intoxication of passion he imputes to himself, as the symbol of all the shades of nature bound up in human nature. Thus he makes himself the mirror of life, in which we can all read the strange and potent forces that govern our fellows, even if they are ruled and subordinate in us.

This was one of the great aims of Whitman’s art — to give with the history of the human soul the influences intertwined with it in the physical laws and forces of life. To leave this out of his work would have been to reject the very mechanism of human conduct, the mainspring of the human spirit. This will come to be better understood as the moralists and the world in general grow wiser in recognition of the dignity of this great force of sex in life. We are taught to hide and ignore it, in spite of the fact that it alone gives our virtues, our love, our society, our arts, industries, civilization, morals, religion, any meaning, and all the motive power inherent in them. But with the expansion of science will come a new reverence for the sacrament and sanctity of sex, the one force which is alone potent enough to keep human life from a mad and soulless anarchy.

Every sweet human tie that binds us in moral duty and love to one another has its source in sex and sexual affinity, and we are profaning the Creator when we crush it into the mire as something gross and horrible and corrupting. To restore the dignity and grandeur of the body as it existed among the ancients, before they were corrupted by perverse religions and luxury, was part of Whitman’s mission in poetry. And therefore he must not be interpreted literally, as a gross realist, but symbolically, as a great idealist who used realism for the purposes of idealism. His egotism is purely vicarious and includes all mankind. What so many readers have mistaken for a display of strange personal vaingloriousness is the expression of satisfaction and pride in the stock and opportunities of the race.

All this is great poetry when properly understood, and Whitman’s complete justification is the increasing humaneness of all that is significant in the tide of current fiction and poetry. Whitman’s influence is easily discernible in the work of the younger poets, in that little body of literature which is written with as genuine inspiration as the poetry of any era, and which promises an outburst of profound feeling in literature similar to that known as the Elizabethan. In a
refined and chastened spiritualization it is present as the dominant intellectual quality and purpose of such work as is gathered together in Bliss Carman’s latest volume, “Behind the Arras.” But it is even more noticeable in the work of the younger English poets — of the men who have made “The Bodley Head” and other London imprints synonymous with masculine and serious purpose in poetry. The immense significance of Whitman’s much scoffed at doctrine of freedom is shown in his palpable influence in stirring the younger poets of England to greater out-spokenness and a healthier objective tone. We see it in the work of William Ernest Henley, Richard Le Gallienne, Norman Gale and others. But Whitman’s influence will increase in America, and especially in the West. Havelock Ellis has said: “Whitman in his own domain made the most earnest, thorough and successful attempt of modern times to bring the Greek spirit into art. The Greek spirit is the simple, natural, beautiful interpretation of the life of the artist’s own age and people under his own sky.” The work conceived and executed in this spirit, and with this serenity of satisfaction with the eternally human materials at hand, will be that which can alone give America a worthy and distinctive literature.

A recent critic — and, by the way, a man of science at the Antipodes — has given a very apt description of the peculiar force exerted by Whitman. He says: “Whether you agree with him or not he will sting you into such anguish of thought as must in the end be beneficial.” Edmund Gosse, on the other hand, is of the opinion that Whitman lacks thought; but this seems simply to be the natural distaste of a man whose mind has been formed in the decorous moral and intellectual world of English upper-middle-class-dom for a great and original rugged force that is beyond his sympathies and comprehension. It is the English gardener’s opinion of Casco Bay, or the Adirondacks, or the Rockies.

Whitman does not harden into intellectual propositions. He is fluid and plastic. It is simply ruinous for any writer to imitate Whitman’s style. His mannerisms are too easy to catch, and they work a palpable diminishment of all individual thought in any work that bears their impress. But Whitman is not a manner but a man, and a great spiritual force. His imitators in mere style will only invalidate and obstruct the great good of the influence of his outlook. It is his spirit and not his style which must be the inspiration of the younger writers. He was the last man in the world to wish to be imitated. He took down the bars and turned his reader loose in the great universe to make the best and the worst of it. His lesson was in direct opposition to the medieval ideal of pinching and sordid asceticism which still animates religion and morality. There are thousands of poets who, with all their music, leave no effect with the mind. Whitman was a poet of elemental forces, and this is his great illuminating
power in modern literature. As has been written of him by another poet, his immortal distinction lies in his instinctive reversal to the old Greek ideals. He was

the taller Socrates,
Greek to the core, yet Yankee too.

September 1896 (7:99)

Another Recovered Chapter in the History of Leaves of Grass

William Douglas O’Connor

[The letter that follows was addressed to the New York Tribune, under date of September 16th, 1882, and, so far as I can discover, was not there or elsewhere printed. I have come into possession of the manuscript through the generosity of the widow of its author. It is by her consent and co-operation that I present it here to the readers of the Conservator. O’Connor’s playful title given this article contained a question which, separated from the text, was more intelligible then than it would be now: “Tobey or Not Tobey? That is the Question.” — H. L. T.]

In August Mr. Anthony Comstock told your reporter that if he found Leaves of Grass on sale in New York, he would certainly take steps to suppress it. August has melted into September, five large editions of Leaves of Grass have been sold under his very nose — his ubiquitous and omni-prevalent nose — and he has taken no steps whatever. This adds another to the group of bold and beautiful works of the imagination he exposed to the public through the agency of your reporter. It is a small but precious gallery. In old days, one of the Boston wits called a fine but highly fastidious art critic, Mr. Franklin Dexter, a man of the most exquisite distastes. Only a connoisseur of this description would be fit to inspect the mendacious masterpieces of Mr. Comstock. The eye trained to repugnance by severe regard for truth finds in these compositions an infinity of details for objection, while admiringly aware of the audacious chaos of fact and dream which makes them miracles of artistic lying. No one of them vies better with Turner’s latest pictures, in which imagination splendidly drowned out veracity, than the brilliant portrayal of the action of Mr. Tobey, the Boston postmaster in respect to Mr. Chainey’s lecture. Upon this, I promised you, in
my last letter, a separate communication, which, like the matter pertaining to it, it well deserves.

The cold, hard, prosaic reality which gave basis to this particular art-gem of Mr. Comstock’s, is as follows:

In May last, I unmasked the impudent and sinister attempt made by Mr. Oliver Stevens, the Boston District Attorney, and the gang of which he made himself the tool, to establish, in the instance of Leaves of Grass, a censorship of the press in America. The subsequent conduct of Mr. Stevens freshly lights the dark import of that deed without a name. As Coke said at Raleigh’s trial — “See the reach of this man!” Except that he has a “reach,” I know of no resemblance Mr. Stevens bears to Sir Walter, unless indeed, as his conduct would seem to suggest, that he has lost his head. How worthless and how wicked the head he had to lose is shown in the story of his base and silly coalition with Mr. Tobey to continue his original act of iniquity.

In Boston there is a brilliant lay-preacher, quite as good as Joseph Dennie, named George Chainey. He is not, as Mr. Comstock, courting the prosecution for slander he is not worth, has the vile audacity to declare, “a free-lover,” but the pure and honorable husband of a true wife. He was formerly a clergyman, but is now, as Colonel Ingersoll wittily says of him, “reformed.” He is settled over a large and respectable congregation, privileged to hear his weekly discourses, and in his capacity as a guardian of public morals, and with a paladin spirit worthy of the man, and too sadly infrequent in our scholars and men of letters, he took occasion on Sunday, June 11th, following the suggestion of my May letter in the Tribune, to address his audience upon the scope and purpose of Leaves of Grass, and upon the recent wrong done its author. The discourse was a gallant vindication of the work of our Homer of the heart, as one of our scholars has, with apt beauty, called Walt Whitman, and its incidental censure of the shameful abuse of power which had been practiced upon the book by Mr. Oliver Stevens was marked by manly temperance and dignity. Mr. Chainey’s discourses are published regularly in a debonair weekly journal which he edits, and this one of June 11th went duly into type. It was illustrated by several citations from the poem; among others, the noble verses I also had defended, entitled “To a Common Prostitute”; and it appears that the printer, although he saw nothing objectionable in the piece, shrank from setting it up, lest under the peculiarities of the law in Massachusetts, his business should become subject to the persecutions of the Boston District Attorney. To relieve his apprehensions, Mr. Chainey had the verses printed upon a separate leaf, and included in his paper as a supplement. Then, with perhaps undue
conscientiousness — but “even his failings leaned to virtue’s side” — anxious that his journal should not infract postal law, he went to lay the question that had been raised before the Boston postmaster, Mr. Tobey.

Mr. Tobey is a pious elderly gentleman, well known in Boston, prior to his appointment as postmaster, for his prominent connection with several business enterprises, all of which, I believe, he successfully conducted to failure. Hafiz tells us, in one of his most charming poems, that the earth of which Allah made him, was kneaded up with wine. The most unquestionable oil might have been used in mixing up the clay of Mr. Tobey. He exudes it like an exhalation. Words, tones, looks, demeanor, are all sleek, sanctimonious and oleaginous. The suave man speaks and smiles in a holy-oily aura. Early in life he avoided the vulgar error that Church and State are separated in this country, and resolved to make piety grease the ways of trade and politics. He lost no opportunity to make known his religious professions, and inching along, became President of the Boston Young Men’s Christian Association. A sniffling speech he made last January at the Bethel to the poor little children of the First Baptist Mariners’ Sunday School parades the avowal that he indirectly obtained his present official position by means of this agency. It is now his pious wont to sit, like an anchorite, in the cavernous recess of his private room in the Boston post-office, and meditate, as he says, “on the comfort of Jesus” — keeping, meanwhile, as will be seen, a sharp lookout for any official chance to tamper with the mails of the free religionists. This is the unctuous gentleman called upon by Mr. Chainey.

If, superimposing one miracle upon another, the prophet Jonah could have absorbed the whale that had previously swallowed him, he would not have been a completer interfusion of sanctity and oil that was embodied in the suave saint of the Boston mail-bags on that holy Thursday. He blandly assured Mr. Chainey that no objection had ever been taken to the passage of Walt Whitman’s book through the mails, and, moreover, that no such objection could possibly be taken without putting an embargo upon literature, inasmuch as such action would exclude the Decameron of Boccacio, the works of Rabelais and Shakspere, and many other illustrious volumes. The postal laws touching obscene matter were, therefore, clearly inapplicable in this instance; the only doubt, slyly suggested Mr. Tobey, was whether Mr. Chainey’s interleaf was properly in the form of a supplement, and this question he proposed to submit to the Post Office Department at Washington. This being the conclusion, Mr. Chainey meekly assented, and left Mr. Tobey to the little task he was to slip in between his post-office meditations on “the comfort of Jesus.”

The next day, Friday, June 16th, Mr. Tobey wrote to Washington. The papers, issuable on Saturday, the 17th, had to wait unpublished. On the Thursday
following, the 22d, the answer came from the Post Office Department that the supplement did not come within the definition of the law, and hence that the paper containing it was not mailable at pound rates, but must go as third-class matter. And why was the interleaf not a supplement? Marry, come up, now! Are not reasons plenty as blackberries? Perhaps, because it was supplementary. There is one reason already! However, Mr. Chainey, bowing to official wisdom, as to the inevitable, paid the extra twenty dollars to have his paper mailed as third-class matter, and the next day, Friday, the 23d — twelve days after the delivery of the discourse — the mail-bags containing the noble lay-preacher’s vindication of the poet went rejoicing to the Boston post-office, and Mr. Chainey rested happy in the assurance that his light was sown in the minds of his subscribers.

The seed-time of his rays was, however, still deferred. It is characteristic of the dulciferous benevolence of Mr. Postmaster Tobey that he spared this misguided man the shock of knowing that his mail-bags had never left the post-office. Kindly, sweetly, silently, with never-ceasing exudation of oil, he detained every bag, but fore-bore to break the news to Mr. Chainey. Why vex the heart of the citizen with sorrow, the knowledge of which cometh sooner or later by slow leakage? Mum be every post-office clerk while we sit upon the mail-bags of the Man of Sin, and meditate upon “the comfort of Jesus”! It was late on the following Monday, the 26th — three days afterward — that Mr. Chainey learned by the merest accident — a chance meeting with a subscriber on the street — that his discourse on Walt Whitman’s book was not yet in circulation, and hastening to the post-office he found that not a copy had been suffered to leave the building. Thunderstruck, he sought the presence of Mr. Tobey and demanded the reason. The good and faithful servant of the people instantly became a gushing geyser of holy oil. He had stopped the paper, he declared with unctuous and saintly fervor, because he considered the quoted poem, “To a Common Prostitute,” obscene. Upon Mr. Chainey’s fiery demand why he had not thought so at their first interview, ten days before, Mr. Tobey suavely responded that he had not then read the poem. As a mere matter of fact, he had read it three or four times, with Mr. Chainey looking at him and seeing him do it, but a good father of the church, Eusebius, I think, says it is allowable to lie for the glory of God, and Mr. Tobey is too faithful a disciple to fail in any precept. Continuing the bland explanation and defence of his action, he presently let the cat out of the meal-bag — in this case, unhappily, a mail-bag. He had consulted the District Attorney, Mr. Oliver Stevens, who had assured him —. As Sterne says, “Shall I go on? No!”
All this was on the 26th of June. Two days before I had seen an item in the Boston Advertiser, announcing the stoppage of Mr. Chainey’s address in the mails. It bore reference to the first detention on mere postal technique, but a man’s nose is placed between his eyes that he may smell out what he cannot see into, and knowing “the ways of such people” (Boccacio’s phrase in speaking of the pranksome devils depicted by Dante in the Inferno, and quite apropos of Messrs. Stevens, Tobey, Comstock, and the rest), and suspecting the true mischief, I at once wrote to Mr. Chainey, personally a stranger to me, asking the particulars. In due time I got them. They included the fact that Mr. Tobey had again referred the supplement (on June 26th) to the Postmaster General, this time for decision upon the question of obscenity. He had promised Mr. Chainey that he would simply submit the case without any attempt to bias the judgment of the Postmaster General, but in making this promise he had remembered his Eusebius, for in his letter of transmission he distinctly expressed the conviction that the supplement lay within the intent of the postal law against obscene matter; cited in confirmation of this view Oliver Stevens’ original action; brought up as additional proof Osgood’s sneaking desertion of the book; and, in a word, said all he could to artfully prejudice the question.

I thought the cause, under the circumstances, possibly a desperate one, and, seeking a comrade fit for a forlorn hope, I went at once to the good, the gallant Colonel Ingersoll. “Osmand had a humanity so broad and deep that, although his speech was so bold and free with the Koran as to disgust all the dervishes, yet was there never a poor outcast but fled at once to him; that great heart lay there so sunny and hospitable in the center of the country that it seemed as if the instinct of all sufferers drew them to his side.” We agreed that the fate of the book was at stake — the book Emerson told Professor Loomis was an absolutely fresh revelation in literature and history — the great book which is the seed-cone of all the future of America; we agreed that the interests of free discussion, in the instance of George Chainey’s lecture, were at stake also; and we went to plead the issue with the Postmaster General. I need not state the result, which the telegraph on the 10th of July carried, with essential truth, to all the public journals. Mr. Howe deserves the cordial thanks of every true American. The Man of Letters sustained the men of letters, and Mr. Chainey’s lecture went free. Yet even after the decision reached him by telegraph, the good and faithful public servant, Mr. Tobey, neglected to give the order for the transmission of the mail-bags he had contrived to detain for three weeks, and they were despatched, without orders, by the honorable audacity of a subordinate. Furthermore, his spiritual oil heated to
boiling at the news wired to the journals that the Postmaster General had ruled that \textit{Leaves of Grass} could not be excluded from the mails, he took pains to furnish items to the Boston papers, stating that the report was false, and that the ruling only covered a quotation. If Mr. Tobey thinks this true, let him try to stop the flying editions of \textit{Leaves of Grass} as they pass through the Boston post-office. The general principle which animated the Postmaster General’s decision in the special instance is known to no one better than to Mr. Tobey, despite his contributions to literature in the Boston journals.

I do not propose to dwell upon the part played by Mr. Oliver Stevens in this precious transaction. Yet his reappearance upon the stage is both significant and memorable. Writhing, smarting, gasping at the dose of bamboo he got from the public journals in May — my letter in the \textit{Tribune} only the first stroke of the gauntlet — he totters in, like the cudgeled attorney of a farce, and wreaks his spite and fury in putting up the postmaster to a war upon the rights and interests of citizens. May the scene be remembered to him forever, and may the remembrance begin when Suffolk county next seeks to elect a decent District Attorney! My present concern is not with him, but with that extension of him constituted by Mr. Postmaster Tobey — the servile cats-paw of a malignant chimpanzee. We have been favored of late years with several varieties of the terra-cotta Christian — far other than the image whose marble beauty looms across the ages from the low hills of Palestine, and stirs the pulses of every thoughtful as well as every adoring heart. We have had the Christian statesman, with his Bible interleaved with Credit Mobilier bonds; we have had the Christian banker receiving deposits up to the very hour of dishonest failure; and we have had the Christian cashier absquatulating with the funds. We are now treated to a view of the Christian postmaster. Appointed to send the mails, but surcharged with mean moralism and odium theologicum, he occupies himself with revising them. As in the transformation scene of a pantomime, the postman changes into the inquisitor. He stops a public journal for three weeks, injuring the business of the publisher and trampling on the rights of the subscribers. While several thousand people wait for their paper he dips with Oliver Stevens into a low intrigue against the freedom of the press, holding in leash the discussion of his partner’s original act of infamy, while he endeavors by artful sophistries to commit the Government at once against the issue of the periodical which had touched his confrere with the whip of Juvenal, and the immortal book from which it had quoted half a page. He cogs, he smiles, he dissembles, he lies, to gain time for the secret correspondence by which he hopes to effect his dirty double end. Mr. Tobey knew his duty perfectly. He knew perfectly well that Walt Whitman’s book, and 

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every part of it, was mailable matter, as he admitted when in his first cajoling conversation with Mr. Chainey he classed it with Rabelais and Shakspere (to either of which it is as snow to scarlet), avowing that it could not be banned from the mails without laying an embargo upon literature. Knowing and having admitted this, he had but one official duty in regard to the page Mr. Chainey had reprinted from the volume, namely, to mail it — to mail it without note or comment; and his subsequent attempt to bar its transmission on the charge of obscenity was, in all its details, no less a ridiculous inconsistency than a piece of low chicanery and a culpable breach of public duty. And who is he anyway? Who is this little old pigmy of a postmaster that occupies himself with the moral questions of the mails — that takes upon himself the tremendous office of public censor, and endeavors to arrest the armed march of free letters, and stop the roaring looms of free discussion, in America? It stirs the blood, even at the distance of three centuries, to read as a preface to *Don Quixote* the inquisitor’s printed certificate that the book contains nothing prejudicial to religion and good morals, and is therefore licensed to pass into circulation; and to reflect that there has been a time on earth, which some would like to evoke again from hell, when the radiant and noble wisdom of Cervantes was dependent for its liberty to enter the mind and soul of the human race upon the arbitrary will of a man! Still, we might endure, if only for the tragic dignity of it, that our poems and our lectures, our journals and our literature, should take their imprimatur or their doom from the dark hand of Torquemada — but who is Tobey?

The Boston post-office does not stand where it used to, but it is still near enough to that State street which lost its old name of King Street because of acts of official tyranny and encroachments upon the rights and interests of citizens, no more petty and base than this performance of the Christian postmaster. His friend, Mr. Comstock, insists upon bringing him and his midsummer operations into the notice I had almost concluded to deny them, and I therefore take the occasion to tell the grandsons of the men of the Old State House that it does them and their traditions little credit that they tolerate in their most intimate public office a gentleman so inimical to liberty, so foreign to civic duty, and so destitute of the higher qualification, as the George Chainey episode proves Mr. Tobey to be — proves, in my judgment, so absolutely as to justify the remark that a petition for the appointment of his successor would at this time be in perfect order.
May 1897 (8:37)

Reminiscent of Whitman

Frank B. Sanborn

Address given before Boston Branch of the Walt Whitman Fellowship, January 21st.

I have brought in with me to-night, and perhaps I will hand it around before I begin to speak, a copy of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* which belonged to Henry Thoreau, and was given to me by his sister, Sophia, a few years before her death. I do not know the history of the volume further than that; but I imagine it was either given to Thoreau by Whitman himself, or by Emerson. It may be that Thoreau received this from Whitman himself. The fly leaf, which the ignorant binder took out, contains Thoreau’s autograph, and there is also a little matter that came to me in it, which contains a line in Thoreau’s handwriting: “Please give this to Mrs. Thoreau.”

The reading of these letters which Mr. [Laurens] Maynard has brought to you to-night has revived in my memory several facts which were lying there concealed. The first letter — the one written from Boston in March, 1860 — was dated but a few days before I first met Whitman. I will speak presently of my acquaintance with his book, which was five years earlier. But the first time of my seeing Whitman was during that visit to Boston, when he was printing his Boston edition of *Leaves of Grass*. I knew his publishers, Thayer & Eldridge, very well. They were young anti-slavery men who had started publishing in this neighborhood, and such was the success of their *Life of Brown* (Redpath’s) that they launched out as publishers with a good deal of confidence and with a result, pretty speedily, of failure. But at this time they were in active business, and were very ready to take up any book which Mr. Redpath recommended.

It is perhaps known to some of this company, though probably not to many, that on the third or fourth of April, 1860 — about five days after this letter of Whitman’s was written — I was arrested in Concord, taken out of my house, handcuffed by a party of men from Boston, headed by a United States marshal, who wished to carry me to Washington to testify in the case of John Brown. I was taken out of the hands of these United States officers by the sheriff or deputy and brought before the court here. The district attorney, their counsel at that time, was Charles Levi Woodbury. My counsel were the late Governor Andrew, Mr. Samuel Sewall, and my classmate, Robert Treat Paine. I sat in the
old court house listening to their arguments, and as I sat there saw an extraor-
dinary man sitting near the door, wearing a carpenter’s jacket, gray or blue —
a very striking looking person. Many friends of mine had gathered there under
the impression that if the court refused to discharge me they would themselves
take a hand in the business. By three or four o’clock in the afternoon (the first
time I had ever been subjected to any process in court) the Chief Justice, old
Judge Shaw, pronounced the decision of the court, which was, that this warr-
rant on which I was arrested was addressed to McNair and was served by
Carlton, and that under the law laid down by Broome in his *Legal Maxims* de-
legated power could not be delegated again. I forget exactly how the Chief Jus-
tice expressed his opinion. It signified little to me. I said, “All right. That
sounds very well,” and just sat there. Wendell Phillips came over to me and
said, “You are discharged. It is time for you to go.” I got up, bowed to the
court, and left the room. My friends took me over to Cambridge and put me
on the train for Concord.

A few days after I was in Boston and went round to the publishing office of
Thayer & Eldridge, and there, sitting on the counter, was this extraordinary
person I had seen in the court house. I was introduced to him. He was Walt
Whitman. My personal acquaintance began at that time. I had known a great
deal about his book and about himself before, from my neighbors, Mr.
Emerson, Mr. Thoreau and Mr. Alcott.

It was in the summer of 1855, I should suppose not later than the first of Sep-
tember (I think the book was published in July or August), that I was walking
one day with Mr. Emerson. We were crossing a bridge over the Concord river,
about a mile from Mr. Emerson’s house, when he began to tell me about this
book, *Leaves of Grass*, which had been published in New York. He asked me if
I had seen it. I said, “No!” “Well,” he said, “you shall see it.” I went home with
him and he gave me a copy of this first edition, bound in paper, and in our walk
he gave me some description of it, saying: “It is a remarkable mixture of the
*Bhagvat Ghita* and the New York *Herald*.” I then, of course, took the book and
read it, and was astonished, as everybody was, at the remarkable incongruities
in it; it was unlike anything. Mr. Emerson soon after that went to New York, and
when he got back home, told me about his acquaintance with Whitman. He
said he went to New York and sought out Whitman, and Whitman came and
dined with him at the hotel which he then frequented, the Astor House, and af-
fter dinner Whitman took him round to one or two of the engine houses; for his
particular friends then were the firemen, and he wanted to show Mr. Emerson
what the firemen did at that time for their leisure. He also told me about
Whitman’s spending so much time riding on the omnibuses in New York, up

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and down Broadway, sitting with the drivers and observing the city from that point of view.

My friend Ellery Channing, who is living with me, the other night, speaking of Whitman, said to me: “I was present when Mr. Emerson first saw his own letter of praise printed by Whitman.” I asked, “What did Mr. Emerson say?” He replied, “Nothing; but he was as angry as I ever saw him in my life.” That was the occasion of a certain change of mind in Mr. Emerson, not, however, with regard to the genius of Mr. Whitman. His letter was a private letter and it had no business with the public, and Emerson should have been asked if there had been any wish to publish it or any part of it. Instead of asking consent Whitman rushed into print with the letter. That shocked Mr. Emerson’s sense of propriety, which was very acute, so he probably very seldom thought of Whitman after that without thinking, “That is the man who printed my private letter.” His opinion of Whitman’s genius never changed, but he lost interest in the later poems. When *Drum-Taps* came out, or soon after, I was very much struck with them and took the book down to Mr. Emerson’s house, where I was in the habit of going frequently, and asked him if he had seen it. I think he said he had seen it but took no particular interest in it. I asked, “Have you seen this poem?” and called his attention to the Lincoln poem, and to that very extraordinary poem in which the old colored woman appears, surveying Sherman’s army. I either read them to him, or he read them; but he said, “I like the *Leaves of Grass*, but I do not see in these later poems what I saw in them.” He never spoke with the slightest disrespect of Whitman.

You may remember that after Thoreau’s death (he died in 1862) Mr. Emerson edited a collection of Thoreau’s letters and poems (I have since edited a more complete edition of the letters). Soon after it appeared I was walking with him one day and he said to me: “When, in eulogizing Thoreau, I made that remark about three persons (the three persons, as you probably know, were John Brown, Joe Polis and Walt Whitman), and Sophia Thoreau heard what I said, she told me she did not think that her brother was so much interested in Whitman as I thought, and, in deference to her, in printing I left out that passage. But I have lately been looking over the journals of Thoreau, and I am satisfied that I was right. He did make that impression on Thoreau which I thought he made.”

That introduces another little circumstance: During this first visit of Whitman in Boston, in 1860, it was the wish of Emerson and Thoreau to invite him to Concord. The ladies of these houses, Mrs. Emerson, Sophia Thoreau and Mrs. Alcott, declared they would not have him in the house.

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Afterwards Louisa Alcott was so much interested in Whitman, that when I went to see him in Philadelphia in 1876 (while visiting the exposition there), she desired me to purchase for her a copy of his last edition. And I did so, and brought it home to her. Mrs. Alcott was not living when Whitman finally visited Concord, though I think she had overcome her prejudices on the subject; and Sophia Thoreau was not living; but Louisa Alcott was present at my house on the occasion that Whitman speaks of in his *Specimen Days*, when we discussed Thoreau, and we were invited the next day to Emerson’s house, where, as he says, he had a very pleasant conversation with Mrs. Emerson. But still, there was a great feeling of prejudice in regard to Whitman. When I invited my neighbors to be present at this conference there was considerable censure on the part of the people of the town. They advised their friends, especially the young ladies, not to come. Emerson came and Mr. Alcott and Louisa Alcott, as Whitman mentions in his account of the matter.

I have printed in my edition of Thoreau’s *Familiar Letters* the same passages that Emerson printed with regard to Whitman, and perhaps some that Emerson omitted, and you will find there in that volume, either in the letters or in my notes, some passages showing how strong was the impression Whitman produced upon Thoreau and Alcott. They went together to see him in Brooklyn.

Whitman was certainly a striking looking man, and would attract the attention of people in any city of the world. I think Whitman was a little too well aware of his fine appearance. There was a strong element of individuality mixed up with his personality, and he did not have occasion to experience what the Arkansas colonel did in walking up and down Broadway. The colonel put on his military cloak with red facing, and walked up and down, and when he met his friend the major, in the evening, he said: “I am going to leave this town. I walked up and down Broadway this morning and not a man looked at me, but when I am at home I am hell on Pea Ridge.”

When Whitman came to visit me in Concord, in 1881, he wore, as always in his later years, some white, soft colors and that long, white beard. His hair was perfectly white. He had a singular resemblance to Gerrit Smith, which I attributed to his Dutch ancestry, Smith being almost wholly Dutch.

Then Whitman’s manners were interesting. I fancy in his younger days, when he dined with Mr. Emerson at the Astor House and insisted on having a tin cup at table, that his manners were not so distinguished; but after he had been through the war and had seen more of life he certainly had very distinguished manners, so that anybody accustomed to the circles of the great would have
been struck with them. As Thomas Cholmondeley said of Bronson Alcott, Whitman “had the manners of a very great peer.” He was independent in bearing, and had the composure of manner which always produces an impression on the people of Europe. He was extremely friendly to all persons. In Concord, on the morning of the Sunday spent with me, he drove with Miss Prestonia Mann, who was living in Concord for the summer, and had a fine pair of Arabian-looking horses. She took him in her carriage, driving herself. In the afternoon I took a carriage, and with Whitman, Mrs. Sanborn and some friend — Mr. Alcott, I think — we also took a drive around the town, and we were out an hour or two; and, finally, towards sunset (this was in September), we drove to my house. We had been driven by a coachman because I wished to leave the carriage and show Whitman those places which I thought he had not seen in the morning, and it was more convenient to have some one drive this pair of horses. We were helping Whitman out; his movements were slow, and we were about going into the house. The rest of us had not thought about the driver. I was in the habit of seeing him every day. Whitman turned to him, with his magnificent manner, and said: “My friend, I suppose I shall not see you again,” giving him his hand, and bidding him good-bye, which is, I suppose, what “a very great peer” would do, though it is not customary in this part of the world.

In the call which Thoreau and Alcott made upon Whitman they found him living with his mother and sister, in great simplicity. They were taken up to his bedroom, which was a small room, and there had their conversation with him! They were struck with the simple, affectionate relations which he seemed to have with everybody, and how proud his mother was of him! Mr. Alcott called in the morning, and found he was not at home; but his mother was here, and Mr. Alcott stayed as long as he had time, for Mrs. Whitman, the mother, occupied a good deal of that time in telling Mr. Alcott what a remarkable boy Walt had been, what a good son, etc., things that mothers generally say concerning such sons.

My own relations with Whitman, though always friendly, were not very close. I corresponded with him but little. When there was occasion to mention him or render any service to him, I did so, but I think I only saw him on those three occasions, possibly four: in Boston, in 1860, at the Court House, afterwards at the publishers; in 1876, at Camden, and in 1881, when he came to my house. I had seen him in Boston at another time, and may have heard him read his account of the assassination of Lincoln, in Boston. Although I read his Leaves of Grass, I cannot say I have read very carefully his prose writings. I have read them more or less. The extraordinary impression that his first book
produced on a few persons was repeated when the English people came to know about him. I printed some years ago, in the *Atlantic Monthly*, some letters of an English friend, Thomas Cholmondeley, and in one letter he speaks of having received from Thoreau a copy of *Leaves of Grass*. He says: “I fail to find the *gentleman* in it.” In 1859–60, before I had ever seen Whitman, a friend of mine, Edwin Morton, who was in England, and knew Cholmondeley, went down to Cholmondeley’s home in the town of Shrewsbury. Mrs. Cholmondeley, his mother, living at Hodnet, had married again, and Cholmondeley’s step-father was the Rev. Zachary Macaulay, a cousin of Lord Macaulay. Cholmondeley told Morton: “Thoreau sent over to me your Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, and I was greatly interested in it. One day, after dinner, I undertook to read some pages of it to the Rev. Mr. Macaulay, and he said he would not listen to it, and if I went on reading he would throw it into the fire.”

As you well know, Whitman’s genius has received more full recognition in England than in this country partly because the English do not well understand the conditions in which it was written. The most striking personal tribute to Whitman’s influence that I have read, I think, is by that remarkable writer, J. A. Symonds. I have only recently read it; but he seems to ascribe to Whitman an effect on his own life and character and hopes, such as we commonly ascribe to the process called “regeneration.” I do not know that any Americans have taken precisely that view. Some of the younger generation may. What was particularly impressive, I think, to Emerson, was the enormous reach of Whitman’s thought. That shocking conception of poetical form which Whitman had, but which he sometimes departed from, *always* to the advantage of what he was saying, produced no favorable impression upon Emerson, who had a very accurate ear for verse or prose. He was willing to regard Whitman as a prose writer, but did not take him seriously as a poet, and I am inclined to think the absence in *Drum-Taps* of that wide-reaching imagination of earlier poems in *Leaves of Grass* accounted for his failure to regard *Drum-Taps* with the same interest, though they came nearer to conformity to accepted poetical forms. The curious fact that Whitman was wholly unlike most American writers was what Emerson saw. Whitman did not impress Thoreau exactly so.

I find a great deal of affectation in Whitman’s poetry; a great deal that he borrowed; and a certain kind of egoism, as if he identified the universe with himself, and considered the course of the stars more important because they had passed through the mind of Whitman.

I showed these notes in the *Conservator* about Julian Hawthorne to a friend who was a great friend to the elder Hawthorne and knew Julian as a boy. I asked him: “What do you think of this?” He replied: “In that speech at the
Camden dinner Julian presented what may be called the opinion of courtesy, but he has now presented the critic’s opinion.” Julian Hawthorne, however, knows a great deal too much to say what he has lately said about Whitman.

I was much struck in the Drum-Taps with the rhythmical movement of some of Whitman’s lines as resembling those in the choruses of the Greek tragedies. I happened to meet one day in the train a gentleman that I never saw afterwards, old Uncle Sam Taylor of Andover. I had just been reading Whitman, and I said, “I want you to observe what a similarity there is in some of these lines of Whitman to the Greek in such and such a tragedy.” He was a great deal impressed by it. He said, “I will look that up.” Whitman’s rhythmical faculty is very peculiar. It is sometimes of the most perfect description and then it seems to fail entirely. He might have a strophe; he never had the antistrophe.

{Frank Sanborn (1831–1917), an active abolitionist and friend and agent of John Brown’s (though he disapproved of the Harpers Ferry raid), was a writer, editor, biographer, and philanthropist (he founded the Massachusetts Infant Asylum and was a founder of the American Social Science Association). A longtime resident of Concord, he wrote biographies of Alcott, Emerson, Hawthorne, and Thoreau.}

November 1899 (10:132)

Dr. Daniel G. Brinton on Walt Whitman

Lucius Daniel Morse

The death a few weeks ago, of Dr. Daniel G. Brinton, of Philadelphia, gave me a touch of genuine personal sorrow. Through familiarity with some of his writings, I had high esteem for the man and admiration for the scientist and scholar. I knew that he had been for some time in precarious health, but I was far from anticipating so prompt a termination of his career. Indeed, his appearance when I saw him in January of the present year did not even suggest ideas of apprehension. His face was ruddy, his eyes clear and vivacious, his manner alert and animated. And yet at that very time he was traveling South, hoping that rest, change of air and environment would arrest the enfeeblement which was gradually mastering him.

Dr. Brinton arrived in Atlanta on the 19th of January and sent me word that he was at the Aragon Hotel. There I visited him and we had a long and to me highly interesting talk. Toward the last, I purposely directed the conversation

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to Walt Whitman, knowing that the Doctor was an old and tried friend of the poet. I have more than once congratulated myself upon having done so, because of the frank and unrestrained manner in which my interlocutor detailed a portion of his Whitman reminiscences.

The gist of the Doctor’s talk touching the great democrat and poet, I jotted down that same evening, and it is these notes which I desire without more ado to lay before the readers of the Conservator, hoping that in the reading of the same they will experience some of the interest and charm which permeated the original utterances:

“My first meeting with Whitman,” said Dr. Brinton, “was at a dinner of the Triplet Club, in the city of Philadelphia — a club of which the celebrated Shakespearean scholar, Howard Furness, was president. When I reached the club on that occasion the attendant told me that one of the guests had already arrived and was upstairs in the reading room. I went up and saw a large man with venerable white hair and beard, toasting his feet at the big open grate fire. I knew at the first glance that it was Whitman. I was familiar with his appearance from having seen him several times before on the streets or in other public places. I introduced myself to him, and spoke about my being familiar with his work, mentioning several poems which had struck me as peculiarly impressive. I specified one which abounds in description of Long Island scenery. We fell into a discussion of the large part which dreams play in shaping the delineations of nature found in the writings of very many authors. He said that his descriptions were drawn direct and at first hand from the natural objects themselves and possessed no elements due to the transformations wrought by the strange perspective of dreams. We had probably twenty minutes’ conversation before other members or guests arrived.

“Whitman was never what you would call convivial, jocular or witty. He never joked, never told humorous stories, never indulged in repartée, never sought to raise a laugh. Still he was not solemn or gloomy; quite the reverse of that. He was possessed by a perennial cheerfulness — a cheerfulness which was consistent and apparently unfluctuating. That he had a quiet vein of humor in his nature was evident to those who knew him well. But there is no sign of this in his poems.

“As a conversationalist Whitman was peculiarly slow and deliberate in his speech. He had a fashion of stating a thought and then going back and carefully restating it; sometimes he would put it in more literary form, but oftener he would clothe it in terms of the common vernacular. Frequently he would hesitate and grope for a word, but I speedily discovered that he did not kindly
accept aid from the listener! He desired to work out the form of his utterances undisturbed by outside suggestions.

“I remember on one occasion that a party of literary and artistic Englishmen thought they would shine and help Whitman to shine, and so they interpolated and suggested in his talk to that point of aggravation where Whitman suddenly shut up like a clam and they got nothing more out of him.

“Whitman liked a patient listener. After he had got a thought stated in definitive terms — terms which suited him — then he would go on and link it with another, and so his talk would progress. And there was this singular thing about a conversation with Whitman; you might go away rather dissatisfied, saying to yourself, ‘Well, I did not get as much out of the talk as I expected.’ But perhaps days or weeks after, something which he said would suddenly recur to you illuminated by a new and strange light, and then you would begin to see that you had not before understood the man’s real meaning. It would seem to you, perhaps, that at the time you had listened in a, so-to-speak, hypnotic condition, though that is a word which applies in this condition only as remotely suggestive. Whitman would certainly have repudiated any intimation of possessing such an influence. What is to be noted, however, is that Whitman’s talk was singularly suggestive and awakening and that it produced effects remotely simulating organic growth.

“The best which I got from him was purely informal. During the later years of Whitman’s life I used to go across to Camden about every six weeks to visit him. Often instead of going upstairs to his workroom he would take me into the kitchen. He had a rickety old splint-bottomed chair, in which he liked to sit, and an old shawl which he was fond of wrapping about him, and there by the kitchen stove we would hold converse. And those were the occasions which I think were most satisfactory to me.

“So far as my experience goes, there was nothing peculiarly attractive in Whitman’s manner or deportment. He was plain, simple, natural. There never seemed to be any straining for effect. He always conveyed to me the impression of poise and equilibrium, as also of one who would not tolerate trifling or familiarity. He was not the sort of a man to slap upon the shoulder or back in the hail-fellow-well-met style. Whitman’s heart was full of sympathy and love for many with whom he came in contact. Peter Doyle, for instance, is an illustration of how warm an affection Whitman could bestow. But Whitman was discriminating. He dwelt for years in a rather unsavory part of Camden, but that did not bother him, since he was a citizen of the universe. His life there was isolated. His neighbors seldom visited him. He had no following among them, save Traubel and his brother-in-law Harned. People

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from a distance, however, came to see him, now and then, even from across the ocean.

“Whitman was not popular either in Camden or in Philadelphia. Twice he was the guest of the Contemporary Club of Philadelphia, of which I am a member. The result of his first visit was rather startling — it caused the resignation of several members. Philadelphians were wont to look upon Whitman as indecent, disreputable, obscene. Other publishers used to expostulate with the McKays for having anything to do with his books. Many of the bookshops would not tolerate his works upon their shelves. No woman there dared to express a liking for his poems. This intolerance has measurably abated with lapse of time, but still holds powerful sway.

“I do not take much stock in Dr. Bucke’s theory of ‘Cosmic Consciousness,’ as applied to Whitman. However, the fact remains that a great change took place in Whitman just about the time he reached his thirtieth year. He attained a new form of expression, mastered a distinct literary style, if you choose to call it by that name, of which there is absolutely no suggestion in anything that he had previously written. Whitman’s is by no means a unique case. The poet Shelley furnishes a very happy illustration of a sudden and unexpected transformation in style. Nevertheless, it must be conceded that back of the changed form of expression lay a spiritual evolution which sanctioned the new vehicle of thought. In conversation with Whitman touching this matter, he told me that many of the ideas found in *Leaves of Grass* had long existed in his mind before he was able to give them utterance, the method of expression then at his command proving inadequate.

“I remember arguing with Whitman once that war was, in a way, necessary — that out of the conflict came elements of human character essential to progress, elements which could be attained in no other way. But he would agree to nothing of the sort. He said that war had no redeeming features: it was unmitigatedly bad. It is evident that Whitman’s ministrations to the sick and wounded soldiers in the great hospitals of Washington during the War of Secession exercised a profound and lasting impression upon his mind. These experiences probably aggravated, if they did not produce the paralysis which maimed him during the last twenty years of his life. However, paralysis was hereditary in his family. His father suffered in that way, and his brother George, whom I know, has experienced repeated strokes. Whitman came of Quaker stock and that fact will perhaps account measurably for his ideas regarding war.

“Whitman was strongly orthodox when it came to a belief in immortality. My conversations with him leave no room for doubt on that point. He believed in personal immortality — continuous identity after death. He spoke of these
things not as matters of simple belief, but with an assurance, a conviction, as though born of actual knowledge.

“Whitman lived for years in a small two-story house in Camden. His study was a large upstairs front room. The floor of this room was littered almost knee deep with a tangled mass of books, newspapers, magazines, letters, clippings and manuscript notes, which were not cleared out, perhaps, for six months at a time. In the midst of these heaps stood a small coal stove, and Whitman had a fashion of setting his coal oil lamp on the floor at night when searching in the litter for some letter, paper, or other object. He was exceedingly heavy, and the paralysis with which he was afflicted rendered him excessively slow, awkward and insecure in his movements. The chances of an accidentally overturned lamp, or of a red-hot cinder from the shaky stove igniting the inflammable material scattered about in such rich profusion, caused me for years a great deal of apprehension. I dreaded to hear that the poet and all his belongings had been consumed in a quick conflagration, kindled in the way I have suggested. I mentioned my fears to Traubel, who shared my apprehension; but expostulations were fruitless. Whitman with habits unmodified went serenely on his way.

“Probably a large majority of readers of Whitman’s poems have an idea that the poet flung out his thoughts to the world, without study or revision, in the chance garb in which they happened to be clothed at birth. No conception of Whitman’s method could be more erroneous. He wrote and rewrote with indefatigable industry. Every line, every phrase, every word, was patiently considered and reconsidered. “The Prayer of Columbus,” for instance, was rewritten about twenty times. The rescripts are in existence. I have examined them. They are covered with erasures and interlineations which suggest a critical appreciation exceedingly difficult to please. And yet Whitman was so successful in hiding his tracks that he seemed to end where most writers begin.

“There are many people for whom Whitman has no message. They would not or could not understand him. I have known persons who were desirous of liking the poet, but they read him in vain — he baffled them. Hence I have latterly become chary about recommending Whitman. If anyone asks me ‘Shall I read the poems?’ I say, ‘Yes, get the book and glance over it; you may find something you like. If so, hold to that and read on.’ Those who are ripe for Whitman will work round to him.

“During the last year of Whitman’s life, I talked with him especially about his work. I said, ‘Now that your message is about complete, what is your conviction regarding it? Is it destined to be recognized, to be accepted?’ His reply was an answer, and yet no answer. He said, ‘It will be accepted, if it deserves

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to be.’ ‘I have no premonition,’ he continued, ‘no conviction, regarding its fate. I simply wrote what I was moved to write. There it stands. What posterity will extract from it I can only guess.’ Whitman wrote much which I believe he could not himself explain. He wrote what he was moved to write.

“Shortly before the poet passed away I visited him. He was too feeble to talk much. He spoke about the seriousness of his physical condition and the probability of his speedy death. I responded cheeringly, told him I believed he was good for another year at least, and that we should have him with us at his next birthday celebration. He raised his eyes to mine and slowly uttered this query, ‘Is it worth while, Doctor?’ Then I spoke of the affection, the love with which his friends regarded him. He smiled with closed eyes, and while the smile still lingered on his face I said good-bye and left him.”

AUGUST 1900 (11:90)

Walt Whitman (and Joaquin Miller)

Leon Mead

Nearly every age since the dawn of recorded civilization has produced its desired and requisite quota of poets, philosophers, scholars, inventors, musicians, artists, et cetera. Civilization cannot well afford to do without geniuses, and the certain fact is that it is not obliged to do so.

On the other hand, geniuses have appeared, sometimes when they were not in the least expected, much less needed. Many men seem to be born before their time. Others seem to be born too late among the centuries, which, as Whittier has beautifully expressed it, “fall from out God’s hand like grains of sand” — for their own or the public good. Still others seem to arrive on this subaltern sphere just in the nick of time and to everybody’s satisfaction, including their own.

In ransacking the nooks and crannies of history we often read of men whom, in the light of to-day, we cannot reconcile to the exact period in which they lived. Through the retrospective glass they appear incongruous and out of touch with their times and surroundings. When we are confronted by these apparent anomalies in human existence it is wise to shrink from any assumption of metaphysical positivism and repeat to ourselves, “Our faith looks up to Thee.” Does any one suppose that Martin Luther, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln were not born at the right time and in the right place?

Walt Whitman was another man who was logically suited to the age in which he lived, though his poetry and his conduct of life may have been at
variance with conventional requirements. He could bow to no fetish set up by so-called modern society. He knew that all the elegant courtesies of our Yankee nabobs have been imported or stolen from abroad; life to him was too serious a matter — he could not think about manner. That, in a way, epitomizes Walt Whitman’s character and genius. He was too great a mental organism to be shackled by manifestos and ultimatums concerning the proper way of doing this and that, or by that bugbear, The Thing, which he shunned as he would a salamander.

It would have been truly ridiculous to have asked Whitman to be anything else besides the man he was. Of all things he was never an actor or hypocrite. He frankly asserted that he was “not contained between” his “cap and boots.” An unbiased study of *Leaves of Grass* will convince any intelligent critic that what at first appears to be colossal egotism, as Bayard Taylor called it, is merely the objective expression of the universal man, as applicable to others as to himself. Clear-sighted as a seer, gentle yet virile in decorum, as though an authorized prophet among the sons of Adam, he went his way unabashed by the scourging whips of his critics — almost indifferent to the loudest acclaim of his more pronounced admirers in England and of the fainter responses of his fellow countrymen. The serenity of his old age, like that of Cato, was beautiful and wholesome in these modern days of spiritual unrest and broodings of conscience.

Yet Whitman was not an aged man when he passed away. He looked the patriarch physically, probably because his mental mechanism had outworn the tenement that held it, but his heart, up to his last illness, was as light and susceptible as that of a child. Indeed there was a great deal of the child in Walt Whitman. “What am I, after all, but a child, pleased with the sound of my own name?” Simple incidents of everyday life, and what a less discerning philosopher would term the commonplaces, affected him to an eloquent aside, a sturdy, outspoken avowal of his interest, or they moved him to silent, heroic tears. Least of all things would he thrust himself forward in casual meetings as more than the most ordinary man. Nevertheless, unheralded in advance or given a whisper, while in his presence men and women knew he was no common gray bearded individual. He arrested attention, and when you heard him speak you at once realized the atmosphere of one to whom the higher mysteries had been revealed, whatever might have been his other experiences.

In the foregoing statements I have endeavored to piece together certain memory-aided images of the poet, in order to furnish some sort of a mental photograph of the profound genius who a few years ago passed so peacefully — so like a true man — to that mysterious bourne whence no traveler returns.

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Many people affect a dislike for Whitman’s poetry, principally because they eschew it altogether and will not try to understand it. But are they really so obtuse and obstinate as to deny the exceeding beauty of such lines as follow?

Splendor of ended day, floating and filling me,
Hour prophetic, hour resuming the past,
Inflating my throat, you divine average,
You earth and life till the last ray gleams I sing.

Open mouth of my soul uttering gladness,
Eyes of my soul seeing perfection,
Natural life of me faithfully praising things,
Corroborating forever the triumph of things. . . .

O setting sun! though the time has come,
I still warble under you, if none else does, unmitigated adoration.

(Song at Sunset)

But it is a useless task to quote fragments from Whitman to prove him a great poet. He must be read in his entirety — and even then perhaps we may fail to realize his cosmic sweep or be unable to follow him into the depths or upon the heights of his democracy.

It chanced one day in Boston that Joaquin Miller, whose acquaintance I had gained through a poetical trifle of my own, the authorship of which had been attributed to him, invited me to accompany him on a little visit to Walt Whitman who was then in the city, engaged in correcting proof for a new edition of Leaves of Grass. Naturally I availed myself of this opportunity to see two poets of widely dissimilar schools commune together. Whitman had comfortable apartments at Mrs. Moffit’s caravansary, in Bulfinch Place, where William Dean Howells, with his family, and other literary people often have sojourned. Greetings and introductions over, Whitman and Miller engaged in a conversation which, quoting from memory, ran something as follows:

Whitman: I’m real glad you dropped in. Miller, old fellow. Why, you’re looking as fresh as a ruby. Getting fat, too. The waters of the Pierian spring agree with you.
Miller: You old rogue, Whitman, I’d give the planet Jupiter, if I owned it, in exchange for your physique, your white mane and god-like brow.
Well, how are you, anyway?
Whitman: You find me in linen fresh this morning, yet wet as water. I’m in a good old fashioned perspiration — a luxury I was afraid I’d not get in Boston. Do you know, a man who never sweats is generally a hard-fisted,
miserable kind of a fellow. I never had any sympathy with a dry-skinned
man. He will turn coward if you give him the slightest provocation. By
the way, I went out to Concord yesterday to see Emerson.
Miller: Indeed; how is the darling old man?
Whitman: Pretty feeble. Yes, I stayed to luncheon with him and we had a
mighty sociable time. He took me for a walk through his garden and
grounds. Occasionally a fitful gleam of his former self would creep into
his eyes, when some reference was made to his old friends who have
passed away. His memory is quite treacherous. He began several stories
that he had to leave unfinished — he was sure to forget the salient point.
Miller: That is very sad. By the way, the other day I put in a couple of
hours with Longfellow.
Whitman: I want to know!
Miller: We had a square you-tell-me-and-I'll-tell-you talk about American
poets and we agree tremendously. Your name was mentioned.
Whitman: Was it?
Miller: And we raked you over the coals for quite a time.
Whitman: Well, now, Miller, candidly, what does Longfellow think of me?
Honest Indian?
Miller: He told me he considered you a genius.
Whitman: No!
Miller: Yes, and moreover he said that you are not only a bright particular
star but a fixed planet of the first magnitude. He said you are a broader
poet than the whole lot. He likes you, Walt.
Whitman: Now, you don’t know how that pleases me, Joaquin. I always
had an idea that Longfellow didn’t care a rap for me. God bless him!
[At this point tears were visible in the speaker’s eyes.] Do you think he
meant it all?
Miller: Most assuredly he did. He referred to your “Song of Myself” as a
deep, esoteric gem. He expressed the regret that you are not more
generally understood and appreciated.
Whitman: I have tried all my life to write for the masses.
Miller: Old boy, you and I are over the heads of the rabble. We stand on
an eminence of our own making, and look down when we wish to see
the world. In a word, we know we are great, and if other people don’t
know it, it is their own fault.

It seemed to afford Whitman a great deal of quiet pleasure to be informed that
Longfellow was his friend and admirer. The conversation branched off into
personal matters which it would not be in good taste to record here. As I was leaving, Whitman favored me with a request to call upon him soon and bring some of my effusions, especially the one whose authorship had been attributed to Joaquin Miller. He said he always took a sterling interest in fledglings and he liked doggerel when it was read by an enthusiastic youth.

A few days later I called upon Whitman, my pockets stuffed with verses. He received me in an affable manner, and I soon ventured to read him a little poem I thought he might like. At its conclusion he smiled forgivingly and asked me to tell him about my grandfather on my mother’s side. He did not evince the slightest desire to hear any more of my verses, and I have come to appreciate what excellent judgment he exhibited on that occasion. He wore a loose cambric shirt, whose ruined bosom was open, exposing his hairy breast. In the course of my stay he suggested that I should follow his example and wear a shirt with an open bosom, so that “the summer breeze could get at” me, as he phrased it.

Upon another occasion we were talking about various studies to which a writer should devote himself. “Rhetoric,” said he, “is all well enough; but beware lest the rules dwarf you into a mere nonentity. A man who feels the message of life and has something to say, will find a way of his own to say it. I hate to see a chubby, rosy-cheeked boy, all mirth and animation, pressed hard against the grindstone of etiquette until he enters a parlor with as much austere dignity as his great grandfather, and says, very primly, ‘of whom were you speaking, mamma?’ Such a boy, to my mind, is positively nauseating. God allows men to be boys first, so that they can kick around and cut up all sorts of monkey shines. And when they are compelled by their parents to be so sadly polite, it takes away all their charm and ginger. It is just so with a writer, who, a slave to rhetoric and such things, is afraid to say his soul is his own.”

No one in our limited galaxy of great poets has been more characteristically American than Walt Whitman. With all his faults he is a native product, and we should be thankful that both as a man and as a poet he was not an exotic.

**JULY 1901 (12:76)**

**Walt at the Daily Aurora:**

*A Memoir of the Mid-1840s*

*William Cauldwell*

The paper, in your recent issue, on Walt Whitman, from the pen of my old and respected friend, Joel Benton (for several years a favorite contributor to
the *Mercury* newspaper, of which I was for many years editor and proprietor),
brought to mind my acquaintance with Mr. Whitman, when, a youth of sev-
eteen or thereabout, I set type for the *Sunday Atlas* on the same floor of 162
Nassau Street (where the Tribune Building now is) on which he, as editor of
the *Daily Aurora*, wrote editorials for that journal. The *Aurora* was the New
York organ for the John Tyler administration and was published by Herrick,
West & Ropes, the proprietors of the *Sunday Atlas*. When the successor of the
deceased president, William Henry Harrison, in 1841, sundered his relations
with the Whig party, which had elected him, and antagonized its policy by his
veto of Henry Clay’s bill for a national bank, he desired an organ to help him
ingratiate himself with the democracy and with the hope of promoting his
chances for a second term; hence the *Daily Aurora*.

Thomas L. Nichols, who had been educated for the medical profession, but
who had so strong an inclination for journalism that he took his chances as a
“penny-a-line” contributor to the journals of that day, was the first or original
editor of *The Daily Aurora*, until he married a lady physician, the widow of
Dr. Gore, when he retired from journalism and was succeeded as editor of
*The Aurora* by Walt Whitman.

Mr. Whitman was at that time, I should think, about twenty-five years of
age, tall and graceful in appearance, neat in attire, and possessed a very pleas-
ing and impressive eye and a cheerful, happy-looking countenance. He usually
wore a frock coat and a high hat, carried a small cane, and the lapel of his coat
was almost invariably ornamented with a boutonnière. This was some years
before he indulged in *Leaves of Grass*.

Mr. Whitman, for some reason, took a fancy to me, and always accorded me
a cheery greeting, and, notwithstanding the difference in our ages, we became
quite chummy. Frequently, while I was engaged in sticking type, he would ask
me to let him take my case for a little while, and he seemed to enjoy the recre-
ation. If I remember correctly I think he told me that he had spent a year or two
in a printing office.

After he looked over the daily and exchange papers (reaching the den he
occupied usually between 11 and 12 o’clock), it was Mr. Whitman’s daily habit
to stroll down Broadway to the Battery, spending an hour or two amid the
trees and enjoying the water view, returning to the office location at about
2 or 3 o’clock in the afternoon to have an interview with Anson Herrick,
the senior partner of the concern, who, as a supporter of the administration,
held a position as custom house weigher under the Collector of the Port.
Mr. Herrick got his “inspiration” for the conduct of the paper, *The Aurora*,
from the Collector, and Herrick, in turn, sought to “inspire” Whitman, but

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in this he had a tough job; for often, after a heated discussion, the conference between the two grinders of the party “organ” ended in Whitman picking up his hat and cane and marching out of the office in high dudgeon. Soon, however, his good nature got the better of his temper and he would return and take his medicine with as few wry faces as possible. According to agreement, as I could understand, Whitman was to have full swing to write just what he chose in any other part of the paper (of course not antagonistic to its politics), but the senior proprietor, Herrick, who ran the political crank, was to have the toning of its leaders. “If you want such stuff in The Aurora, write it yourself,” Whitman more than once said to Herrick, and in reply Herrick would denounce Whitman as “the laziest fellow who ever undertook to edit a city paper.”

After the expiration of the term for which Whitman had engaged he had had, as he said, enough of editing a party “organ,” and he sundered his relations with The Aurora. Then, according to my recollection, some of his friends helped him to start a paper of his own in Brooklyn.

{The title for this item is not original; the untitled reminiscence was reprinted from the New York Times.}

MAY 1906 (17:42)

William O’Connor and Walt Whitman

Ellen O’Connor Calder

This last life of Walt Whitman {by Henry Bryan Binns; see Traubel’s review, 273} is interesting, as any life of him must be, but one who knew him personally and intimately must rather shrink at some of the author’s conclusions and misstatements. The Introduction entitled “Whitman’s America” is a very pleasant and philosophical study of the conditions into which Walt was born. Not having known Walt personally until 1862, I cannot speak of his life previous to that time, but from that date until he left Washington, in 1873, we were intimately associated. He was never a boarder with us, but was our most welcome guest for months until we moved from the house on L Street — where he had a room on the same floor with us — to another apartment. In the account by Mr. Binns of Walt’s relations with William O’Connor the statements are painfully inaccurate to those who are aware of the ardent affection always
existing between the two. For a time, as is stated, the intimacy was interrupted, and all communication closed; but at the moment the Osgood edition was attacked, O’Connor rushed to the defense of Walt and *Leaves of Grass* with the same energy that he displayed years before when he wrote the *Vindication* and christened Walt the “Good Gray Poet.” From that time on until the death of Mr. O’Connor everything was as it had been, save for a greater tenderness and love, between them, and there was never an allusion to the past. At this time Mr. O’Connor was an invalid and continued to be such to the end. This prevented him from going to see Walt frequently. But his invalidism never affected his head, which was clear and strong till almost the last. Two days before his death he was correcting the proofs of his *Mr. Donnelly’s Reviewers*. The violent disagreement between Walt and O’Connor has been spoken of as a political quarrel. It was not that. It was the result of a purely moral question regarding the blacks and their enfranchisement — O’Connor taking strong ground in favor of enfranchisement, and Walt taking the opposing view with equal vehemence. I am impressed with the evidences of close and careful study which Mr. Binns discloses in his discussion of *Leaves of Grass*. To many of his interpretations I accord him my hearty endorsement. I should take exception to his fanciful chapter relating to what he calls Walt’s “romance,” in which his conclusions are too liable to be mistaken for facts. Less might have been better said on that score. It does not seem to me that we are called upon to try to explicate all of Walt’s poems. A too minute and careful explanation and commentary will not tend to make them clearer. Sometimes Mr. Binns has appeared to load the text with rather extreme inferences which I have no reason whatever for supposing Walt himself would have endorsed.

SEPTEMBER 1907 (18:103)

**Pete Doyle**

**Percival Wiksell**

Speech made at the convention of the Walt Whitman Fellowship in New York, May 31.

Peter Doyle in March joined his friend Whitman in the real country. He was a strong man and worked up to his normal strength to the last day of his life. Men, women and children felt the charm of his simple, direct being. He held
no pose. Cared not a hang for anyone’s opinion. Lived a free sane life and hated appointments. Spoke only of things in his knowledge. Never faked up any good-sounding phrases.

Pete was a cranky fellow, the boys said, but he held them close by his singular magnetic personality. Ale tasted better when he was along. They always wanted him at christenings and weddings and such occasions, but he usually begged off, to be in a quiet place where a few close friends knew where to find him.

Fellowship was Pete’s faith, and the Elks, to whose organization he gave time and money, represented his principles and embodied his ideas of practical service. He was joyously looking forward to the remarkable Elks conclave in Philadelphia at the time of his death.

Pete’s early association with Walt Whitman, after they met in Washington, Pete being then a young man, colored his whole life. Perhaps he never knew that Whitman was a great spiritual teacher, but the finest things in his nature were aroused, and his whole character was seasoned, by the strong love which grew up between them. He showed us an old raglan Whitman had given him, and said that when he felt lonely or blue he wrapped himself in it and was at once calm, cheered and restored.

Doyle was full of stories of his days with Whitman. You could hardly talk five minutes with him before he was quoting Walt as his authority for some fact or opinion, or was telling some story he got from Walt. Pete was easy to approach. He liked to meet people without any preliminaries and wanted to be introduced simply by his first name—“this is Pete”—or as plain “mister.” If dealt with in this way he was at once free with anybody, unawed, though they were learned professors or editors or bookmen from over the sea. To the interviewing bore he was a stale and silent proposition.

I forced myself on Pete one night as his train came in to Boston. He was passing trunks out of his car. The man who was receiving the trunks made some disrespectful remark about the Pennsylvania Railroad or about its way of doing business. This unloosened the vials of Pete’s wrath. He swore a streak—and he was gifted above the average sons of men in the intelligent use of invective. Suddenly he spied Traubel standing there with me. Traubel stepped forward and reaching up shook hands with Pete, who stood in the doorway of the car. “It’s Dr. Wiksell,” said Traubel looking around over his shoulder towards me. “God! is that so? did he hear me a-goin’ on?” Pete asked Traubel. Then we were introduced. I shall never forget it. Pete looked magnificent in his indignation. There could not have been a more impressive and characteristic initiation of our friendship. To see the hot anger one minute and then to see it

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so easily and genially melt away. From that day on Traubel and I never lost
sight of Pete for long at a time. Traubel would see him in Philadelphia, where
he lived, and I would see him in Boston. Often, when Traubel was in Boston,
we would go to Pete’s haunts together, talking, jollifying, with him as he ate his
dinner or drank his beer. They are sacred memories — those dear nights, and
that dear man, Pete, our true brother, now passed on.

Well: here’s good night, not good bye, to our darling brother. Let all stand
up and toast him. He was Walt’s brother: he was, he is, your brother, too. Toast
him: with love in your hearts toast him. Pete: Good night!

March 1908 (19:5)

Richard Maurice Bucke (The Whitman Years)

James H. Coyne

In July, 1877, for the first time, Bucke met and conversed with Walt
Whitman. He called upon the poet at Camden. Of this meeting he gives a
graphic account in the Introduction to Calamus, a collection of Whitman
letters to Peter Doyle, edited by Dr. Bucke, and published in 1897. It is too
long to transcribe here. But the effect is given in these words: “Briefly, it would
be nothing more than the simple truth to state that I was, by it, lifted to and set
upon a higher plane of existence, upon which I have more or less continuously
lived ever since — that is, for a period of eighteen years. And my feeling toward
the man, Walt Whitman, from that day to the present, has been, and is, that
of the deepest affection and reverence. All this, no doubt, was supplemented
and reinforced by other meetings, by correspondence and by readings, but
equally certainly it derived its initial and essential vitality from that first, almost
casual contact.”

In a paper published in 1894, referring to the interview, he had written as
follows: “A sort of spiritual intoxication set in which did not reach its culmi-
nation for some weeks, and which, after continuing some months, very gradu-
ally, in the course of the next few years, faded out . . . . It is certain that the hours
spent that day with the poet were the turning point of my life. The upshot of it
was the placing of my spiritual existence on a higher plane.” Readers of Lucian
will remember his description of a somewhat similar effect produced upon
him by the philosopher Nigrinus. Other instances in sacred and profane liter-
ature are by no means infrequent in cases of men and women of exceptional
moral and spiritual elevation.

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Man’s Moral Nature (1879) is dedicated “To the man who inspired it — to the man who of all men, past and present, that I have known has the most exalted moral nature — to Walt Whitman.” In this book Dr. Bucke divides the moral nature into two classes of functions: positive, i.e., love and faith; and negative, i.e., hate and fear. He finds its physical basis in the great sympathetic nervous system. The moral nature is not a fixed quantity, but has developed from an initial stage, with hate and fear predominant, to that in which love and faith are more and more in evidence. The means by which the change has been effected have been (I) Natural Selection; (II) Sexual Selection; (III) Social Life; (IV) Art; (V) Religion. Infinite progress is the law. “Hate and fear are dying out. The argument is that their total extinction is justified. Faith and love are increasing. Infinite faith and love are justified. . . . The highest moral nature is nearest in accord with the truth of things. This is why we call those men inspired who have the most exalted moral natures, and those men wise who have exceptionally exalted moral natures as well as superior intellectual natures. . . . Religion, morality and happiness are three names for the same thing — moral elevation. This then is the end, the conclusion of the whole matter: Love all things — not because it is your duty to do so, but because all things are worthy of your love. Hate nothing. Fear nothing. Have absolute faith. Whoso will do this is wise: he is more than wise — he is happy.”

It is hardly too much to say that this theory and these conclusions were the foundation and regulating principles of Dr. Bucke’s conduct. The facts and reasoning upon which his theory was based are for the scientist and the philosopher. The author’s presentation is clear, full and interesting. His theory is put forward as a tentative one, as the one that seems most in conformity with the facts. The argument will appear more or less cogent according to the training and tendencies of him to whom it is submitted. The conclusion, according as it does with the highest and best in man, should meet with general acceptance. He was an optimist by instinct, by observation, by reflection, by a varied experience. Appropriately, he prefixes to the final chapter these lines from Whitman: “The Lord advances and yet advances; always the shadow in front; always the reached hand, bringing up the laggards” {Faces (4)}.

After the first interview in 1877, Dr. Bucke made periodical visits to the Good Gray Poet. He took the field as his champion and expounder. Controversy as to the quality and tendency of Leaves of Grass raged with more or less heat. Bucke rarely assumed the defensive. He was best in attack. His skill as a writer shows itself in exposition of his theme, in marshalling and massing
his facts. Opposing facts are often left to take care of themselves. The result, as far as Whitman is concerned, seems to justify the strategy, if such it should be called. Bucke’s method in the fierce controversy was no mean factor in the final result. Whitman’s place in the Pantheon is no longer open to serious question. Criticism accepts *Leaves of Grass* as a whole, with reservation of judgment as to details.

In September, 1879, Bucke lectured on Whitman before an Ottawa audience. In May he wrote the *Philadelphia Press* a letter entitled “The Good Gray Poet.” This was an appellation first used by William D. O’Connor, in his brilliant defence of Whitman many years before. The summer of 1880 was memorable for Whitman’s visit to London (Ontario) as the guest of Dr. and Mrs. Bucke. He remained four months. During the summer, the two men made a voyage down the St. Lawrence as far as the Saguenay and up the latter stream to Chicoutimi and Ha Ha Bay. Whitman was greatly impressed with the Asylum, its “ample and charming gardens and lawns,” the religious services, the demeanor of “the motley, yet perfectly well-behaved and orderly congregation,” the “refractory building,” then under the special charge of Dr. Beemer. Referring to the whole institution, he wrote in his diary: “As far as I could see this is among the most advanced, perfected, and kindly and rationally carried on, of all its kind in America. It is a town in itself, with many buildings, and a thousand inhabitants.” The four months thus spent with Whitman were important in results. Bucke was resolved to write a biography of the poet. The latter demurred, objected, was at length overruled, gave consent, and, indeed, actively co-operated. Bucke put himself in communication with all whom he thought possessed of information required by him, including leading writers in Europe and America. The results were a collection of correspondence unique and valuable, and friendly visits received and returned.

With Whitman, Bucke went to Long Island in 1881 to familiarize himself with the former’s early home and its environment. In working the book into shape valuable aid was rendered by William D. O’Connor, Mrs. Anne Gilchrist and others, who contributed facts, illustrative material and incidents. Although the book was ready in 1881, publication was delayed owing to difficulty in securing a satisfactory publisher. After various suggestions had been made, Osgood, of Boston, would appear to have been his original choice. But Osgood was not in the humor. He had just then been forced by threats of prosecution by the Attorney General of Massachusetts to withdraw from sale his edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Early in May, 1882, Bucke wrote O’Connor that
Osgood had declined *Walt Whitman, a Study*. O’Connor wrote another scathing letter to the press, defending the *Leaves*. On the third of June, he wrote Whitman that Bucke had written him “quite jubilant over my letter, and telling me the fix I have got his book into, which is comic as a scene from Molière. You will see the fun, when you know that he had sent his ms. to Osgood.”

Whitman, as has been stated, took an active interest in the *Life*. His extended and varied experience, as compositor, editor, proof-reader, business manager, was at Bucke’s disposal, and was invaluable. It was Whitman who arranged with Gutekunst for proofs of portraits of his father and mother, the number of copies to be printed and the price. The first twenty-four pages were written by him.

He suggested names of publishers, and finally, when Osgood declined the book, it was Whitman who, on the nineteenth of February, 1883, with his own hand drew up the agreement between Dr. Bucke and David McKay of Philadelphia, for the publication of “Walt Whitman, a Contemporaneous Study.” The agreement shows Whitman’s business ability and carefulness in looking after details, and is witnessed by him.

It was under the title *Walt Whitman the Man* that the volume at last appeared from the press of David McKay. In the following year, the Glasgow edition appeared with an addition entitled *English Critics on Walt Whitman*, edited by Edward Dowden, LL.D., Professor of English Literature in the University of Dublin. “The book is valuable,” says Ernest Rhys in his introduction to the volume of *Selections from Walt Whitman* in the Canterbury Poets, “not only as an authoritative biography — the standard biography — but for its collection of contemporary notices and criticisms, European and American, favorable and the reverse, of *Leaves of Grass*.” “In the English list the names of Ruskin, Tennyson, Swinburne, Buchanan, Symonds, and other leading poets and writers bear unique testimony to Whitman’s influence.” In the Introduction, Dr. Bucke asserts that the basic meaning and value to us of the man, Walt Whitman, and the book *Leaves of Grass*, is moral elevation. “The true introduction, therefore, to this volume is the author’s previous work, *Man’s Moral Nature*. In that book he has discussed the moral nature in the abstract, pointed out its physical basis, and shown its historical development; while the sole object of the present work is to depict an individual moral nature, perhaps the highest that has yet appeared.”

{This was the sixth in a series of eight articles on Bucke that Coyne published in the *Conservator* from October 1907 to May 1908.}

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A Visit with Walt Whitman

William Hawley Smith


On a hot August afternoon, in 1889 wife and I went to call on Walt. We had no letters of introduction, or credentials of any kind. We were just “anybody.” We knocked at his door, and a stout and hearty young man, in his shirtsleeves, came to find out who was there. We asked him if we could meet Mr. Whitman, and he said: “Come in, and I’ll see.” He showed us into the front room, at the left of the hall, and then went to make inquiry for us. He immediately came back and said: “Mr. Whitman will be in in a few minutes.” Then he went away. We sat down on a lounge that was at the rear of the room, and put in our brief wait in looking at the thousand-and-one things of interest that were everywhere about us. These so absorbed us that we did not hear the footsteps of the old man as he came down the hall. As it happened, our backs were toward the door when he reached it, and the first we knew of his presence was when he said, in the sweetest and most engaging voice I ever heard: “Well, friends!”

We turned, and there stood Walt, “framed,” as it were, by the door-casings. It was a picture never to be forgotten. He wore a long gray gown that reached to the floor. The collar was wide and turned back, and there was fine lace at the ends of the full sleeves. The light from the windows fell on the left side of his face, and illumined his hair and beard against the shadows it formed on the right. Wife has always said he looked like a god. Never having seen a god, I cant say whether she is right or not. But I do know this — that any god might well be proud to look as Walt did as he stood in the door that August afternoon! We moved forward and shook hands with him, and told him who we were and where we came from. Then he entered the room and sat down in his large arm-chair by the window. We chatted with him for an hour, talking of all sorts of things. He was as genuinely interested in us as if we were old friends. And he would have been the same to anyone else that he was to us. He had no pets.

A good deal that was said, on both sides, was everyday talk. He made no grand-stand play, nor did we. We just “visited,” like “lovers and friends.” But he said some things that are well worth telling. Wife said to him: “I should not have wondered so much if you had written what you have at your present time...

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of life, but that you should have done it when you were a comparatively young man is a marvel to me.” And Walt replied: “Well, my friends who have known me longest have told me, many times, that I always was a kind of an old critter!” When we spoke of our home in Illinois he said: “You live in a great State. Indeed, the whole West is wonderful — so full of possibilities, as yet undreamed of.” And then he added, after reflecting a moment: “I think my poems are like your West — crude, uncultured, wild in spots; but as the years go by, and they are turned over and over, as your prairies are, I believe they will produce bountiful crops!” Could any faith be finer than that?

I asked Walt if he ever intended to compile all he had written, poetry and prose, in one volume, and he told me that he had just done that very thing, and that a special limited edition of six hundred copies of such a revision had just come from the press. I asked again: “Could one of us common folks get a copy of this edition, or are they all spoken for?” To which he replied (and his answer shows the old man just as he was in so many ways): “Why, anybody can have one of the books, if he can stand the price; but they come pretty steep.” “How much?” I inquired. “Six dollars,” he said; and the way he said it implied that he felt it was rank robbery to charge as much as that for any book that he had ever written. I kept on: “Where can I get one of them?” “O, I have some here in the house,” he replied. “If you want to take it with you I’ll send up stairs and have one brought down.” I told him I would be much obliged if he would do so, and handed him the six dollars on the spot. He called to his housekeeper, who was in a room down the hall, and asked her to go up and get a book for me, which she did forthwith. That is how I came into possession of volume number one hundred and sixteen, Ferguson Brothers and Company, Philadelphia, special single volume edition of six hundred copies. The text is identical with that now printed in two volumes, which I think are from the same plates. But I like this book just a little better, getting it as I did. I rejoice more, though, that the book is not “limited,” but that all who will can have a copy as good as the best, at a merely nominal price. That is the democracy in the premises that would suit Walt.

Just after I got the book the young man who had admitted us came into the room. He was a railroad employee, and was just going out for his night run. He had his lantern on his arm and his long-visored cap was drawn well down over his forehead. He came in to say “So long” to Walt before going on duty. Walt gripped his hand heartily, and then gave him a salute as he went out into the street. When we came away Walt sat in his arm-chair, and held wife with his right hand and me with his left, and said: “So long, my young friends! Expecting the main things from you who come after!” That was his farewell.

I guess life is worth living. Love to all the crowd.

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Incidents of Walt Whitman

Truman H. Bartlett and the Boston Globe

Your editorial anent Walt Whitman and Lowell brings to mind a number of incidents. An eminent Englishman came to Boston, after seeing Walt Whitman in Camden, and Dr. Holmes gave him a scholastic dinner, Harvard professors, etc. After the dinner, the Doctor told a friend: “I dont care for Sir So and So, as he kept talking during the entire time about that pesky cab driver, Whitman. No new conversation could go on without something more about Whitman, though I told Sir So and So that Lowell, Longfellow and I had examined his claims and found that he was of no account.”

When Whitman was in Boston in the early 80’s he said to me, “I am going to see Longfellow, repay his call on me in Camden, and I want you to go along.” Longfellow was very kind and polite, many pleasing subjects were alluded to, and finally John Brown came up as one. Longfellow proceeded to give a very common description of John Brown, Whitman listened attentively and then gave his impression of John Brown, and one of the best I have ever heard or seen. Longfellow was almost struck dumb, but he had the nerve to keep still. Longfellow’s idea of John Brown surprised Whitman very much and he did not get over it for a long time.

On the same visit the St. Botolph Club refused to invite Whitman to the Club. Parkman, one of my good friends, was president. I took Whitman myself to the usual monthly dinner and introduced him to Parkman. The latter was a little surprised at first, but soon they were chatting in the nicest way.

On Quincy Street, Cambridge, there lived a woman who was a great admirer of Whitman, and she wished me to bring him to see her. We went on a warm, fine Sunday afternoon, and curiously enough everyone living on that street seemed to be out of doors, and saw Whitman, large, white-haired and imposing, passing along. I imagine at seeing where we went these people watched us as we returned to take the car for Boston, for all were out to see this unusual looking man. Later they very likely learned who it was.

Lowell was the only man who apologized for Lincoln’s homeliness, in his odes, and especially in his Birmingham address. He never saw Lincoln, and one of his biographers, Greenslet, says that he doesn’t think Lowell had a picture of Lincoln.
Walt Whitman could recite his poems and other things beyond belief in every way. His voice and manner were so in accord with the ideas that you felt as if what he said had never been said before, and had been waiting to be said until he came. Prof. William James and Josiah Royce asked me what my impression of Whitman was. All I could say was that he impressed me as the first being I had ever seen. They laughed. — *Truman H. Bartlett*.

If the late James Russell Lowell — aristocrat and exquisite gentleman that he was — had been possessed of prophetic as well as of poetic insight, he might have foreseen that some day, not long after his death, that very “common” person, the author of *Leaves of Grass*, would be reckoned by John Burroughs, John Addington Symonds, Swinburne, and even by many college professors, as among the real poets of America. And Lowell’s friends might have been spared the embarrassment of reading in *The Forum* the account of an incident which shows to what extremes the prejudice of even a very highly cultured man may carry him.

Horace Traubel, the industrious Boswell of Walt Whitman, narrates in *The Forum* Whitman’s account of how Lowell prevented an English nobleman from presenting to the “good gray poet” a letter of introduction from an eminent Englishman. Lowell is said to have exclaimed: “What! a letter to Walt Whitman? Don’t deliver it! Do you know who Walt Whitman is? Why, a rowdy, a New York tough, a friend of cab drivers, and all that.” The letter was never delivered, and Whitman remarked to Traubel that “the world can have no idea of the bitterness of feeling against me in those days” (*WWC*3:126). But times and tastes have changed, and it is a question whether there are not today two or three times as many readers of Whitman as of Lowell.— *The Globe, Boston*.

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**June 1914 (25:54)**

**Notes from an Autobiography**

*William W. Thayer*

While in the Myrtle street house I formed a partnership with Charles W. Eldridge under the firm name of Thayer and Eldridge, Book Publishers, taking the old stand of Dayton and Wentworth, having bought on credit Wentworth’s share of the stock of the old firm, consisting of books, copyrights

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and stereotype plates. In the Myrtle street house, October 17, 1859, was born my eldest son, William Eldridge Thayer.

On that very day John Brown had possession of Harper’s Ferry. The people of the United States, north and south, were wild with excitement. They wanted to know all about Brown and his raid. Information was scanty. Thayer and Eldridge learned that James Redpath, a former Kansas correspondent of the New York Tribune, knew Brown. We wrote to Redpath, who happened to be in Boston. I composed the letter. There was a certain magnetism about it that Redpath could not resist. He afterwards told us that of the many letters from publishers asking him to write a life of Brown, ours was the only one he answered. He agreed to write for us the Life of John Brown. He was largely aided in the work by Richard J. Hinton, who also had lived in Kansas, and who became afterwards, in the war of the Rebellion, lieutenant colonel of the Kansas “Red Legs,” one of the regiments of that State. We made a great success, selling about seventy-five thousand copies of the book.

We afterwards published for Walt Whitman his Leaves of Grass. Though Whitman was a stranger to us, we wrote to him proposing that he come to Boston. I composed the letter, receiving the approval of Mr. Eldridge, my partner. It was so striking that Whitman, when visiting Ralph Waldo Emerson, at Concord, Massachusetts, gave it to him to read. The latter praised it, and said there was hope for freedom of thought and a free press when such a publishing house as indicated, like Thayer and Eldridge, had its home in Boston and dared to take up the defense for the poet who had been so savagely criticized.

Up to that time Fowler and Wells of New York had their imprint on the title page of Leaves of Grass. But they could not endure the assault of the critics, and some of the sentiments of the book were not acceptable to some readers. They notified Whitman of their intention to discontinue selling the book. My partner and myself were indignant, and by letter informed the “Good Grey Poet” that there was one free press at least, that one in Boston controlled by Thayer and Eldridge, which was freely offered to him. The result was the publication of a superb edition of the book under Whitman’s personal supervision. It did not sell rapidly, but the demand was moderately steady and showed gradual enlargement all the time we had control of the business. Our motto was to stimulate home talent and encourage young authors.

William D. O’Connor, a young Boston man, had written some successful magazine stories. We offered to publish a book story if he would write it. He wrote and we published it, but the book was not a success. We published a number of other books, the copyrights and stereotype plates of which we had
bought from Dayton and Wentworth, or rather from the latter, who had secured them in settlement from Dayton.

We did a good trade, our first year’s profits being seventeen thousand dollars. Out of this we paid large sums for advertising, for stereotype plates of new books (Whitman’s cost us eight hundred dollars), for installments of purchase money to Wentworth, for clerk hire, household expenses, etc., so that our actual cash surplus was not sufficient to meet any unexpected contingency. We published anti-slavery books and pamphlets, and thus had friendly relations with such men as Wendell Phillips, Charles Sumner, T. W. Higginson. William Lloyd Garrison we saw a little of.

The first time Senator Sumner called at our store he asked: “Is this Thayer and Eldridge?” “My name is Thayer,” I replied. Looking at me from his towering height of body he exclaimed: “Why, you are young!” The fact was, our public reputation as publishers was so extended and so full of character that he had imagined we were men advanced in years. Instead, he found in me a youthful looking man of only twenty-nine years and my partner barely twenty-one years of age.

Previous to my departure from Boston, my partner and myself had concluded to take interest in an oil well in Franklin County, Pennsylvania, where the oil excitement was raging. (Charles) Tidd had given me letters of introduction to some of John Brown’s relatives living in Tideout, who were developing oil grounds there. I arrived at Franklin at the hour that an old man resident was just drawing up oil in a windlass bucket. He charged me ten cents for a couple of two-ounce bottles of oil. After securing our well at Tideout I returned to Boston. We paid out several hundred dollars, but not striking “ile” as soon as we desired, Eldridge was unwilling to spend more money there, so we got our friends to sell out for us to our best advantage. We afterwards learned that our well was a great success.

Our regular book trade prospered, but on the fatal day when the Rebels fired on Fort Sumter came the signal that announced disaster for all business firms. We were caught with all sails spread without warning of the storm. Merchants at once began to retrench and reduce liabilities; capital hid itself; banks were distrustful. No one knew how the war would end. Books being a luxury, there was no demand. All book firms were shaky. The strongest houses were ready to topple over. Our friends who had money felt that justice to themselves demanded that they should husband their resources, for no one could predict the result of the war, whether the North or the South would be victor.
Wendell Phillips, Charles Sumner, Frank Bird, George L. Stearns, and other anti-slavery people, were interested in keeping us up, but they were forced to call in their funds and most reluctantly let us go down. We went into bankruptcy. Marshall Jewell, a prominent business man and afterwards United States Postmaster General, was our assignee, on petition of Rice, Kendall and Company, one of our heaviest creditors, of whom we had bought book paper.

Mr. Wentworth was also a creditor, we having bought him out of his stock on credit. He wanted to get it back cheap, so he hinted that we had failed rich. He thereby hoped that the creditors would sell to him and utterly prevent us from securing a compromise with them. But we had no money, and for five months or so were as poor as poverty, trying to get employment to keep from starving. Finally, through the influence of Charles Sumner, I secured a clerkship in the Boston post-office.

*William W. Thayer, who is dead, appears to have left behind him an autobiography, which has never been published. The Conservator is permitted to use these extracts. Thayer was the Thayer of Thayer and Eldridge who brought out the third edition of Leaves of Grass.

May 1916 (27:40)

Lincoln and Leaves of Grass

Henry B. Rankin


No part of Lincoln’s life has suffered more in history from false coloring and belittling sensationalism than that of the earlier years he lived in Springfield; and especially is this true in respect to his mental and literary activities of that period. While I knew Lincoln in office life then, every new book that appeared on the table had his attention, and was taken up by him on entering to glance through more or less thoroughly. I can say the same of the books in Bateman’s office adjoining the law office, Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass, then just published, I recall as one of the few new books of poetry that interested him, and which, after reading aloud a dozen or more pages in his amusing way, he took home with him. He brought it back the next morning, laying it on Bateman’s
table and remarking in a grim way that he “had barely saved it from being purified in fire by the women.”

Readers of this day hardly comprehend the shock Whitman’s first book gave the public. Lincoln, from the first, appreciated Whitman’s peculiar poetic genius, but he lamented his rude, coarse naturalness. It may be worth while to relate the office scene when Lincoln first read Whitman’s poetry. It was exceptional for Lincoln to read aloud in the office anything but a newspaper extract. Only books that had a peculiar and unusual charm for him in their ideas, or form of expression, tempted him to read aloud while in the office — and this only when the office family were alone present. It was quite usual and expected by us at such times, when he would become absorbed in reading some favorite author, as Burns’s poems, or one of Shake-speare’s plays, for him to begin reading aloud, if some choice character or principle had appealed to him, and he would then continue on to the end of the act, and sometimes to the end of the play or poem.

When Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* was first published it was placed on the office table by Herndon. It had been read by several of us and, one day, discussions hot and extreme had sprung up between office students and Mr. Herndon concerning its poetic merit, in which Dr. Bateman engaged with us, having entered from his adjoining office. Later, quite a surprise occurred when we found that the Whitman poetry and our discussions had been engaging Lincoln’s silent attention. After the rest of us had finished our criticism of some peculiar verses and of Whitman in general, as well as of each other’s literary taste and morals in particular, and had resumed our usual duties or had departed, Lincoln, who during the criticisms had been apparently in the unapproachable depths of one of his glum moods of meditative silence — referred to elsewhere — took up *Leaves of Grass* for his first reading of it. After half an hour or more devoted to it he turned back to the first pages, and to our general surprise, began to read aloud. Other office work was discontinued by us while he read with sympathetic emphasis verse after verse. His rendering revealed a charm of new life in Whitman’s versification. Save for a few comments on some broad allusions that Lincoln suggested could have been veiled, or left out, he commended the new poet’s verses for their virility, freshness, unconventional sentiments and unique forms of expression, and claimed that Whitman gave promise of a new school of poetry.

At his request, the book was left by Herndon on the office table. Time and again when Lincoln came in, or was leaving, he would pick it up as if to glance at it for only a moment, but instead he would often settle down in a chair and never stop without reading aloud such verses or pages as he fancied. His
estimate of the poetry differed from any brought out in the office discussions. He foretold correctly the place the future would assign to Whitman’s poems, and that *Leaves of Grass* would be followed by other and greater work. A few years later, immediately following the tragedy of Lincoln’s assassination, Whitman wrote the immortal elegy, “O Captain! My Captain!” which became the nation’s — aye, the world’s — funeral dirge of our First American. When I first read this requiem its thrilling lines revived in my memory that quiet afternoon in the Springfield law office, and Lincoln’s first reading and comments on *Leaves of Grass*. That scene was so vividly recalled then as to become more firmly fixed in my memory than any other of the incidents at the Lincoln and Herndon office, and this is my apology for giving space for rehearsing it so fully here.

*October 1917 (28:120)*

**Whitman, Democrat {Interview with Francis Howard Williams}**

*Albert Mordell*

One who has read Walt Whitman’s prose works might recall a reference to a visit paid by the Good Gray Poet to the Williams in Germantown. The visit occurred on the Christmas of 1883, and the poet talks about the good time he had and mentions the children, Churchie (i.e., Churchill Williams) among them. The host of Walt on that occasion was Francis Howard Williams, the poet and dramatist and the present treasurer of the Pennsylvania Historical Society. Churchie is the present associate editor of the *Saturday Evening Post* and author of *J. Devlin-Boss* and *The Captain*.

I spoke to Francis Howard Williams at his office of Walt Whitman, of poetry in general, Philadelphia poets, and about his own contributions. Mr. Williams is remarkably well preserved for a man in his seventies. He is hale, hearty, and there is something of the Beau Brummel in his exactitude and immaculateness of dress. I asked Mr. Williams to shed some light on Walt Whitman’s personality.

“I knew Whitman for about fifteen years before he died. He visited me often at Germantown. He was a clean, neat, polite man, too. Yet neighbors of mine wouldn’t let their daughters come to the house when they knew Walt was there. As for the stories about his sponging on people, they are all false. In his later years a number of his friends, Dr. Mitchell, Harrison S. Morris, Tom Donaldson, myself and others voluntarily, without his request, contributed to

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his support because we loved and admired him, and it pleased us to do so. He was paralyzed, penniless and would have starved. His poetry brought him in but little money.

“Walt was sensitive when people asked him why he never married. He talked pretty freely to me about his early personal affairs. There was one woman whom he would have married had she been free: that was the married woman he met in his sojourn in New Orleans when a young man. Her husband knew of their love, too, I believe. He refers to her in the poem, ‘Once I Passed Through a Populous City.’

“Walt was really an individualist, a democrat. He has been taken up by two classes, who, at least, I think, misinterpret him — the Socialists and the free verse poets. I am opposed to Socialism, as in my opinion it is opposed to democracy, which gives the individual free scope to develop. All the radicals take to Whitman — the pacifists, for instance — yet Whitman was a militarist in the sense that he wanted the North to fight out the war to the bitter end.

“The free verse poets are to me meaningless and inane. Very little poetry do I find in them. I admire the work of Amy Lowell and Edgar Lee Masters, but most of the poets are poor. They are not the legitimate heirs of Whitman.”

“Why is it Philadelphia has not had for many years many poets of a high order?” I asked.

“Well, real poetry is always rare. We have had many good versifiers. But our city has been bound by old traditions. Take the Quakers. I am myself of Quaker stock, so I can afford to talk against them. They once were opposed to music, and their traditions still rule us. Poets have not been able to develop freely. In the past we have had Boker, Leland and others. S. Weir Mitchell wrote excellent poetry. I remember Luders and Dan Dawson, both excellent verse writers. Nor should I forget to mention Charles Leonard Moore, who wrote unusual sonnets and whom Dr. Mitchell introduced to the world in an article in The Forum over twenty years ago. Of the living writers there is Harrison S. Morris, who does not do much poetry writing, as he has a large business to take care of, but he has certainly written some fine poems. Florence Earle Coates has done some good verse, and there is also my friend, Horace Traubel, a wonderfully brilliant fellow, whose Conservator I get. But he is full of that Socialism I don’t like, and he always talks of love in times like today, when the Prussians are without a spark of it, murdering brutally with hatred. After the war I expect some great poets, but they may not come for fifty years.”

{Traubel excerpted passages from this interview, which had appeared in the Philadelphia Record.}

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Walt Whitman and Elbert Hubbard
{A Peter Doyle Controversy}

Laurens Maynard

[This is from an old manuscript. I didn’t think the thing significant enough to print at the time. Maynard acquiesced. Then I lost it. But Pete felt hurt, somehow. So I promised him, with the assent of Maynard, that if I ever recovered it, and the Conservator was still in existence, I’d do as he wished. I’m keeping my promise. — H.T.]

Perhaps no one of the great men of America seems sooner likely to receive a monument of apocryphal biography than does Walt Whitman. While many people are contributing material quite suitable for such a purpose, there seems little doubt that the man best fitted to become its architect and chief constructor is the picturesque-at-any-cost Fra Elbertus of East Aurora.

Some years ago Mr. Hubbard laid a fitting cornerstone for such an edifice in one of his “little journeys to the homes of good men and great,” which he devoted to Whitman. This was tersely described by one who knew Whitman most intimately as being “one-third taken from Dr. Bucke, one third from Ingersoll and the remaining third pure invention.” As these “little journeys” appeared to be designed to convey diluted information for those who wish to read biography for amusement, it did not seem worth while to take this work seriously enough to try to correct its inaccuracies.

In the Cosmopolitan Magazine for May Mr. Hubbard tells a pleasingly picturesque anecdote of Whitman’s intimacy with Peter Doyle, the un-literary friend of his Washington life, and John Burroughs. The gist of the story is that Doyle once entrusted his month’s pay (one hundred dollars!) to Whitman for safe keeping; that Whitman lost the money and tried to conceal the fact until, with the help of John Burroughs and Dr. Bucke, he could accumulate the sum needed to replace the amount so that Pete should never know of its loss. It is presumably to gain a true Whitman atmosphere that Dr. Bucke is introduced into the story, although the event is said to have occurred in 1863, and Dr. Bucke has stated that he first heard of Whitman in 1867 and never met him until 1877. Dates, however, are very immaterial things to Mr. Hubbard, for Doyle himself did not know Whitman in 1863 and did not come to Washington until after the close of the war, when he was discharged from the Confederate army.

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The whole article was so full of errors which anyone familiar with Whitman’s life would recognize that it seemed desirable to find out whether the story had any foundation in fact. Fortunately this was easy to ascertain, since Peter Doyle is still a baggage master on the “Colonial Express,” between Washington and Boston. (Not, as Mr. Hubbard says, in the Grand Central Station, New York.) The following letter from Doyle is an interesting commentary on Mr. Hubbard’s pretensions as a narrator of biography:

The Thorndike, Boston, Mass., May 7, 1902

Dear Laurens: The story in the Cosmopolitan is entirely imaginary. Whitman never lost any money of mine and I did not get one hundred dollars a month. I was a conductor, not a driver, and I paid myself off every night out of collections. The pay was two dollars a day. Bucke was not in Washington and Whitman did not room in the house with Burroughs or me. The article is full of other mistakes, most of which you know as well as I.

Yours truly, Peter G. Doyle.

A careful examination of Mr. Hubbard’s article in the light of this letter and some knowledge of Whitman’s life in Washington reveals the fact that the forty-five sentences of which it consists contain thirty-eight errors or mis-statements of fact, most of which could easily have been verified by Mr. Hubbard if he had cared a straw about accuracy.

For one reason it is too bad that the story isn’t true, for Pete’s alleged remark, “Damn the money! I didn’t want the blame stuff, anyway. Is supper ready?” is really quite typical of one who as a youth of eighteen appealed more strongly to Walt Whitman than all the writers and educated persons he knew, and who today at fifty-five is a noble true-hearted laboring man, greatly beloved by all who come in contact with him, and who can tell many delightful stories of Whitman, and who likes to do so when he finds an interested listener. Mr. Hubbard’s assertion notwithstanding, Peter has never been to visit John Burroughs at Slabsides. He has only seen him once since the old Washington days, and that was at Whitman’s funeral, when Burroughs fortunately met him just as he was turning sadly away from Walt’s house, because the person at the door had said there was no more room, and he had been too modest to tell who he was or urge his special right to admittance.

Doyle has become quite used to seeing all sorts of errors in print concerning him. Probably the one which annoyed him most was when John Addington Symonds spoke of him as the baggage master of a freight train. In some way this phrase got to the ears of his fellow employees, and they used to chaff
him by asking how long freight trains had baggage masters and how he got the appointment. After reading Mr. Hubbard’s story he remarked with a comical twinkle in his eye: “I’ve got used to being called a driver instead of a conductor, but nobody ever made me drive a mule on a bobtail car before. We had as good horses as could be got, and there were a pair of them on each car.”

{Elbert Hubbard (1856–1915) was a prolific printer, editor, and writer who, inspired by William Morris’s Kelmscott Press, founded the Roycroft Press in East Aurora, New York. Maynard’s piece was probably written in 1902, to judge from the date of Doyle’s letter.}

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**June 1919 (30:54)**

**Walt Whitman’s Personality**

*Thomas B. Harned*

Abstract of an address at the New York meeting, May 31st, of the Walt Whitman Fellowship.

It was Richard Watson Gilder who, on one occasion, spoke of Walt Whitman as a “hobo,” and Gilder was at that time as friendly to Whitman as a conventional literary man could be. And it was Col. Ingersoll, in a burst of eloquence, who said of Whitman that “he walked among men, among writers, among verbal varnishers and veneerers, among literary milliners and tailors, with the unconscious majesty of an antique god.” These are the two extremes. I am reminded of the time when Whitman was walking along Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, and Dr. Horace Howard Furness approached him from the opposite direction. Dr. Furness raised his hand in salute and said: “You are too handsome for words,” and passed on. It is difficult to put Whitman’s personality in words. Dressed usually in a gray sack suit. Scrupulously clean. Shirt wide open at the neck and no necktie. A flowing white beard and an imposing head. We can well say we shall never look upon his like again. I can well remember his coming to Camden, in 1873, to live with his brother George. He was poor and paralyzed. George was an expert pipe tester, who had secured a competence. Walt’s relatives had no appreciation of his poetry. His much-loved “powerful uneducated” mother had said that “if Hiawatha was poetry perhaps *Leaves of Grass* was.” The two poems were printed first in the same year. Walt’s cheerful “Howdy” needed no other introduction. We were neighbors and I soon made his acquaintance. My parents were abolitionists and

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liberals, and I had been reared in a radical atmosphere. I was already in earli-
est manhood an acceptor of Walt’s views of democracy. The story of Walt’s
downbreak is well known. His devotion as a volunteer nurse in the Civil War
needs no repetition, and his poetry of that period is an enduring part of our pa-
triotic literature. Living in the open at Timber Creek soon revived him, and for
nineteen years he was a familiar figure on the streets of Camden and Philadel-
phia. He took a personal interest in the welfare of working men and women.
He knew by name all the deck hands on the ferryboats, and also the street car
drivers. He supplied them with warm gloves in winter. He inquired about
their children and ministered to their wants. Of course, people of prominence
came from all parts, but he seemed to prefer plain people and especially chil-
dren. He took the rough with the smooth and was never ruffled. After the spurt
in the sale of his books in 1882 he had some money, and he bought his Mickle
Street “shack” and lived there the last ten years of his life. He at first did his
own cooking, but Mrs. Davis and her two adopted sons moved in, and he was
comfortably fixed, getting his board for their use of the house. Then it was that
I became more intimate with him, and he was a frequent guest at my home a
number of years before his death. Was he appreciated in Camden? Only as a
man. Few if any understood his greatness as an author. On his seventieth birth-
day about two hundred assembled to do him honor. The presiding officer had
only in the afternoon before the dinner asked: “What did this old fellow write,
anyhow?” But there were distinguished men from abroad and letters from per-
sons of eminence, and the affair was a success. Walt was open to suggestions
about things to write about. An etching on the wall of a stranded ship sug-
gested his poem “The Dismantled Ship.” An interesting supper at my home
caused him to write “After the Supper and Talk.” Some orange buds sent him
from Florida gave him the subject for a poem. We gave him some trailing arb-
butus, and he sent it to Queen Victoria with a short poem and a request that
the flower should be put in a vase and placed on the royal breakfast table. He
said the Americans should be grateful to Victoria for her services in maintaining
neutrality in our Civil War. He was a radical of the radicals, but he had mo-
mements of conservatism. He wrote a poem on the death of Emperor William I of
Germany, calling him a faithful shepherd, and his radical friends were indig-
nant and showered him with letters of condemnation. He defended himself
and said that “he was not asleep to the fact that among radicals, as among oth-
ers, there are hoggishnesses, narrownesses, inhumanities, which at times al-
most scare me for the future, for the future belongs to the radical and I want to
see him do good things with it. I look in all men for the heroic quality and find
it. In Caesar, Emerson, Carlyle. If that is aristocracy, I am an aristocrat.” I am
inclined to the opinion that he would not have called the recently deposed emperor a “faithful shepherd.” He was terribly opposed to a protective tariff, and frequently denounced it. He was always telling us not to omit the “hells and damns.” I remember when he thought “hell” if he did not say it. Lady Mountemple, daughter of Lord Palmerston, had sent him a knitted vest, and Walt had to pay $3.25 duty. It was a brilliant scarlet. It might have been used to illustrate the line “the multitudinous seas incarnadine,” or it might have been useful in a bull fight, but as it was two sizes too small it was useless and Walt was out the amount of the duty.

We had a Unitarian church in Camden that I attended, and Walt would have his little joke by saying: “Tom, my philosophy includes them all, even the Unitarians.” One morning on our way to service the minister and I stopped at his house. He said: “And what may be the subject of your sermon?” “The Tragedy of the Ages.” “And what may be the tragedy of the ages?” “The crucifixion of Jesus.” Walt said: “I would not be willing to call that the tragedy of the ages. There are twenty thousand tragedies, equally significant. The tragedy of the average man. The tragedies of war and peace. The obscured, the lost tragedies.” (This was at the time of the Giordano Bruno monument erected on the spot where he had been burned.) “The masters of history have been glorified beyond recognition. Now give the others a chance.” He revered the memory of Lincoln. There was a large engraving of Lincoln in my dining room, and he always lifted his glass and suggested a toast. On one occasion there were several persons present, and he said: “Here is to the blessed man above the mantel; you know this is the day he died.” They had much in common. We should remember that when the fires of our Civil War burned fiercely, in the moment of victory, Lincoln uttered those deathless words — “with malice towards none, with charity to all” — and Whitman wrote his most beautiful short poem — “Reconciliation.” In our own age, when universal hate seems to reign supreme, we can well consider whether we will ever have a lasting peace until the wounds of the nations have been healed by the adoption of that course suggested by these two champions of justice and humanity. Let me present two pictures. In his brother’s home, a little son of his brother lay dead in the coffin. Walt sat with bowed head at the side of the coffin. A neighbor’s child came in and looked at the dead child. Walt said to the child: “You don’t understand, do you? Neither do I.” This inspired Mary Mapes Dodge to write her beautiful poem, “The Two Mysteries.” Why don’t some artist paint this scene? Another picture. Walt Whitman was lying in bed nearing death. His great friend, Col. Ingersoll, sat on the side of the bed. “Well, Walt, you fought your fight.” “Do you say so, Robert?” “And you never faltered.” “Do you say so, Robert?” “And you won.”
“Do you say so, Robert? I did what I thought was right.” The great agnostic and the great believer, else so wide apart, were one in their championship of truth, justice, humanity and democracy. Those were blessed hours at the bedside. We had many talks. Walt maintained his belief in human continuity. Joyfully, fearlessly, he met his translation at the last tenderly, with Horace Traubel holding him by the hand and I on the other side. And I felt like repeating those words uttered by Secretary Stanton at the death bed of Lincoln —“Now he belongs to the ages.”
Nearly 150 substantial articles on Whitman, defined as more than about 750 words, appeared in the *Conservator* (any item shorter is considered a filler). Most of these ran between three and six columns in length, or about 1,500 to 3,000 words; perhaps a dozen or so reached 5,000 words. Not surprisingly, prominent among the authors of these articles were members of the Whitman inner circle: William Sloane Kennedy (9 articles), John Burroughs (8), Traubel (6), Harned (6), Bucke (5), Brinton (4), Francis Howard Williams (3), J. W. Wallace (2), Frank Sanborn (2), John Clifford (1), and Sidney Morse (1). On eighteen occasions, topical essays on Whitman were sufficiently long to appear in installments. Several topical articles of particular interest are included here. Appendix 1 lists all of these articles in chronological order of publication.

While Whitman was alive, Traubel was sparing of such articles. As we have seen, Walt approved highly of the first one, Bucke’s “Leaves of Grass and Modern Science” (1:19), and the second one, Kennedy’s “The Quaker Traits of Walt Whitman” (1:36). Traubel’s two-part article reporting on the first Whitman birthday dinner after the poet’s death included this charming anecdote: “Thomas Eakins pleaded that he was ‘no speaker.’ Mr. Traubel cried — ‘If Whitman were here, Eakins, he would say to that, Then you are all the more likely to say something.’ Eakins got up laughing — ‘Well, I will try’ — and in direct and simple phrase dwelt upon Whitman’s vast knowledge of form, as discovered by him, Eakins, at the period the now historic portrait was in process” (3:35).

In March 1893 appeared “Walt Whitman the Comrade” (4:7), which derived from a speech Traubel gave to the Walt Whitman Reunion, the establishment of which the previous June was announced in this issue of the *Conservator*. It offers a convenient summary, in Traubel’s most elevated vatic style, of all the planks in the Whitman spiritual platform, while at the same time present-
ing the essential “marching orders” for the *Conservator* itself: “This name, Whitman, talismanic, vital, charging the fires of a new brotherhood, giving duties not as reasons but as living impulses, is opener of a new world, usherer of a new spring, answerer for mysteries, baffler of graves and despairs.” Burroughs’s essay, “Whitman’s Self-Reliance” of 1894 — the first of several spry and elegantly literary contributions by him — strikingly asserts, “More than Heine, or Rousseau, or Molière, or Byron, was Walt Whitman a victim of the literary Philistinism of his country and times.” No *Conservator* author wrote with more appealing verve and wit than Kennedy, as in his “ Suppressing a Poet” of 1895 (227), in which he reminisces about his investigations in Boston after *Leaves of Grass* succumbed in 1881–1882 to “the stiff Puritan squireocracy” of that city.


Several articles delved into Whitman’s personality and life, most notably, perhaps, an extensive two-part exploration by the industrious ur-university Whitmanite, Oscar Lovell Triggs, “Walt Whitman: A Character Study.” Among other articles in this category are “Whitman as a Mystic” (9:133), “A Psychic’s View of Whitman” (9:136), “Whitman and Mannahatta” (9:148), “Whitman: The Inner Light of Quakerism” (17:24), “Whitman, the Lover,” and, in the very last *Conservator*, Harned’s “Walt Whitman’s Personality” (101). In 1899 Traubel commissioned a new translation of a long (and long-ago written) essay on Whitman by the Frenchman Gabriel Sarrazin; it appeared in four installments (9:164). An editorial note reveals that Whitman read and greatly approved of snatches of it that were translated for him by Bucke and Kennedy. O’Connor, Traubel says, “regarded it with hot enthusiasm,” saying, ‘Here is free America to go to free France to be interpreted.’”

Many topical articles sought to pair or compare Whitman with other cultural celebrities. Isaac Platt made his debut in June 1894 with the first of these, “The Cosmic Sense as Manifested in Shelley and Whitman” (5:54). Similar articles

Several other articles carry titles natural to a journal whose roots ran deep in the soil of Ethical Culture and liberal values, for example: “Does Whitman Harmonize His Doctrine of Evil with the Pursuit of Ideals?” (6:39), “Good and Evil in Whitman” (11:6), and “Walt Whitman, Christian Science, and the Vedanta” (15:182). “Whitman’s Relation to Morals,” a witty, rousing performance by Burroughs, is all the more remarkable because it derived from an 1896 Phi Beta Kappa lecture at that great academic bastion, Yale. Aside from containing the most vivid simile ever to grace the Conservator — “Into a literature that was timid, imitative, conventional, {Whitman} fell like a leviathan into a duck-pond” — Burroughs’s brilliant defense ends with this droll peroration squarely facing up to the “healthy animality” of Leaves of Grass: “Whitman stands in the garden of the world naked and not ashamed. It is a great comfort that he could do it in this age of hectic lust and Swinburnian impotence, that he could do it and not be ridiculous. To have done it without offense would have been proof that he had failed utterly. Let us be shocked; it is a wholesome shock, like the douse of the sea, or the buffet of the wind. We shall be all the better for it by and by.” Another fine Burroughs performance is “Whitman’s Relation to Culture,” which includes this acerbic summary: “He has escaped the art disease which makes art all in all; the religious disease, which runs to maudlin piety and seeks to win heaven by denying earth; the beauty disease, which would make of poesy a conventional flower-garden.”

More seldom than one might have predicted, articles addressed specific Whitman poems. In an 1895 issue, Helen Clarke discoursed on “Passage to India” (6:7); as with many topical articles, this one derived from a speech given at a meeting of the Walt Whitman Fellowship, usually in Boston, Philadelphia, or New York. At a Philadelphia meeting in 1897, Laurens Maynard read a paper focusing on the Calamus sequence that became “Walt Whitman’s Comradeship,” which reveals Traubel giving Maynard access to his WWC notes years before their publication. Calamus “will never be understood,” Whitman is recorded as saying, “until we have developed a race of men and women whose love is capable of crossing, at times obliterating, all boundaries of sex.” Maynard also cites the suggestion of the lesbian proprietors of Poet-lore, Charlotte
Porter and Helen Clarke, that “the meaning [of Calamus] be extended to include comradeship between women.”

As noted in the introduction, several articles addressed more general aspects of the prosody, structure, and content of Leaves of Grass. An interesting early one is Oscar Triggs’s “The Growth of Leaves of Grass” (8 : 84), a remarkable 5,000-word summary of the work’s evolution, which includes perceptive comments on Whitman’s juvenilia; the preeminence of the 1855, 1856, and 1860 editions; Emerson’s famous letter (“the sheet-anchor of the faith in Whitman’s greatness”); Whitman’s habits of moving poems about and of revision; the weaker poems in the later Annexes (“like the eddies behind a great ship”); and the purpose of it all: “Leaves of Grass has for its chief aim the stimulation of personality.”


NOTE

1. Triggs seems to have been the first teacher of a Whitman course. An instructor at the University of Chicago who wrote on Browning and Whitman, he was deprived of his post after gaining national notoriety for questioning conventional pieties and advocating free love, free verse, and socialism. He later produced the 1917 variorum edition of Leaves of Grass (see Traubel’s review, 219).

November 1894 (5 : 131)

Whitman’s Self-Reliance

John Burroughs

It is over sixty years since Goethe said that to be a German author was to be a German martyr. I presume things have changed in Germany since those times, and that the Goethe of to-day does not encounter the jealousy and hatred the great poet and critic of Weimar seemed to have called forth. But we in America have known an American author who was an American martyr in a
more literal sense than any of the men named by the great German. More than Heine, or Rousseau, or Molière, or Byron, was Walt Whitman a victim of the literary Philistinism of his country and times; but, fortunately for himself, his was a nature so large, tolerant and self-sufficing that his martyrdom sat lightly upon him. (His unpopularity was rather a tonic to him than otherwise.) He said he was more resolute because all had denied him than he ever could have been had all accepted him, and he added: “I heed not and have never heeded cautions, majorities or ridicule.”

There are no more precious and tonic pages in history than the records of men who have faced unpopularity, odium, hatred, ridicule, detraction, in obedience to an inward voice, and never lost courage or good nature. Whitman’s is the most striking case in our literary annals — probably the most striking one in our century outside of politics and religion. The inward voice alone was the oracle he obeyed: “My commission obeying, to question it never daring.”

The bitter-sweet cup of unpopularity he drained to its dregs, and drained it cheerfully, as one knowing beforehand that it is preparing for him and cannot be avoided.

Have you learn’d lessons only of those who admired you, and were tender with you and stood aside for you?

Have you not learn’d great lessons from those who reject you, and brace themselves against you? or who treat you with contempt, or dispute the passage with you?

(Stronger Lessons)

Every man is a partaker in the triumph of him who is always true to himself and makes no compromises with customs, schools or opinions. Whitman’s life, underneath its easy tolerance and cheerful good-will, was heroic. He fought his battle against great odds and he conquered; he had his own way, he yielded not a hair to the enemy.

The pressure brought to bear upon him by the press, by many of his friends, or by such a man as Emerson, whom he deeply reverenced, to change or omit certain passages from his poems, seems only to have served as the opposing hammer that clinches the nail. The louder the outcry the more deeply he felt it his duty to stand by his first convictions. The fierce and scornful opposition to his sex poems, and to his methods and aims generally, was probably more confirmatory than any approval could have been. It went to the quick. During a dark period of his life, when no publisher would touch his book, and when its exclusion from the mails was threatened, and poverty and paralysis were upon him, a wealthy Philadelphian offered to furnish means for its publication.
if he would omit certain poems; but the poet does not seem to have been
tempted for one moment by the offer. He cheerfully chose the heroic part, as he
always did.

Emerson reasoned and remonstrated with him for hours, walking up and
down Boston Common, and after he had finished his argument, says Whitman,
which was unanswerable, “I felt down in my soul the clear and unmistakable
conviction to disobey all, and pursue my own way.” He told Emerson so;
whereupon they went and dined together. The independence of the poet prob-
ably impressed Emerson more than his yielding would have done, for, had not
he preached the adamantine doctrine of self-trust? “To believe your own
thought,” he says, “to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is
ture of all men — that is genius.”

In many ways was Whitman, quite unconsciously to himself, the man
Emerson invoked and prayed for — the absolutely self-reliant man; the man
who should find his own day and land sufficient; who had no desire to be
Greek, or Italian, or French, or English, but only himself; who should not
whine, or apologize, or go abroad; who should not duck, or deprecate, or bor-
row, and who could see through the many disguises or debasements of our
times the lineaments of the same gods that so ravished the bards of old.

The moment a man “acts for himself,” says Emerson, “tossing the laws, the
books, idolatries and customs out of the window, we pity him no more, but
thank and revere him.”

Whitman took the philosopher at his word. “Greatness once and forever has
done with opinion,” even the opinion of the good Emerson. “Heroism works in
contradiction to the voice of mankind, and in contradiction, for a time, to the
voice of the great and good.” “Every heroic act measures itself by its contempt
of some external good” — popularity, for instance. “The characteristic of hero-
ism is persistency.” “When you have chosen your part abide by it, and do not
weakly try to reconcile yourself with the world.” “Adhere to your act and con-
gratulate yourself if you have done something strange and extravagant, and
broken the monotony of a decorous age.” Heroism “is the avowal of the un-
schooled man that he finds a quality in him that is negligent of expense, of health,
of life, of danger, of hatred, of reproach, and knows that his will is higher and
more excellent than all actual and all possible antagonists.” “A man is to carry
himself in the presence of all opposition as if everything were titular and
ephemeral but he.” “Great works of art,” he again says, “teach us to abide by our
spontaneous impression with good-natured inflexibility, the more when the
whole cry of voices is on the other side.” These brave sayings of Emerson were
all illustrated and confirmed by Whitman’s course. The spectacle of this man
sitting there by the window of his little house in Camden, poor and partially paralyzed, and looking out upon the trite and commonplace scenes and people, or looking athwart the years and seeing only detraction and denial, yet always serene, cheerful, charitable, his wisdom and tolerance ripening and mellowing with time, is something to treasure and profit by. He was a man who needed no assurances. He had the patience and the leisure of nature. He welcomed your friendly and sympathetic word, or with equal composure he did without it.

I remember calling upon him shortly after Swinburne’s fierce onslaught upon him had been published, some time in the latter part of the eighties. I was curious to see how Whitman took it, but I could not discover either in word or look that he was disturbed a particle by it. He spoke as kindly of Swinburne as ever. If he was pained at all it was on Swinburne’s account and not on his own. It was a sad sight to see a man retreat upon himself as Swinburne had done. In fact, I think hostile criticism, fiercely hostile, gave Whitman nearly as much comfort as any other. Did it not attest reality? Men do not brace themselves against shadows. Swinburne’s polysyllabic rage showed the force of the current he was trying to stem. As for Swinburne’s hydrocephalous muse, I do not think Whitman took any interest in it from the first.

Self-reliance, or self-trust, is one of the principles Whitman announces in his “Laws for Creations.” He saw that no first-class work is possible except it issue from a man’s deepest, most radical self.

What do you suppose creation is?
What do you suppose will satisfy the soul, except to walk free and own no superior?
What do you suppose I would intimate to you in a hundred ways, but that man or woman is as good as God?
And that there is no God any more divine than Yourself?
And that that is what the oldest and newest myths finally mean?
And that you or any one must approach creations through such laws?

(Leaves of Grass)

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stand. The sentiment of these things is very pretty, and we all love it and admire it, but the flesh and blood reality puts us to flight.

I think it probable that Whitman anticipated a long period of comparative oblivion for himself and his works. He knew from the first that the public would not be with him; he knew that the censors of taste, the critics, and literary professors, would not be with him; he knew the vast army of Philistia, the respectable, orthodox church-going crowd, would be against him, and that, as in the case of nearly all original, first-class men, he would have to wait to be understood for the growth of the taste of himself. None knew more clearly than he did how completely our people were under the illusion of the genteel and the conventional, and that even among the emancipated few the possession of anything like robust aesthetic perception was rare enough. America, so bold and original and independent in the world of practical politics and material endeavor, is, in spiritual and imaginative regions, timid, conforming, imitative. There is, perhaps, no civilized country in the world wherein the native, original man, the real critter, as Whitman loved to say, that underlies all our culture and conventions, crops out so little in manners, in literature and in social usages. The fear of being unconventional is greater with us than the fear of death. A certain evasiveness, polish, distrust of ourselves, amounting to insipidity and insincerity, is spoken of by observant foreigners. In other words, we are perhaps the least like children of any people in the world. In due time youth and manhood meet; the greatest men are the most frank and simple; but, as a people, we have a long way yet to travel to reach this blessed state. All these things were against Whitman, and will continue to be against him for a long time. With the first stroke he broke through the conventional and took his stand upon the natural. With rude hands he tore away the veils and concealments from the body and from the soul. He ignored entirely all social and conventional usages and hypocrisies, not by revolt against them, but by choosing a point of view from which they disappeared. He embraced the unrefined and the savage as well as the tender and human. The illusions of the past, of the models and standards, he freed himself of at once, and declared for the beauty and the divinity of the now and the here. He did not hesitate to say that “what is nearest, cheapest, easiest is me.” Such an example of self-assertion, not only in behalf of himself but in behalf of his fellows and of his country, was never before seen in any recent literature. The arrogance and the assumptions of the work were astounding. But its boundless humanitarian spirit, its tremendous practical democracy, its grasp of the great spiritual forces and its pristine splendor and freshness, like the sea and the orbs, won for it a tardy recognition here and there; yet to say that the public taste was shocked, is not saying much: appreciative readers were often bewildered. Even
Emerson’s admiration, so strongly and eloquently expressed in his now famous letter to the poet, though never taken back, was apparently held in abeyance for years before his death.

Out of Whitman’s absolute self-trust arose his prophetic egotism — the divine fervor and audacity of the simple ego. He shared the conviction of the old prophets that man is a part of God, and that there is nothing in the universe any more divine than the individual soul. “I, too,” he says, and this line is the key to much there is in his work — “I, too, have felt the resistless call of myself” (“Song at Sunset”).

With the old Biblical writers the motions of their own spirits, their thoughts, dreams, etc., was the voice of God. There is something of the same sort in Whitman. The voice of that inner self was final and authoritative with him. It was the voice of God. He could drive through and over all the conventions of the world in obedience to that voice. This call to him was as a voice from Sinai. One of his mastering thoughts was the thought of identity — that you are you, and I am I. This was the final meaning of things, and the meaning of immortality. “Yourself, yourself, yourself,” he says, with swelling vehemence, “forever and ever.” To be compacted and riveted and fortified in yourself, so as to be a law unto yourself, is the final word of the past and of the present.

Whitman’s egotism, colossal as it was, was not personal and ignoble. It was vicarious and all-embracing of humanity. He thought better of every man than that man thought of himself. Selfishness in any unworthy sense he had none. Vanity, arrogance, self-assertion in his life there was none. Fondness for praise, as such, which has been so often charged, I fail to detect.

A craving for sympathy and personal affection he certainly had; to be valued as a human being was more to him than to be valued as a poet. His strongest attachments were probably for persons who had no opinion, good or bad, of his poetry at all.

His egotism, if there is no better word, united him to his fellows rather than separated him from them. It was not that of a man who sets himself up above others, or who claims some special advantage or privilege, but that god-like quality that would make others share its great good fortune. Hence we are not at all shocked when the poet, in the fervor of his love for mankind, determinedly imputes to himself all the sins and vices and follies of his fellow-men. We rather glory in it. This self-abasement is the seal of the authenticity of his egotism. Without those things there might be some ground for the complaint of a Boston critic of Whitman that his work was not noble, because it celebrated pride, and did not inculcate the virtues of humility and self-denial, etc. The great lesson of the Leaves, flowing curiously out of its pride and egotism, is
the lesson of charity, of self-surrender, and the free bestowal of yourself upon all hands.

The law of life of great art is the law of life in ethics, and was long ago announced.

He that would lose his life shall find it; he that gives himself the most freely shall the most freely receive. Whitman made himself the brother and equal of all, not in word, but in very deed; he was in himself a compend of the people for which he spoke, and this breadth of sympathy and free giving of himself has resulted in an unexpected accession of power.

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JANUARY 1895 (5:165)

**Whitman and Tolstoi**

*Edward Payson Jackson*

Read at the first meeting of the Boston Branch of the Walt Whitman Fellowship. . . . A portion of the discussion it evoked is added.

Both Whitman and Tolstoi move mankind by other momentum than that of mere genius. Both are like the lover, who wins not so much by the brilliancy of his intellect as by the impetuous ardor of his wooing. And his fellow-man is the object of the passionate love of each. Christ was such a lover. Both Tolstoi and Whitman typify different phases of the Christ idea. Whereas one takes the individual Christ of the New Testament as his literal model in every minute detail of example and teaching, the other takes what may seem to be broader ground — a sort of impersonal Christ-hood, of which the Nazarene was only a concrete, though the most highly developed, exemplar. The one views Christ as the fountain-head of all that is embraced in the collective term Christianity, while the other regards all this as self-existent and pre-existent, and Christ himself as only a single exponent. If there had been no Christ it is probable that Tolstoi would have remained either the selfish, arrogant aristocrat he describes himself in his earlier life, or the despairing hypochondriac, whom his intense and persistent study of the Sermon on the Mount transformed into one of the meekest and most altruistic of men. Exactly what Whitman would have been if Christ had not lived, it is of course impossible to know, but it is safe to believe that under no conditions could he have been an arrogant aristocrat or a despairing hypochondriac. That he owes much to the inspiration of Christ, whether consciously or unconsciously, we must believe, who live in a world where civilization and philanthropy coincide with Christianity, and where
ignorance and barbarism coincide with Antichrist; but that he would have been the great poet of democracy and philanthropy, in whatever age of the world he might have lived, we must also believe. Had Socrates followed Christ, instead of preceding him by nearly five centuries, he would still have been Socrates; so Whitman would have been Whitman, whether he had lived in ancient Greece or in modern New England. In his youth and younger manhood Tolstoi tastes the cups of power, wealth, fame, social eminence, and luxury deepening to debauchery. He finds them sweet at first, but gradually their sweetness turns to bitterness. In his desperation he seeks for relief, and at last finds it in the teachings and example of Christ. By these he measures character and conduct for himself and for the world. Hence he endeavors to eliminate all forms of self-seeking. Many of the natural passions of the human heart he would stifle altogether. Egotism, personal ambition, love of ownership, of ease, and of luxury, he would banish from the world, and substitute self-sacrifice, contentment with poverty, privation and humble toil. In short, he is sublimely discontented with things as he finds them. He would revolutionize human society, making altruism the one great lever of effort and achievement, instead of ambition, appetite and avarice.

On the other hand, Whitman is sublimely contented with things as he finds them — at least with their tendencies. Every part of the natural man, psychical and physical, meets not merely his approval but his profoundest adoration. He but repeats the verdict of the Almighty upon the work of his creation, and pronounces all good. He would no more quench one natural impulse, one natural passion of the heart, than he would cripple one limb of the body or rob it of one of its functions. To him a child in the first sweet process of its unfolding, a youth or a maiden in the budding promise of maturity, a man or a woman fully developed in all powers and capacities, an old man bowed under his ripened sheaves, are each and all beautiful and glorious in their way, and the effort to annul or abort any part of nature’s handiwork in them is simply an effort at defacement and distortion.

Both Whitman and Tolstoi are the apostles of the loftiest ideals. Both sincerely desire the best possibilities for themselves and their race; but one finds the best only in the religious mountain heights; the other finds it in the valleys and in the plains, among the luxuriant undergrowth, among forests, flowers, and weeds. One finds good only in the New Testament; the other finds and presents it in Leaves of Grass.

Both depict vice with startling realism; the one only to show its utter hideousness; the other to show that, hideous as it is, it is yet a part of the general plan, the shading of the great picture, throwing the highlights into...
stronger relief, the minor key in the universal harmony. Tolstoi would banish all evil from the world at once and forever; I am not sure that Whitman would. He seems to believe that evil, or what we call evil, still has a most important function to perform in the economy of nature; that it is a sort of anvil upon which what we call good is forged. Whether, indeed, there could be good without evil is a question that has employed philosophers as well as poets. The scientist has his staggering analogies at his tongue’s end: there can be no north without a south, no up without a down, no positive electric current without a negative. So the index might point to zero in the moral dynamo, whether it were the good or the evil electrode that were neutralized.

Tolstoi and Whitman both enter boldly upon ground forbidden to the common herd of writers, and both have again and again been ordered off by multitudes of indignant censors. But while both turn deaf ears to the storms of protest that are showered upon them, as those having authority to walk there, neither has entered the forbidden ground for any profane or unworthy purpose. The one says to the multitude: “This is a garden full of poisonous weeds and venomous reptiles. I am divinely commissioned to explore it that you may know how noisome and perilous it is; that your feet may be withheld from wandering among its snares and its pitfalls.” The other says: “This is nature’s holy of holies. The wall that holds you without is of your own building. You have built it of stones that nature never made.”

There are many of the best who believe that, whatever their motives may have been, both are wrong in thus drawing the veil from nature. In Paradise she needs no veil; when Paradise comes again she may need none; but the world is a long way from Paradise. Was not Solon wiser, who, when asked if his laws were the best that could be devised, answered: “No, but they are the best the people are capable of receiving.” Many modern Solons seriously question whether Anna Karenina, The Kreutzer Sonata, and Leaves of Grass are not as far beyond the needs of the people as the code of laws which the old Solon withheld.

But it is easy to understand why both of these courageous souls have advanced upon ground which the timid, the neutral, the conventional, so carefully avoid. They have come into the world, not like visitors to the public garden, who must not touch the plants and shrubs, and who must not upon any consideration walk upon the grass. They have come like newly-appointed gardeners, to prune, uproot, and transplant as they see fit. The little warning legends, “Keep off the Grass,” they either do not see, or, if they see them, note them no more than Sherman would have noted a ribbon barrier stretched across his path to the sea. They have undertaken their work, and they set about
it in no halfhearted, perfunctory way. So when Tolstoi takes Christ as his model he learns the whole alphabet of Christianity. He enters upon the new life with all the fervor and abandon which led to his utter satiety and disgust with the old. He begins with unsparing denunciation of the church, which, professing to follow the teachings of Christ, is complacently indifferent to the real present welfare of mankind. He denounces it for its illogical ignoring of essentials and its eager punctiliousness in non-essentials. Its rules touching dogmas, sacraments, prayers, fasts, rites, were no more necessary to him than they were to Whitman. The vital injunctions: judge not, be humble and forgiving, love your neighbor as yourself, were trumpeted by the church, which at the same time openly and shamelessly approved of what was incompatible with these injunctions. To him it was impossible that true Christianity admits of such palpable inconsistencies. Still he was puzzled. The new doctrine required men to love their enemies, to submit to all sorts of wrong and oppression, in short, to violate what seemed to him the very fundamental laws of nature. Could it be possible that all this was demanded? Then the solution flashed upon his mind: “Except ye become as little children, ye cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.”

He had been trying to make over a full-grown man; he had been trying to re-model a house already built. He must begin de novo. The man must become a little child; the house must be torn down and built again from its foundation stones. It needed a great-souled enthusiast like Tolstoi to carry out the new doctrine to its very ultimate. He had been taught to regard as sacred the institutions of civil and military government, by which offenses were judged before civil and military tribunals and punished sometimes with death. He had served in an army which was called the “Christophile army,” and which was “sent forth with a divine benediction.” He could not reconcile all this with the new doctrine. He boldly accused the church, the government, all human society, which attempted to reconcile such contradictions, of hypocrisy.

With such convictions, it is inevitable that a man like Tolstoi should become what men of less positiveness of character call an utterly impractical enthusiast — a crank. The average man may interpret the Sermon on the Mount as Tolstoi interpreted it, or he may not, but the average man never attempts to put its injunctions into actual practice. The most pious churchman, the most fervent evangelical orator, will not only never think of giving his cloak to the robber of his coat, but he will lose no time in having him arrested for the theft, and few of us have seen the man who will turn his right cheek to the ruffian who has smitten his left. The average man will, if he have the courage and patriotism, leap to the defense of his country’s flag whenever and wherever it is assailed, and in doing so he will enjoy the approval of his own conscience and the admiration
and gratitude of his fellow-countrymen — at least until the danger is past and the pension bills come in. But Tolstoi is not the average man. He would actually turn his right cheek, though he is a nobleman of the most aristocratic nobility on earth, and his assailant might be the humblest of the emancipated serfs. He would actually send his cloak after his stolen coat, and would sternly rebuke the man who should counsel prosecution of the thief. Not only this, but he would allow the feeblest foreign invaders, even the miserable Turkish skilloi, to ravage his country without lifting his hand in its defense, though he fought bravely enough at Sebastopol and Tchernaya. Should you say to him: “But, sir, your principles put into practice would subvert all government and destroy society. They would put the innocent at the mercy of the guilty. Instead of establishing the peace on earth, good will to men, for which you pray, they would bring about universal anarchy, the triumph of evil over good.” Should you say this to him he would reply: “My principles! No, they are the plain teachings of the Christ whom you profess to follow. If they should subvert government, destroy society, and bring about anarchy, as you say, that is not my responsibility. I have the faith to believe, however, that no such disasters would follow. He who laid down these precepts knows better than you or I what would be the result of their application. When I was a soldier of the Czar I learned to obey orders without question. I am now a soldier of one greater than the Czar, and my duty is still to obey orders without question.”

What could you reply? That even the subordinate must use discretion? That, at least, he has the right to interpret his orders according to the rules of reason and common sense? Imagine the scorn with which the old soldier would turn upon his heel!

Walt Whitman does not acknowledge such subserviency to any master, past or present. He says:

I give nothing as duties,
What others give as duties I give as living impulses,
(Shall I give the heart’s action as a duty?)
(Myself and Mine)

He is independent of other teachers than his own glorious intuitions, and his own observation. He stands upon his spot in the universe with his “robust soul.” Like Tolstoi, he cares nothing for dogmas, rites, sacraments; not because they have ever tortured him with their hollowness and triviality, but because they have never in any way appealed to him. He does not trouble himself about being smitten or robbed. Such a man is in small danger of either. As to his views of duty when his country is in peril, we have his long record of
hospital service in evidence. Whether this was the outcome of a mere circumscribed patriotism, or whether it resulted merely from his love and compassion for his suffering fellow-man, the result was the same. The hundred thousand sick and wounded men who received his tender, loving ministrations never bothered their aching heads with the ethical problem. Whatever Whitman’s relations to the personal Christ may have been, here was a practical application of the Christ idea on the grandest scale. It is easy to talk of love and mercy; it is easy for genius to thrill the souls of others with sublime and impassioned eloquence upon love and mercy; but if any cynical criticism should impute the least insincerity, either to the inspired rhapsodies of Whitman or to the exalted theories of Tolstoi, the actual lives and deeds of both would be its sufficient refutation. Both are different types of the Christ idea. The difference is that, while Tolstoi is a religionist in the restricted sense of the term, Whitman was not. “I have never had any particular religious experiences,” he said to Bucke. And in his poems he says of animals:

They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things,
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.

(Song of Myself 32)

Some of this is exactly what Tolstoi does. He sweats and whines about his condition. He lies awake in the dark and weeps for his sins. He writes a great book discussing his duty to God. But he also says much about his duty to man. He is not demented with the mania of owning things, he never kneels to one of his kind, and his idea of respectability is closely akin to that of Whitman. It is in the latter branch of this antithesis that he is at one with the “good, gray poet.” Both are the great modern apostles of democracy pure and undefiled.

Both also feel the same lover’s passion for nature. When Tolstoi speaks of Lukashka and Maryana it might be Whitman himself speaking, save for the lack of Whitman’s stormy rhythm. There is the same love of the unrestrained and the unconventional, both in the animate and the inanimate world.

But this was written before Tolstoi’s regeneration, an epoch of life which Whitman never experienced. What would such a regeneration have done for Whitman, if he had been capable of it? Would it have broadened his sublime philanthropy, would it have narrowed it, or would it have left it unchanged?
Would it have rendered his sweet, luxuriant nature still more sweet and luxuriant, or would it have chastened it to a less abounding but a more rigid fidelity to what he would then have deemed his duty? Would it have led him to a deeper love of nature, as the work of a higher than nature, or would it have led him to separate the work from the Worker, and worship, not himself as the microcosm including the macrocosm, but only the Creator of both microcosm and macrocosm?

Tolstoi undoubtedly needed the regeneration to make him what he is to-day. Did Whitman need it to make him more philanthropic and democratic than he was? These questions are asked not with any implication of their solution.

[William Sloane Kennedy: Mr. Jackson has stated both sides so thoroughly, I don’t know that I can add much. I think Whitman’s character was a growth all through his life. He came from Quaker ancestry on his mother’s side, and I believe they don’t go through this agony which Calvinists do of conversion and regeneration.

Mr. Jackson questioned whether Whitman might, perhaps, if he had had such regeneration, have been brought into deeper relations with nature — whether he might have seen that nature was the product of something beyond itself. But it is his idea that in nature is the progression of absolute being. This is the key to his entire philosophy, as he has expressly said in his prose work. Whitman, it seems to me, as Mr. Jackson says, is another expression of the Christ type. But as the centuries have rolled away man’s intellect has progressed, and Whitman’s gospel, the result of science, is a scientific gospel, as well as a religious gospel. Mankind has reached a point where a new sphere of thought is born. Whitman is the first great spokesman in literature of the cause non-ascetic — the naturalistic attitude toward nature and the world, accepting the body as coequal with the soul. His acceptance of the body, glorifying it and exalting it joyously, puts him in total opposition with ascetic Christianity. It does not put him in opposition with Christ, as we dimly discern him behind the gospel of the sermon on the Mount. He therefore finds himself with Hegel and all the great humanitarians. Whitman is a democrat. Comradeship and love of man have always existed, yet in him it appears at its highest. Tolstoi’s Christianity cannot exist with Whitman’s; they are the antipodes of each other.
Charlotte Porter: Mr. Jackson’s question as to whether Whitman’s poetry would have been better if he had passed through such a regeneration of self as Tolstoi passed through, should be questioned. Do you think Whitman needed regeneration? It seems to some of us as if Whitman were born regenerate, reaching naturally to a phase of thought and spirit where, without either asceticism or altruism, he had regard for the best growth both of himself and others. The anti-altruistic spirit is in all that Whitman wrote.

W. S. K.: People do not realize that there is in Whitman a tremendous old satanic spirit as well as the Christ-like. All his life he conquered it, and the Christ love came to him. He spent his life in good deeds, ministering to the sick and wounded. He did have a regeneration, an inner one, which went on beneath that impassive surface.

E. P. J.: It is held by one class of religionists that this regeneration which I spoke of, and which you have alluded to as a slow process in the case of Whitman, is impossible without a certain supernatural agency. Whenever I have heard that I have thought of Socrates. The regeneration described in his life was a slow one, very like that of Whitman.

June 1895 (6:55)

Was Whitman Mad?

Richard Maurice Bucke

Read in Philadelphia at the annual meeting of the Walt Whitman Fellowship, May 31st.

The multitude answered: Thou hast a devil. — John 8:20.

Many of them said: He hath a devil and is mad. — John 10:20.


And now [Cesare] Lombroso pronounces: “Walt Whitman . . . assuredly a mad genius.” And Max Nordau echoes: “Mad, Whitman was, without doubt.” And goes on: “He was a vagabond, a reprobate rake.” Winding up with: “He is morally insane and incapable of distinguishing between good and evil, virtue and crime.” According to both Lombroso and Nordau, Whitman is a case of degenerative insanity.
Is it well to notice such allegations? Perhaps not. The proof must always rest (in last resort) upon the acceptation of the world — of posterity. Nothing that may be said, for or against, will influence by a hair’s breadth this final verdict, for it will rest not upon opinion, scientific or popular, but upon something far deeper — upon the absorption, namely, of the man by the race. Of a given food or drink no argument will settle the question. Is it wholesome? Is it finally good for man? But the instinct of the race, after sufficient experience, may be absolutely depended upon to give a correct answer. It must be so. No race either of plants or animals could continue to exist were this not true. Is it not the same — must it not be the same — with mental ailment? And does not Whitman himself speak the last word when he says that “the proof of a poet shall be (must necessarily be) sternly deferred till his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it”?

Granting all this, and knowing absolutely that nothing I can say will affect the final decision, I am still impelled by my love for the poet to say a few words upon the point that has been raised. I am more willing to speak because, having known Whitman intimately for the last fifteen years of his life, having been his physician for a large part of that time, having been for now over nineteen years superintendent of a large lunatic asylum, in which capacity I have made, both theoretically and practically, a special study of insanity for nearly half a lifetime; for all these reasons, I say, if this allegation or charge of insanity is to be replied to at all it would seem that I am the person (or, at all events, a person) to accept the undertaking.

It is said that a given man is a case of degenerative insanity. I am ordered, we will say, by my government, to examine him. I go into the witness box and say: “He is not insane.” Queen’s Counsel asks me: “How do you know?” I answer: “He has none of the marks of degenerative insanity or of any form of insanity — for nearly all insanity is degenerative, that is, rests and depends upon degeneration.” Counsel again asks: “What are these marks which are absent in this case, and, being present in other cases, prove insanity?” I respond: “The marks are enormously varied in different cases, it seldom happening that one individual has all or nearly all of them. These marks are bodily and mental. The latter class is divisible into defects and perversions of the senses, of the intellect, and of the moral nature. The bodily marks are defects in evolution and want of symmetry.” So that the marks of such degeneration as leads to insanity may be scheduled as follows:

1. Imperfect growth or evolution of the body.
2. Asymmetry of the body or of any part or parts of it.
3. Defects in the sense organs making one or more of the senses imperfect.
4. Perversions of sense giving rise to illusions and hallucinations.
5. Defect of the intellect from absolute idiocy (a form of insanity) to the least degree of imbecility.
6. Perversions of the intellect shown by the existence of extreme and unfounded opinions, and by the presence of delusions.
7. Defect of the moral nature from absence of it (moral idiocy) to lesser defects such as are very common.
8. Perversions of the moral nature, as when, to take an extreme case, a loving wife and mother conceives a hatred to her husband and children, or as when (a very common symptom) a man is haunted for weeks, months, or years, either constantly or intermittently, with intense fear, there being no objective cause therefor.
9. and lastly. What is called hyperkinesia — want of inhibition: a condition often lifelong, in which, from congenital defect, a person is more or less unable to control his thoughts, words, feelings, acts.

It will, upon reflection, be understood that each of these nine headings covers a vast field, and it must also be borne in mind that between none of these insane categories and health is there any hard and fast line of demarcation — between such foundationless beliefs as we all have and an insane delusion; between a fit of the blues and melancholia; between any infirmity of purpose and insane hyperkinesia; and so on.

I have seen more than one insane degenerate who was defective under all of the above nine heads; many are defective under eight, seven, six, or five; there is no true insane degenerate but is defective under several. Now, I should be glad to be told under which of these heads the degenerative insanity of Whitman should be classed? Let us see. His defect does not belong to the first or second category, for he was of good stature — six feet tall — and weighed two hundred pounds; he was neither fat nor lean; his body was symmetrical, and his features were exceptionally formed and unusually noble. Whitman was, I think, the handsomest man I have ever seen. I have seen and examined in my life about five thousand lunatics. I have not seen one handsome man or beautiful woman among them all. Beauty depends on the highest evolution. Here is a question of devolution. Degeneration and beauty could hardly exist together.

I have never seen any person who could fairly be called an insane degenerate who had noble features or a noble expression. It would then be a singular exception in my long experience if the best-formed man I have known, and the man with undoubtedly the noblest expression, should have been a lunatic.

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The most important test of the perfection of the senses, from our present point of view, will be the perfection or otherwise of those sense functions which, having been last evolved, are the least stable, and are therefore the most liable to lapse and perversion. The most prominent of these are the musical sense, the color sense and the sense of fragrance. My means of ascertaining the truth have been ample, and I am satisfied that all three of these were in Whitman highly developed; his writings incontestably prove the same thing. His more basic sense functions were all, as far as I know or have reason to believe, well, and some of them, as his sense of hearing, exceptionally well, developed. As evidence of the acuteness of the last he tells us (and there is no reason to doubt his word) that he heard the grass and grain growing, and the unfolding of the tree leaves in the spring. He had no sense defects. Had he sense perversions? If he had I never remarked or heard of them, and no one has ever suggested to me, or in my hearing, a single suspicion pointing thereto.

To pass on to the next point: I do not believe that any one will claim that Whitman’s intellect was defective. I have never heard that proposition suggested in the most remote manner, while I myself have always considered him the most all-round intelligent man that I have known. But was he eccentric? notional? Did he take up fads and believe things without sufficient reason? Did he adopt extreme views? I do not ask whether he had delusions, because such a question to those who know anything of the man would be too absurd. But had he any mental traits that could be considered as approximations to delusions? Well, if he had such mental traits, if he was eccentric, notional, if he took up with fads or extreme views, I must say that my fifteen years’ acquaintance with the man has left me absolutely ignorant as to his character. Let us take one or two examples of his calmness and moderation in matters of opinion which are apt to move men deeply. Whitman was an abolitionist, and in “The Body Electric” he wrote, long before the war, as strong anti-slavery words as have ever been penned. Nor did he afterwards change his opinion. Still, he was so moderate that he would never join himself to the extreme abolitionists, and never adopted their methods or their doctrines. Again, if Whitman believed in any one thing more than another it was in government by the people as contrasted with government by caste, but so tolerant was he of the opposite view that he mortally offended some of his strongest friends (among them W. D. O’Connor) by his lines to Emperor William upon his death in 1888. Once more — his whole life, and the tenor of his writings from beginning to end, show that Whitman’s sympathies were steadily with temperance. Nevertheless he declined to rank himself among total abstainers, but from first to last held himself free to drink wine when he pleased. His religious feelings and
convictions were as deep as those of any man I have known, yet his tolerance of all religious views, honestly held, was absolute, insomuch that it could be, and was, truthfully said of him that “he accepted and absorbed all theories, all creeds, all religions.” We may then surely acquit Whitman of perversions of the intellect, indicative of degeneracy, shown by the existence of delusions or by the presence of extreme and unfounded opinions.

Let us pass now to a brief consideration of Walt Whitman’s moral nature, and ask, in the first place, whether there was evidence in that direction of absence or defect? You all know that this question can neither be seriously asked nor answered by a man who knew the poet. You all know his almost preter-human faculties of affection, courage, trust, compassion. You know how, throughout a long life, he proved them day by day, year in and year out — how he was loved by almost all the men and women who were brought into relationship with him and how he loved them in return — how he proved this love on battle-fields and in hospitals. Many of you know his calm courage in the face of great danger. You all know his invincible faith in the absolute and infinite goodness of God and that to him eternal life was as certain as the life he was living when we knew him. How could one of us who knew all this ask or answer such a question? But in this well nigh divine moral nature were there perversions as on the sun’s disc there are spots? If there were I have not seen them, but neither have I seen the spots on the sun. Of one thing I am certain: that in the moral nature of Walt Whitman there were no perversions indicative of degeneration. My personal knowledge of the man satisfies me beyond all question that he was troubled with no hates, fears, remorses or qualms either insane or sane — either degenerative or normal; the spiritual atmosphere in which he lived being above and beyond all such human, marsh emanations.

We come now to the final point — the most important of all: was he hyperkinetic? I may say here, for the benefit of those who are not psychologists, that man’s mastery of himself — his own control of his own ego — is one of the last evolved of our psychical functions, and, being so, is one of the most liable to be defective or absent. You all know by daily observation how true this is; how many men and women there are in all cities and all countries, and in all classes and societies, who, in this respect, come short of the full stature of manhood; how many there are who yield to likes, dislikes, impulses, passions, temptations, when unyielding resistance would be (and they know it) wiser and better.

This is hyperkinesia as we see it every day in sane men and women. When this defect is still greater it constitutes a form of insanity. Not only so, but hyperkinesia — the lack of inhibitory power — is necessarily, because of the recent evolution of self-control, an element in all cases of mental degeneracy.
Was Whitman in his make-up deficient in his power to master and subordinate his own thoughts, words and acts? In other words, did he possess fixed intentions and ideals, and did he, to a greater or less degree than ordinary men, live up to his ideals and carry out his intentions?

Whitman — almost, perhaps quite, casually — expressed to me one day, in the following words, what was, I think, one of the leading aspirations of his life. He said: “I have imagined a life which should be that of the average man, in average circumstances, and still grand, heroic.” His idea undoubtedly was to lead such a life himself, and by so doing show that it might and how it might be led by any other person. This ideal he held up before his own eyes during a long career, and those who have made him a study, though not pretending but that at times he may have come short of attainment to it, yet know well that, day by day, and year by year, to a very marvelous extent, it dominated his every thought, word and act, and that, lofty as it was, he lived up to it with extraordinary constancy.

For another fact, pointing to qualities in the man the reverse of those included under the term hyperkinesia, take the history of the writing of *Leaves of Grass*. This book was planned, as an extended entry in his own hand in one of his notebooks shows, back in the forties. It was actually begun in the early fifties. It was part of the plan that the book should cover his whole life. So rigidly was this carried out that he worked upon it every year afterwards as long as he lived, and in June, 1888, when he thought himself dying, he actually added a poem to speak for him from that condition. I cannot see anything like excessive mobility, want of fixedness of purpose, indicated by these facts. But perhaps the best of all tests of the presence or absence of hyperkinesia is the very commonplace one of temper. There is no person having this defect but breaks out into passions and goes into the sulks with or without cause and with greater or less frequency. Was Whitman troubled in this way? During the fifteen years of our friendship, and the four months that he lived in my home, I never saw him to be out of temper but once, and then only for a few minutes. Neither have I known of his being out of temper at any other time.

I have now honestly gone over the full list of symptoms indicating, when they are present, mental degeneration, and I cannot find that Whitman had any of them.

The above is necessarily a mere outline. A full analysis of Whitman’s character, made in answer to the charge of madness, would fill a volume. I will merely say, in conclusion, that knowing, as I cannot help but know, something of degeneration and of insanity, and knowing Whitman almost as well,
I suppose, as one man can know another, I am prepared to say that I believe he was not only what is called sane, but that he was, from all points of view, exceptionally so; that he had the characteristic elements which constitute sanity exceptionally developed; and that such traits as suggest mental alienation were in him less numerous and less pronounced than in any other man with whom I have had acquaintance.

It remains to ask why, he being what he was and is, any one should specify him as a mental degenerate? The answer seems to be that Whitman belongs to a class of men who, possessing attributes beyond those of ordinary humanity, are, for that reason, not understood, are considered bizarre, eccentric, insane. We have seen that this judgment was passed upon Jesus and Paul. We know it was passed upon William Blake and Honoré de Balzac. And I could name other men of the same class who have lain under the same imputation. Nobody ever heard of Sophocles, Euripides, Horace, Virgil, Goethe, Milton, or Wordsworth being pronounced insane. These are all men of genius, but they are all built upon the lines of ordinary humanity. They and their like belong to epochs, they do not make them. But men of the class to which Whitman belongs, such as Gautama, Jesus, Paul, Mohammed, Dante, “Shakspere” and Balzac, have faculties beyond. They belong to another order; have relations to the cosmos that in other cases do not exist. Through them streams a divine ray for which in the ordinary man no passage is found. If for this they are by the average man sometimes ill understood, misunderstood, maligned, charged with insanity, persecuted, even put to death, we dare not, overmuch, pity them, for in compensation for these drawbacks they have had bestowed upon them incomparably greater advantages — they have seen glories to which those of the common earth are as dross, and felt happiness beyond the loftiest imagination of their critics.

July 1895 (6:70)

What Walt Whitman Means to the Negro

Kelly Miller

Speech delivered at the annual meeting of the Walt Whitman Fellowship, May 31st.

Walt Whitman is the poet of humanity. He sings the song universal for all who suffer, love, and hope. No class or clique or clan can lay claim to him and
say, he is mine. To his “feast of reason and flow of soul” he invites all mankind. “Of every hue and cast am I, of every rank and religion.”

The processes of nature are uniform in their operation and apply with equal favor to all classes and conditions of men. The rain falls, the grass grows, and the sun shines kindly alike for all who place themselves in harmonious relations to their beneficent design. And so comes Walt Whitman, adorning himself to bestow himself upon whoever will accept him, scattering his good will freely over all.

As we ascend higher and higher in the scale of moral and spiritual excellence, the ephemeral distinctions among men, based for the most part upon arrogance and pride, grow fainter and fainter, and finally vanish away. Buddha teaches: “There is no caste in blood, which runneth of one hue, nor caste in tears, which trickle salt withal.”

It was revealed to the Apostle Peter in a vision that he should not call any man common or unclean. Saint Paul, viewing mankind from his spiritual altitude, saw “neither Greek nor Jew, Barbarian nor Scythian, bond nor free.” It is but natural to expect generous sentiments from Walt Whitman, for he, too, dwells upon “the radiant summit.” From this lofty elevation he looks with equal eye on all below. He announces himself “meeter of savages and gentlemen on equal terms.” Let no favored fraction of the human family fancy that they find in him their pet poet or special pleader. He himself rebukes such unwarranted presumption:

No friend of mine takes his ease in my chair,  
I have no chair, no church, no philosophy.  
(Song of Myself 46)

There is no variety of the human race that cannot find in him that which is adapted to their peculiar needs.

Compelled by circumstances to view all objects under a racial angle of vision, the negro, not unnaturally, seeks in Whitman some peculiar significance and specialty of meaning. The anthropomorphic tendency is so strongly rooted in human nature that a people are apt to form their ideals in their own image and stamp upon them the impress of their own physical and social peculiarities. This circumstance renders any type un-suited to artistic or literary uses among a people of different “clime, color, and degree.” “Shakspere,” says a learned critic, “ought not to have made Othello black, for the hero of a tragedy ought to be white.” But Walt Whitman tells us that in his literary treatment he does not “separate the learn’d from the unlearn’d, the Northerner from the Southerner, the white from the black.”

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As the negro is portrayed in modern literature, he usually plays a servile, contemptible or ridiculous role. He is sometimes used to point a moral, but never to adorn a tale. We find the negro appearing in several forms of literature.

1. In the unadorned, didactic discussions of the race problem which have filled our newspapers, magazines and book stalls, both in anti-slavery times and since the war. Such works are mainly preceptive in their aim, and, strictly speaking, cannot be called literature at all.

2. In the dialect story he is portrayed as being ignorant, superstitious, degraded, and clownish, cutting jim-crow capers and apish antics for the amusement and delight of white lookers-on. By a strange literary inconsistency, however, he is made to express the wisest philosophy in the crudest forms of speech. If there be any virtue, or if there be any praise, ascribed to him, it is of the unaspiring, sycophant, servile sort, leaving the world to believe of the race that “their morals, like their pleasures, are but low.”

3. In anti-slavery poetry, the negro is pictured in his pitiable helplessness, and is sometimes endowed with manly qualities and courage, to serve as a more elective object lesson of the wrongs and cruelties of slavery. Whittier, Lowell and Longfellow tuned their lyres to human liberty and did noble service for freedom by means of their songs. But, on close scrutiny, we find that, for the most part, these have the patronizing or apologetic tone. They are not intended to please but to teach. They do not appeal to the taste but to the moral judgment. The sermonic purpose is apparent in every line. This class of poetry reaches the high-tide mark in the kindly conceived lines of the poet, who, with conscious satisfaction of feeling, pays the negro the negative compliment of not being outside of the pale of humanity:

Fleecy locks and dark complexion
Cannot forfeit nature's claim.
(unknown author)

It is no depreciation of the kindly intent and useful purpose of this class of poetry to say that it is “sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought.” Contrasted with it, how refreshing are the lines of Whitman!

You whoever you are!
You daughter or son of England!
You of the mighty Slavic tribes and empires! you Russ in Russia!

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You dim-descended, black, divine-soul’d African, large, fine-headed, nobly-form’d, superbly destin’d, on equal terms with me!

(Salut au Monde 11)

4. In recent years, it has been quite customary to discuss the race question through the agency of the novel. Authors of no less distinction than Grant Allen, W. D. Howells and Paul Bourget have handled the subject in this fashion. The negro is made the tragic representative of his own fate. These stories usually breathe the spirit of despair and death. They hold up no model, no ideal, no ambition, no aspiration for the youth of this race.

The growth and expansion of modern literature is coextensive with the rise and development of African slavery. This literature is tinged throughout with the contemptuous disdain for the negro which he is made to feel in all the walks and relations of life. In it he finds himself set forth in every phase of ridicule, and derided in every mood and tense of contempt. It appears in our textbooks, in works of travel, in history, fiction, poetry and art.

The same spirit does not obtain in the Oriental and classical literatures. These never refer to the negro except in terms of endearment and respect. The gods of Homer are not too fastidious to spend a holiday season of social intercourse and festive enjoyment among the blameless Ethiopians.

It is true that many of the choicest works of the human mind have been produced during this modern period. This literature possesses all of the qualities which Macaulay ascribes to the works of Athenian genius. It is “wealth in poverty, liberty in bondage, health in sickness, society in solitude.” “It consoles sorrow and assuages pain and brings gladness to eyes which fail with wakefulness and tears.” But for the negro to derive therefrom such wholesome, beneficial effects, he must be “self-balanc’d for contingencies,” so as to steel his feelings against rebuff, insult and ridicule. He must exercise the selective instinct, which “from poisonous herbs extracts the healing dew.”

The poet Virgil paints a pathetic picture. After the wandering Eneas had suffered many vicissitudes by land and sea, he came at length to Tyre, the land of the ill-fated Dido; and while waiting in the sacred grove for an audience with her Sidonian majesty, he feasted his mind on the works of art which embellished the temple of Juno. But when he beheld, represented in art, the woes and miseries of his race; when he saw the Trojan forces fleeing before the Greeks, and beheld the body of the god-like Hector dragged around the walls of Troy, and saw the aged Priam extending his feeble hands in helpless pity, his heart failed him and his eyes melted with tears. Out of this pathetic fullness of
soul he exclaimed to his faithful companion in woe: “O Achates, what spot is there, what region is there, throughout the whole earth, which is not full of our misfortunes?”

Like father Eneas, the negro sees that his woes and misfortunes are universal, confronting him everywhere — in art and literature, in statue and on canvas, in bust and picture, in verse and fiction, in song and story. But in the literary realm of Whitman all are welcome; none are denied, shunned, avoided, ridiculed or made to feel ashamed. Indeed, Whitman’s whole theory is a protest against such exclusion. He has in his inimitable way described the degrading effects of European literature upon America. This degradation holds with added force when we apply it to modern literature and the negro. Whitman says:

No fine romance, no inimitable delineation of character, no grace of delicate illustrations, no rare picture of shore or mountain or sky, no deep thought of the intellect, is so important to a man as his opinion of himself is; everything receives its tinge from that. In the verse of all those undoubtedly great writers — Shakspeare just as much as the rest, there is the air which to America is the air of death. The mass of the people, the laborers and all who serve, are slag, refuse. The countenances of kings and great lords are beautiful; the countenances of mechanics ridiculous and deformed. What play of Shakspeare, represented in America, is not an insult to America, to the marrow in its bones? {unsigned review, “An English and an American Poet,” in the *American Phrenological Journal*, 1856}

As a matter of course the negro can get no standing in that school of literature which runs wild over the “neck, hair and complexion of a particular female.”

Walt Whitman’s poetic principle does not depend upon superficial distinctions, but upon the eternal verities. He does not believe the “jay is more precious than the lark because his feathers are more beautiful, or the adder better than the eel because his painted skin contents the eye.” He is “pleased with the homely woman as well as the handsome” (“Song of Myself” (33)). Truly his poems “balance ranks, colors, races, creeds and sexes.” He does not relegate the negro to the back yard of literature, but lets him in on the ground floor.

But let none imagine that because Whitman includes the weak as well as the mighty, the lowly and humble as well as the high and haughty, the poor as well as the rich, the black as well as the white, that he depreciates culture, refinement and civilization. Although he widens the scope, he does not lower the tone. True, he is “no dainty dolce affettuoso.” He hates pruriency, fastidiousness and
sham. He is “stuff’d with the stuff that is coarse and stuff’d with the stuff that is fine.”

I know that his bold, bald manner of expression sometimes grates harshly upon the refined sensibilities of the age. But he speaks with the unblushing frankness of nature. To the pure all things are pure. *Leaves of Grass* must not be judged by isolated lines, but we must consider the general drift of its purpose and meaning. Whitman does not despise the perfumeries, graces and adornments of life, but he will not be intoxicated by their exhalations. He maintains his soberness and sanity amid these enticing allurements.

He says indifferently and alike, *How are you, friend?* to the President at his levee,

And he says, *Good-day my brother,* to Cudge that hoes in the sugar-field,

And both understand him and know that his speech is right.

*(Song of the Answerer 1)*

And yet he urges us to preserve all of the solid acquisitions of civilization.

To earn for the body and the mind whatever adheres and goes forward . . .

*(Starting from Paumanok 12)*

Produce great Persons, the rest follows.

*(By Blue Ontario’s Shore 3)*

Charity and personal force are the only investments worth any thing.

*(Song of Prudence)*

All truly great souls spend themselves in selfless service. Whitman would drag none down, but would lift all up. He would ring in for the world “the nobler modes of life, with purer manners, sweeter laws.” He would bring mankind everywhere “flush” with himself.

America has broken the shackles which bound four millions of human beings to a degraded life. But the bondage of the body is nothing compared with the slavery of the soul. Whitman sounds the key-note of the higher emancipation. A great poet is necessarily a great prophet. He sees farthest because he has the most faith. The time must come when color will not be interchanged for qualities. When all other considerations will not wait on the query, “of what complexion is he?” When men and women cease to make graven images of their physical idiosyncrasies, and cease to bow down to them and serve them, then the accidental will yield to the essential, the temporary and fleeting to those things which abide.
The providence of God is mysterious and inscrutable, but his ways are just and righteous altogether. Suffering and sorrow have their place in divine economy. If the woe and affliction through which this race have passed but lead to the unfoldment of their latent esthetic and spiritual capabilities, then the glory of tribulation is theirs. But can it be that they are to be forever the victims of contempt, caricatured in literature, and despised in all the ennobling relations of life? Can it be for the purpose of making a race despicable in the eyes of mankind that this people have endured so much and suffered so long? Was it for this that their ancestors were ruthlessly snatched from their native land, where they basked in the sunshine of savage bliss and were happy? Was it for this that they endured the hellish horrors of the middle passage? that the ocean bed was calcimined with the whiteness of human bones, and ocean currents ran red with human blood? Was it for this that they groaned for three centuries under the task-masters’ cruel lash? that their human instincts and upward aspirations were brutalized and crushed? Was it for this that babes were inhumanly torn from mothers’ breasts? that the holy sentiment of mother-love — that finest, that divinest, feeling which God has embedded in the human bosom — was stifled and smothered? Was it for this that our Southland was filled with sable Rachels “weeping for their children and would not be comforted for they were not?” Was it all for this? In the name of God I ask, was it for this?

But Whitman points to a far higher destiny. He looks through the most degraded externals and forecasts the glorious possibilities of this people. He leads the negro from the slave block and crowns him with everlasting honor and glory.

A man’s body at auction,
(For before the war I often go to the slave-mart and watch the sale,)
I help the auctioneer, the sloven does not half know his business.

Gentlemen look on this wonder,
Whatever the bids of the bidders they cannot be high enough for it,
For it the globe lay preparing quintillions of years without one animal or plant,
For it revolving cycles truly and steadily roll’d.

In this head the all-baffling brain,
In it and below it the makings of heroes.

Examine these limbs, red, black, or white, they are cunning in tendon and nerve,
They shall be stript that you may see them.

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Exquisite senses, life-lit eyes, pluck, volition,  
Flakes of breast-muscle, pliant backbone and neck, flesh not flabby,  
   good-sized arms and legs,  
And wonders within there yet.

Within there runs blood,  
The same old blood! the same red-running blood!  
There swells and jets a heart, there all passions, desires, reachings,  
aspirations . . .

This is not only one man, this the father of those who shall be fathers in  
their turns,  
In him the start of populous states and rich republics,  
Of him countless immortal lives with countless embodiments and  
enjoyments.

   (I Sing the Body Electric 7)

No negro, however humble his present station, can read these lines without  
feeling his humanity stirring within him, breeding wings wherewith to  
soar. Whitman has a special meaning to the negro not only because of his liter-  
ary portrayal; he has positive lessons also. He inculcates the lesson of  
ennobling self-esteem. He teaches the negro that “there is no sweeter fat than  
sticks to his own bones.” He urges him to accept nothing that “insults his  
own soul.”

   Long enough have you dream’d contemptible dreams,  
   Now I wash the gum from your eyes.  
   (Song of Myself 46)

   . . . commence to-day to inure yourself to pluck, reality, self-esteem,  
definiteness, elevatedness.  
   (To a Pupil)

Surely he would lead this race “upon a knoll.”

He has also taught his fellow-men their duty concerning the negro.  
Catching his inspiration from the hounded slave, he has given the golden  
rule a new form of statement which will last as long as human sympathies  
endure:

   I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the  
wounded person.  
   (Song of Myself 33)
Whoever degrades another degrades me.
(Song of Myself 24)

He will accept nothing that all cannot have a counter part of on equal terms with himself. Listen to his “Thought”:

Of Equality — as if it harm’d me, giving others the same chances and rights as myself — as if it were not indispensable to my own rights that others possess the same.

These are the lessons that Whitman would teach the world.

But one asks, what did he do practically in his lifetime for the negro? Beyond the fact that he imbibed the anti-slavery sentiment of his environments, and that this sentiment distills throughout Leaves of Grass, I do not know. Nor does it matter in the least. Too large for a class, he gave himself to humanity. These are his words:

I do not give lectures or a little charity,
When I give I give myself.
    (Song of Myself 40)

I give nothing as duties,
What others give as duties I give as living impulses.
    (Myself and Mine)

He knows no race, but scatters his charity alike over all the families of the earth. He believes in Euclid’s axiom that the whole is greater than any of its parts. He does not love a race, he loves mankind.

I am a Christian and believe in the saving merits of Jesus Christ to redeem mankind, and to exalt them that are of low degree. It is nevertheless true that

In faith and hope the world will disagree,
But all mankind’s concern is charity.
    (Pope, Essay on Man, 3:304)

Whitman has given the largest human expression of this virtue.

On this first meeting of the Walt Whitman Fellowship all men can equally join in celebrating the merits of their great Comrade, who, in robust integrity of soul, in intellectual comprehension and power, in catholic range of sympathy, and in spiritual illumination, is to be ranked among the choicest of the sons of men.
Whitman’s Relation to Morals

John Burroughs

Part of an address before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, at Yale College, delivered February 19th.

I had a letter from an old Yale boy the other day, Edmund Clarence Stedman, whom I trust you all know and love. Referring to my proposed visit here, and to the theme upon which I was to speak, Mr. Stedman said: “Let me assure you that the Yale spirit is sturdy, democratic, unaffected, American, and so ‘cosmopolitan’ that it is at home even in its own country.” Well, I come to you with a theme that should appeal to all these qualities. If it does not the fault is in me and not in it. Mr. Stedman has himself written wisely and appreciatingly of Whitman, and he is about the only eminent American man of letters who has done so. Let me take this as a good omen, as a sign that the Yale spirit and the Whitman spirit are not so far apart as they might seem to be. But if it is so, if I have not your sympathy, that is all the more reason why I should be true to myself and speak my honest conviction concerning this man and his work. If the Yale spirit is indeed resolute, self-reliant, democratic, if it has done with toys and sugar plums, if it is emancipated from fashions and conventions, if it can cheerfully face the realities of life and of nature, there is much in Whitman to which it ought to respond. His example of self trust, and of cheerful determination to go his own way in the world, ought to be an inspiration to every young man. He says:

I am more resolute because all have denied me than I could ever have been had all accepted me,
I heed not and have never heeded either experience, cautions, majorities, nor ridicule.

(As I Lay with My Head in Your Lap Camerado)

Is that the Yale spirit? Again, Whitman asks:

Have you learn’d lessons only of those who admired you, and were tender with you, and stood aside for you?
Have you not learn’d great lessons from those who reject you, and brace themselves against you? or who treat you with contempt, or dispute the passage with you?

(Stronger Lessons)

Does the Yale spirit speak in that, too?

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Whitman was a strange and unwonted figure among his country’s poets, and among English poets, and in the opinion of many must sit forever apart from the company of the poets. Apart, certainly, from the verbal poets, the sweet singers, the tuneful choir who beguile the time for us and fill the day with music, and if he cannot sit apart from them and maintain his hold, if he cannot stand upon new and ample ground of his own, he is doomed to a speedy oblivion. He is less and he must be more than the popular poets, or we shall leave him behind. As a certain Pennsylvania editor said at the time of his death: “He is either a great original genius, one of the few historic figures of literature, or he is nothing.”

The diverse and contradictory views of him that have so long been current, both in American and in European criticism, have had their origin in the diverse and contradictory methods of criticism that have prevailed. When we try him by current standards, current taste, and demand of him formal beauty, formal art, we are disappointed. But when we try him by what we may call the scientific standard, the standard of the natural, universal, and demand of him the vital and the characteristic, demand of him that he have a law of his own, and fulfill that law in the poetic sphere, the result is quite different.

Had Whitman dropped upon us from some other world he could hardly have been a greater puzzle to the average reader or critic. Into a literature that was timid, imitative, conventional, he fell like leviathan into a duck-pond, and the commotion and consternation he created there have not yet subsided. All the reigning poets in this country except Emerson denied him, and many of our minor poets still keep up a hostile sissing and cackling.

Study Whitman carefully and you will see how completely he sums up and justifies the modern world — how in him the new spirit of democracy first completely knows itself, is proud of itself, has faith and joy in itself, is fearless, tolerant, religious, aggressive, triumphant, and bestows itself lavishly upon all sides. It is tentative, doubtful, hesitating, no longer. It is at ease in the world, it takes possession, it fears no rival, it advances with confident step.

Whitman’s ideal is undoubtedly much larger, coarser, stronger — much more racy and democratic — than the ideal we are familiar with in current literature, and upon which our culture is largely based. He applies the democratic spirit not only to the material of poetry — excluding all the old stock themes of love and war, lords and ladies, myths and fairies and legends, etc., — but he applies it to the form as well, excluding rhyme and measure and all the conventional verse architecture. His work stands or it falls upon its inherent, its intrinsic, qualities, the measure of life or power which it holds. Whitman’s ideal was neither the scholar nor the priest, nor any type of the genteel or exceptionally favored or cultivated. His influence does not make for any form relationship with the past, but stands upon the new ground which it has created.
of depleted indoor, over-refined or extra-cultured humanity. The spirit of his work transferred to practice begets a life full and strong on all sides, affectionate, magnetic, tolerant, spiritual, bold with the flavor and quality of simple, healthful, open-air humanity. He opposes culture and refinement only as he opposes that which weakens, drains, emasculates and tends to beget a scoffing, carping, hyper-critical class. The culture of life, of nature, and that which flows from the exercise of the manly instincts and affections, is the culture implied by *Leaves of Grass*. The democratic spirit is undoubtedly more or less jealous of the refinements of our artificial culture and of the daintiness and aloofness of our literature. The people look askance at men who are above them without being of them, who have dropped the traits and attractions which they share with unlettered humanity. Franklin and Lincoln are closer akin to this spirit, and hence more in favor with it, than a Jefferson or a Sumner.

In my attempts, for the most part vain attempts, to define Whitman, I am ready at times to call him the poet of the absolute, the unconditioned. His work is launched at a further remove from our arts, conventions, usages, civilization, and all the artificial elements that modify and enter into our lives, than that of any other man. Absolute candor, absolute pride, absolute charity, absolute social and sexual equality, absolute nature. It is not conditioned by what we deem modest or immodest, high or low, male or female. It is not conditioned by our notions of good and evil, by our notions of the refined and the select, by what we call good taste and bad taste. It is the voice of absolute man, sweeping away the artificial, throwing himself boldly, joyously, upon unconditioned nature. We are all engaged in upholding the correct and the conventional and drawing the line sharply between good and evil, the high and the low, and it is well that we should, but here is a man who aims to take absolute ground and to look at the world as God himself might look at it, without partiality or discriminating — it is all good and there is no failure or imperfection in the universe and can be none:

Open mouth of my soul uttering gladness,
Eyes of my soul seeing perfection,
Natural life of me faithfully praising things,
Corroborating forever the triumph of things.

*(Song at Sunset)*

He does not take sides against evil, in the usual way, he does not take sides with the good except as nature herself does. He celebrates the All.

Can we accept the world as science reveals it to us, as all significant, as all in ceaseless transmutation, as every atom aspiring to be man, an endless
unfolding of primal germs, without beginning, without end, without failure or imperfection, the golden age ahead of us, not behind us?

Because of Whitman’s glorification of pride, egoism, the virile, the hardy, etc., it is charged that the noble, the refined, the self-denying, have no place in his system. What place have they in the antique bards? in Homer, in Job, in Isaiah, in Dante? It is to be kept in mind that Whitman does not stand for the specially social virtues, nor for culture, nor for the refinements which it induces, nor for art, nor for any conventionality. There are flowers of human life which we are not to look for in Walt Whitman. The note of fine manners, chivalrous conduct, which we get in Emerson, the sweetness and light gospel of Arnold, the gospel of hero-worship of Carlyle, the gracious scholarship of our New England poets, etc., we do not get in Walt Whitman. There is nothing in him at war with these things, but he is concerned with more primal and elemental questions. He strikes under and beyond all these things.

What are the questions or purposes, then, in which his work has root? Simply put, to lead the way to a larger, saner, more normal, more robust type of men and women on this continent, to prefigure and help develop the new democratic man — to project him into literature on a scale and with a distinctness that cannot be mistaken. To this end he keeps a deep hold of the savage, the unrefined, and marshals the elements and influences that make for the virile, the heroic, the sane, the large, and for the perpetuity of the race. We cannot refine the elements — the air, the water, the soil, the sunshine — and the more we pervert or shut out these from our lives, the worse for us. In the same manner, the more we pervert or balk the great natural impulses, sexuality, comradeship, the religious emotion, nativity, or the more we deny and belittle our bodies, the further we are from the spirit of Walt Whitman, and from the spirit of the All.

With all Whitman’s glorification of pride, self-esteem, self-reliance, etc., the final lesson of his life and work is service, self-denial — the free, lavish giving of yourself to others. Of the innate and essential nobility that we associate with unworldliness, the sharing of what you possess with the unfortunate around you, sympathy with all forms of life and conditions of men, charity as broad as the sunlight, standing up for those whom others are down upon, claiming nothing for self which others may not have upon the same terms — of such nobility and fine manners I say, you shall find an abundance in the life and works of Walt Whitman.

The spirit of a man’s work is everything; the letter, little or nothing. Though Whitman boasts that “What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me” — yet he is always saved from the vulgar, the mean, the humdrum, the bourgeois, by the breadth of his charity and sympathy and his tremendous ideality.

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Of worldliness, materialism, commercialism, he has not a trace; his only values are spiritual and ideal; his only standards are the essential and the enduring. What Matthew Arnold called the Anglo-Saxon contagion, the bourgeois spirit, the worldly and sordid ideal, is entirely corrected in Whitman by the ascendent of the ethic and the universal. His democracy ends in universal brotherhood, his patriotism in the solidarity of nations, his glorification of the material in the final triumph of the spiritual, his egoism issues at last in complete otherism.

A race that can produce a man of his fiber, his continental type, is yet at its best estate. Did one begin to see evil omen in this perpetual whittling away and sharpening and lightening of the American type — grace without power, clearness without mass, intellect without character — then take comfort from the volume and the rank-ness of Walt Whitman. Did one begin to fear that the decay of maternity and paternity in our older communities and the falling off in the native population presaged the drying up of the race in its very sources? Then welcome to the rank sexuality and to the athletic fatherhood and motherhood celebrated by Whitman. Did our skepticism, our headiness, our worldliness, threaten to eat us up like a cancer? did our hardness, our irreligiousness and our passion for the genteel point to a fugitive superficial race? was our literature threatened with the artistic degeneration — running all to art and not at all to power? were our communities invaded by a dry rot of culture? were we fast becoming a delicate, indoor, genteel race? were our women sinking deeper and deeper into the incredible sloughs of fashion and all kinds of dyspeptic depletion — the antidote for all these ills is in Walt Whitman. In him nature shows great fullness and fertility, and an immense friendliness. He supplements and corrects most of the special deficiencies and weaknesses toward which the American type seems to tend. He brings us back to nature again. The perpetuity of the race is with the common people. The race is constantly dying out at the top, in our times at least; culture and refinement beget fewer and fewer and poorer and poorer children. Where struggle ceases, that family or race is doomed.

Now understand me well — it is provided in the essence of things that from any fruition of success, no matter what, shall come forth something to make a greater struggle necessary.

(Song of the Open Road 14)

In more primitive communities, the sap and vitality of the race were kept in the best men, because upon them the strain and struggle were greatest. War, adventure, discovery, favor, virility. Whitman is always and everywhere occupied with that which makes for life, power, longevity, manliness. The scholar
poets are occupied with that which makes for culture, taste, refinement, ease, art.

*Leaves of Grass*, taken as a whole, is the drama of personality. Its aim is to exhibit a modern, democratic, archetypal man, here in America, confronting and subduing our enormous materialism to his own purposes, putting it off and on as a garment, identifying himself with all forms of life and conditions of men, trying himself by cosmic laws and processes, exulting in the life of his body, and the delights of his senses, and seeking to clinch, to develop and to realize himself through the shows and events of the visible world. The poet seeks to interpret life from the central point of absolute abysmal man.

The critics perpetually misread Whitman because they fail to see this essentially composite and dramatic character of his work, that it is not the song of Walt Whitman, the private individual, but of Walt Whitman as representative of, and speaking for, all types and conditions of men; in fact, that it is the drama of a new democratic personality, a character outlined on a larger, more copious, more vehement scale than has yet appeared in the world. The germs of this character he would sow broadcast over the land.

In this drama of personality the poet always identifies himself with the scene, incident, experience, or person he delineates, or for whom he speaks. He says to the New Englander, or to the man of the South and the West: “I depict you as myself.” In the same way he depicts offenders, roughs, criminals, and low and despised persons, as himself; he lays claim to every sin of omission and commission men are guilty of, because, he says, “the germs are in all men.” Men dare not tell their faults. He will make them all his own, and then tell them; there shall be full confession for once.

If you become degraded, criminal, ill, then I become so for your sake,
If you remember your foolish and outlaw’d deeds, do you think I cannot remember my own foolish and outlaw’d deeds?

*(A Song for Occupations 1)*

It will not do to read this poet, or any great poet, in a narrow and exacting spirit. As Whitman himself says: “The messages of great poems to each man and woman are: Come to us on equal terms, only then can you understand us.”

In the much misunderstood group of poems called “Children of Adam” the poet speaks for the male generative principle, and all the excesses and abuses and disorders that grow out of it he unblushingly imputes to himself. What men have done and still do while under the intoxication of the sexual passion, he does, he makes it all his own experience.

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That we have here a revelation of his own personal taste and experiences may or may not be the case, but we have no more right to assume it than we have to assume that all other poets speak from experience when they use the first person singular. When John Brown mounted the scaffold in Virginia, in 1860, the poet says:

(I was at hand, silent I stood with teeth shut close, I watch’d,
I stood very near you old man when cool and indifferent, but trembling
with age and your unheal’d wounds you mounted the scaffold . . .)

(Year of Meteors)

Very near him he stood in spirit, very near him he stood in the person of others, but not in his own proper person.

If we take this poet literally, we shall believe he has been in California and Oregon, that he has set foot in every city on the continent, that he grew up in Virginia, that every Southern State has been by turns his home, that he has been a soldier, a sailor, a miner, that he has lived in Dakota’s woods, his “diet meat, his drink from the spring,” that he has lived on the plains with hunters and ranchmen, etc., etc. He lays claim to all these characters, all these experiences; because what others do, what others assume, or suffer, or enjoy, that he appropriates to himself. He is Man, he is the composite American, taking possession of the New World. His critics have shown great stupidity or else great malignity in misrepresenting his meaning in this respect.

It is charged against Whitman that he does not celebrate love at all, and very justly. He had no purpose to celebrate the sentiment of love. Literature is vastly overloaded with this element already. He celebrates fatherhood and motherhood, and the need of well begotten, physiologically well begotten, offspring. Of that veiled prurient suggestion which readers so delight in — of “bosoms mutinously fair,” and “the soul-lingering loops of perfumed hair,” as one of our latest poets puts it — there is no hint in his volume. He would have fallen from grace the moment he had attempted such a thing. Any trifling or dalliance on his part would have been his ruin. Love as a sentiment has fairly run riot in literature. From Whitman’s point of view, it would have been positively immoral for him either to have vied with the lascivious poets in painting it as the forbidden, or with the sentimental poets in depicting it as a charm. Woman with him is always the mate and equal of the man, never his plaything.

Whitman is seldom or never the poet of a sentiment, at least of the domestic and social sentiments. His is more the voice of the eternal, abysmal man.

The home, the fireside, the domestic allurements, are not in him; love, as we find it in other poets, is not in him; the idyllic, except in touches here and there,
is not in him; the choice, the finished, the perfumed, the romantic, the charm of art and the delight of form, are not to be looked for in his pages. The cosmic takes the place of the idyllic; the begetter, the Adamic man, takes the place of the lover; patriotism takes the place of family affection; charity takes the place of piety; love of kind is more than love of neighbor; the poet and the artist are swallowed up in the seer and the prophet.

The poet evidently aimed to put in his sex poems a rank and healthful animality, and to make them as frank as the shedding of pollen by the trees, strong even to the point of offense. He could not make it pleasing, a sweet morsel to be rolled under the tongue; that would have been levity and sin, as in Byron and the other poets. It must be coarse and rank, healthfully so. The courage that did it, and showed no wavering or self-consciousness, was more than human. Man is a begetter. How shall a poet in our day and land treat this fact? With levity and by throwing over it the lure of the forbidden, the attraction of the erotic? That is one way, the way of nearly all the poets of the past. But that is not Whitman’s way. He would sooner be bestial than Byronic, he would sooner shock by his frankness than inflame by his suggestion. And this in the interest of health and longevity, not in the interest of a prurient and effeminate “art.” In these poems Whitman for a moment emphasizes sex, the need of sex, and the power of sex. “All were lacking if sex were lacking.” He says to men and women, here is where you live after all, here is the seat of empire. You are at the top of your condition when you are fullest and sanest there. Fearful consequences follow any corrupting or abusing or perverting of sex. Whitman stands in the garden of the world naked and not ashamed. It is a great comfort that he could do it in this age of hectic lust and Swinburnian impotence, that he could do it and not be ridiculous. To have done it without offense would have been proof that he had failed utterly. Let us be shocked; it is a wholesome shock, like the douse of the sea, or the buffet of the wind. We shall be all the better for it by and by.

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Whitman’s Relation to Culture

John Burroughs

Sent to the annual meeting of the Walt Whitman Fellowship International, May 31st.

There is one important quality that enters into all first-class literary production and into all art, which is taken little account of in current criticism — I
mean the quality of the manly — the pulse and pressure of manly virility and
strength. Goethe spoke of it to Eckermann as a certain urgent power in which
the art of his time was lacking. The producers had taste and skill, but were not
masterful as men. Goethe always looked straight through the work to the man
behind it; in art and poetry the personality was everything. The special talent
of one kind or another was quite secondary. The greatest works are the least lit-
erary. To speak in literature as a man, and not merely as a scholar or profes-
sional literateur, is always the crying need. The new poet has this or that gift,
but what is the human fund back of all? What is his endowment of the common
universal human traits? How much of a man is he? His measure in this respect
will be the measure of the final value of his contribution.

The decadence of literature sets in when there is more talent than character
in current production; when rare literary and artistic gifts no longer come
wedded to large human and manly gifts; when taste is fastidious rather than
robust and hearty. When was there a man born to English or American litera-
ture with a large endowment of the universal human qualities, or with those el-
ements that give breadth and power and which lead art rather than follow it?
We are living in an age of great purity and refinement of taste in art and letters,
but destitute of power. The British poet of most renown to-day, Swinburne,
has a marvelous verbal gift; his professional equipment is almost unrivaled,
but the man back of all is of the most shadowy, vapory, hectic sort, void of sym-
pathy and empty of thought. The still younger poets, like Watson, have a gen-
une gift, fine but not great. Goethe spoke of Walter Scott not merely as a great
talent but as a “comprehensive nature.” Without this comprehensive nature as
a setting, his great talent would have amounted to but little. This gives the
weight, the final authority. How little there was on the surface of Scott of the
literary keenness, subtlety, knowingness of later producers, and yet how far his
contribution surpasses theirs in real human pathos and suggestiveness!
The same might be said of Count Tolstoi, who is also, back of all, a great
loving nature.

One has great joy in Whitman because he is beyond and over all a large and
loving personality; his work is but a thin veil through which a great nature
clearly shows. The urgent power of which Goethe speaks is almost too
strong — too strong for current taste: we want more art and less man, more lit-
erature and less life. It is not merely a great mind that we feel, but a great char-
acter. It penetrates every line, and indeed makes it true of the book that who-
ever “touches this touches a man.”

The lesson of the poet is all in the direction of the practical manly and wom-
any qualities and virtues — health, temperance, sanity, power, endurance,
aplomb — and not at all in the direction of the literary and artistic qualities or culture.

To stand the cold or heat, to take good aim with a gun, to sail a boat, to manage horses, to beget superb children,
To speak readily and clearly, to feel at home among common people,
And to hold our own in terrible positions on land and sea.

(Myself and Mine)

All his aims, ideas, impulses, aspirations, relate to life, to personality and to power to deal with real things, and if we expect from him only literary ideas — form, beauty, lucidity, proportion — we shall be disappointed. He seeks to make the impression of concrete forces and objects, and not of art.

Not for an embroiderer,
(There will always be plenty of embroiderers, I welcome them also),
But for the fiber of things, and for inherent men and women.

Not to chisel ornaments,
But to chisel with free stroke the heads and limbs of plenteous supreme
Gods, that the States may realize them walking and talking.

(Myself and Mine)

The whole volume is a radiation from an exemplification of the idea that there is something better than to be an artist or a poet — namely, to be a man. The poet’s rapture springs not merely from the contemplation of the beautiful and the artistic, but from the contemplation of the whole; from the contemplation of democracy, the common people, workingmen, soldiers, sailors, his own body, death, sex, manly love, occupations, and the force and vitality of things. We are to look for the clews to him in the open air and in natural products, rather than in the traditional art forms and methods. He declares he will never again mention love or death inside of a house, and that he will translate himself only to those who privately stay with him in the open air.

If you would understand me go to the heights or water-shore,
The nearest gnat is an explanation, and a drop or motion of waves a key,
The maul, the oar, the hand-saw, second my words.

No shutter’d room or school can commune with me,
Butroughs and little children better than they.

The young mechanic is closest to me, he knows me well,
The woodman, that takes his axe and jug with him shall take me with him all day,
The farm-boy ploughing in the field feels good at the sound of my voice,
In vessels that sail my words sail, I go with fishermen and seamen and love
them . . .

My face rubs to the hunter’s face when he lies down alone in his blanket,
The driver thinking of me does not mind the jolt of his wagon,
The young mother and old mother comprehend me,
The girl and the wife rest the needle a moment and forget where they are,
They and all would resume what I have told them.

(Song of Myself 47)

So far as literature is a luxury and for the cultured privileged few, its inter-
ests are not in Whitman; so far as poetry represents the weakness of man rather
than his strength — so far as it expresses a shrinking from reality and a refuge
in sentimentalism — so far as it is aristocratic as in Tennyson, or mocking and
rebellious as in Byron, or erotic and mephitic as in Swinburne, or regretful and
reminiscent as in Arnold, or a melodious baying of the moon as in Shelley, or
the outcome of mere scholarly and technical requirements as in so many of our
younger poets — so far as literature or poetry, I say, stand for these things,
there is little of either in Whitman. Whitman stands for the primary and es-
sential; he stands for that which makes the body as well as the mind, which
makes life sane and joyous and masterful. Everything that tends to depletion,
satiety, the abnormal, the erotic and exotic, that induces the stress and fever of
life, are foreign to his spirit. He is less beautiful than the popular poets, yet
more beautiful. He will have to do only with the inevitable beauty, the beauty
that comes unsought, that resides in the interior meanings and affiliations —
the beauty that dare turn its back upon the beautiful.

Whitman has escaped entirely the literary disease, the characteristic symp-
tom of which, according to Renan, is that people love less things themselves
than the literary effects which they produce. He has escaped the art disease
which makes art all in all; the religious disease, which runs to maudlin piety
and seeks to win heaven by denying earth; the beauty disease, which would
make of poesy a conventional flower-garden. He brings heroic remedies for
our morbid sex-consciousness, and for all the pathological conditions brought
about by our excess of refinement, and the dyspeptic depletions of our indoor
artificial lives. Whitman withstood the esthetic temptation, as Amiel calls it, to
which most of our poets fall a victim — the lust for the merely beautiful, the
epicureanism of the literary faculties. We can make little of him if we are in
quest of esthetic pleasures alone. “In order to establish those literary authori-
ties which are called classic centuries,” says Renan, “something healthy and
solid is necessary. Common household bread is of more value here than pastr y.” But the vast majority of literary producers aim at pastry, or worse yet, confectionery—something especially delightful and titivating to the taste. No doubt Renan himself was something of a literary epicure, but then he imposed upon himself large and serious tasks, and his work as a whole is solid and nourishing; his charm of style does not blind and seduce us. It makes all the difference in the world whether we seek the beautiful through the true, or the true through the beautiful. Seek ye the kingdom of truth first and all things shall be added. The novice aims to write beautifully, but the master aims to see truly and to feel vitally. Beauty follows him, and is never followed by him.

Nature is beautiful because she is something else first, yes, and last, too, and all the while. Whitman’s work is baptized in the spirit of the whole, and its health and sweetness in this respect, when compared with the over-refined artistic works, are like that of a laborer in the fields compared with the pale dyspeptic ennuyé.

*Leaves of Grass* is not the poetry of culture, but it is to be said in the same breath that it is not such a work as an uncultured man produces, or is capable of producing. It is perhaps of supreme interest only to men of the deepest culture, because it contains in such ample measure that without which all culture is mere varnish or veneer.

The problem of the poet is doubtless more difficult in our day than in any past day; it is harder for him to touch reality.

The accumulations of our civilization are enormous; an artificial world of great depth and potency overlies the world of reality; especially does it overlie the world of man’s moral and intellectual nature. Most of us live and thrive in this artificial world and never know but it is the world of God’s own creating. Only now and then a man strikes his roots down through this made land into fresh virgin soil. When the religious genius strikes his roots through it and insists upon a present revelation we are apt to cry “heretic”; when the poet strikes his roots through it, as Whitman did, and insists upon giving us reality—giving us himself before custom or law—we cry “barbarian,” or “art-heretic,” or “outlaw of art.”

Whitman certainly gave us nature at first hand, and in doses too strong for the taste of most readers. And it is one of the curiosities of criticism that men of thought and reading should have concluded that this could be done by a man without culture, some crude, unlettered, undeveloped individual, perhaps a mechanic, or boatman, or farmhand, whose opportunities for culture had been very limited, and of whom a poet might have been made had the schoolmaster caught him in season; as if, without culture, without an acquaintance with the

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best that had been thought and said in the world, a man was likely to conceive such a problem as Whitman proposed to himself, or to appreciate the need of an utterance out of more radical and primary sources. Whitman’s purpose was to launch his criticism from the basic facts of human life, psychic and physiologic; to inject into the veins of our enemic literature the reddest, healthiest kind of blood, and in doing so he has given free swing to the primary human traits and affections, and to sexuality, and has charged his pages with the spirit of real things, real life.

The great souls always get culture enough, no matter what their opportunities for book reading or school training may or may not have been. God himself is their schoolmaster. They attain to their normal development and maturity as inevitably as an oak in the forest. The highest and best result of culture is liberation of spirit — free as the truth makes free — and Lucretius attains to this as surely as Tennyson.

\[\text{July 1896 (7:73)}\]

**The American Idea in Whitman**

*Charlotte Porter*

Delivered, May 31st, in Boston, at the afternoon session of the convention of the Walt Whitman Fellowship.

I don’t know whether others here, who feel that Walt Whitman has better than any one else embodied and expressed the American Idea, have been at all disheartened, of late, at certain half denials of the American proposition — at all impatient of what seems the usual blindness to the one or the other side of full-orbed Democracy —

(Democracy, the destin’d conqueror, yet treacherous lip-smiles everywhere,  
And death and infidelity at every step.)  
(By Blue Ontario’s Shore 1)

Such a book as {W. E. H.} Lecky’s *Democracy and Liberty* {1896}; such talk as that we have had much of lately concerning the wisdom of restricting the suffrage of those who are, through some mysterious judgment, assumed incompetent to grow, by others whom the same mysterious say-so assumes to be fully equipped to do right; or concerning the folly of further corrupting
the suffrage by opening the polls to bad women along with the good; or concerning the prudence of restricting immigration on the shrewd bargain basis of admitting all who don’t need us particularly and can be shown to be able to help us, and of barring out all who are in need of our help; concerning the retrogression and decay involved in discussing socialism as a factor playing its part along with individualism in shaping civilization; or concerning the risk a literary society runs in permitting all its members to offer nominations for its officers.

Perhaps I cannot truthfully say that I have been greatly disheartened at any such temporizing talk, feeling myself blessed in sharing somewhat of Whitman’s large faith in the seething principle, the well-kept latent germ of the old cause of the people which is the birthright of America. But, I confess I have been just enough riled by such anti-democratic assumptions as I have mentioned to turn to Whitman afresh and see if perchance I overlooked some of the special stress that I know very well he puts on individualism, in its relation to the social whole. Others may see something else in Walt Whitman on this subject. I see this: Whitman’s individualism is always of more than himself. It implies identification with all.

Through me many long dumb voices...
And of the rights of them the others are down upon.
(Song of Myself 24)

Do you know so much yourself that you call the meanest ignorant?
Do you suppose you have a right to a good sight, and he or she has no right to a sight?
Do you suppose matter has cohered together from its diffuse float, and the soil is on the surface, and water runs, and vegetation sprouts,
For you only, and not for him and her?
(I Sing the Body Electric 6)

... O I at any rate include you all with perfect love!...
Walking New England, a friend, a traveler...
Yet a true son either of Maine or of the Granite State, or the Narragansett Bay State, or the Empire State,
Yet sailing to other shores to annex the same, yet welcoming every new brother,
Hereby applying these leaves to the new ones from the hour they unite with the old ones.
(Starting From Paumanok 14)

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In all people I see myself, none more and not one a barleycorn less . . .
I show that size is only development.
Have you outstript the rest? are you the President?
It is a trifle, they will more than arrive there every one, and still pass on.
(Song of Myself 20, 21)

Three strands of thought or insight make up the one leading-thread — ever and always the indivisibly one clue to the American Idea: Oneself; the Social One, or all other Selves; Progressive Plan.

Not one can acquire for another — not one,
Not one can grow for another — not one.
(Song of the Rolling Earth 2)

Charity is useless — impertinent.
(source unidentified)

And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one’s self is,
And whoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to his own funeral drest in his shroud.
(Song of Myself 48)

To separate individualism from socialism — the righteous, competent self-developing one from due relation with the other slow-developing selves of mankind — is suicidal; for

Whoever degrades another degrades me,
And whatever is done or said returns at last to me.
(Song of Myself 24)

I acknowledge the duplicates of myself, the weakest and shallowest is deathless with me,
What I do and say the same waits for them,
Every thought that flounders in me the same flounders in them.
(Song of Myself 42)

The first blade of Leaves of Grass carries this two-fold message on its spear’s point: “One’s-Self I sing, a simple separate person, / Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.”

The root of the whole matter is Oneself, but, if that is to live, then from the emphasis put upon oneself grows the second emphasis put upon other selves. From Oneself, the “word Democratic, the word En-Masse” unfolds.

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Unquestionably, as it looks to me, Walt Whitman’s regard for others — for the social whole — is not based on compassion, or philanthropy, but on his uncondescending, uncompromising identification of his own good and progress with the good and progress of all: “I only am he who will never consent to subordinate you.” This constitutes a regard for others which has no self-sacrifice in it, no mere altruism, in the usual religious sense; it is so just that any man may take it as his due; it is so brotherly that any man must yearn to do it credit. Is there any philanthropy in it? Is there any competition in it? Neither does it stop with this assertion of the basic importance of self-development. There is no scorn or patronage whatever of the socialistic whole. On the contrary, the chanter of the Song of Personality makes a song also “of the One form’d out of all” —

The fang’d and glittering One whose head is over all,
Resolute warlike One including and over all.
(However high the head of any else that head is over all.)
(Starting from Paumanok 6)

To the talkers who call themselves individualists and the talkers who call themselves socialists he utters calmly the word of balance — word of reconciliation, each party needs — justly counterpoising to “Oneself” — all the Selves for whom he speaks, and justly counterpoising to the socialistic whole the expanding, fluent Selfhood on which he builds it.

In one word, his own loving Personality clears up the tangle of opposition. “Behold I do not give lectures or a little charity,/ When I give, I give myself.”

If all other individualists did the like, the socialistic ideal would be realized, not by prescribing it as a duty, but by giving it as a living principle. What injustice could live with the spirit of such words as these animating society?

. . . what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
(Song of Myself 1)

I resist any thing better than my own diversity,
Breathe the air but leave plenty after me.
(Song of Myself 16)

This is the meal equally set . . .
I will not have a single person slighted or left away.
(Song of Myself 19)
I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy.
By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of
on the same terms.

(Song of Myself 24)

... as if it harm’d me, giving others the same chances and rights as
myself — as if it were not indispensable to my own rights that others
possess the same.

(Thought)

This profound lesson of universal opportunity, without preference or de-
nial of any, is the life-blood of Democracy, according to Whitman. The vital
force of love stirs in the veins of this social structure, and makes the whole no
longer the abstraction called the state, but a co-equal co-operant human col-
lectivity of individuals,

Underneath all, individuals . . .
The American compact is altogether with individuals,
The only government is that which makes minute of individuals.

(By Blue Ontario’s Shore 15)

This is not paternalism; it is open-eyed, free-willed cooperating fraternalism,
which constitutes his Social Whole. The only institution is that of the dear
love of comrades; the “main purport of these States” being to found the “su-
perb friendship” that has always been waiting, “latent in all men.” With love
are the two hitherto stubborn strands of Self and the Social Whole interwoven
and tacitly convinced of their interdependence, they follow the indicative
trend of the progressive plan in which each one of us is the inevitable factor —
“Each of us limitless — each of us with his or her right upon the earth,/ Each
of us here as divinely as any is here” {“Salut au Monde” (11)} — and all
“launched forward into the unknown”; for America does not build merely for
herself. Wider than her territorial expansion tend the health-giving light-
beams of her vision of personal freedom, and friendship, and spiritual growth.
Deeper than the utmost thought of her founders sinks her root in the fruitful
soil of the whole broad earth.

Sail, sail thy best, ship of Democracy,
Of value is thy freight, ’tis not the Present only,
The Past is also stored in thee,
Thou holdest not the venture of thyself alone, not of the Western continent alone,
Earth’s résumé entire floats on thy keel, O ship, is steadied by thy spars,
With thee Time voyages in trust, the antecedent nations sink or swim with thee . . .
Thems, theirs as much as thine, the destination-port triumphant . . .
. . . thou New, indeed new, Spiritual World!
The Present holds thee not — for such vast growth as thine . . .
The Future only holds thee and can hold thee.

(Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood 4, 6)

The narrow competitive processes to which much is due, doubtless, cannot suffice for that future without reinforcement by the loving cogency of mutual growth, for which equal personal opportunity must free the way, though it disencumber the open road of much precious lumber.

Democratic progress is personally, lovingly, spiritually bound, and compared with this port of the long future what matters aught else that appears to be imperiled?

O banner, not money so precious are you, not farm produce you, nor the material good nutriment,
Nor excellent stores, nor landed on wharves from the ships . . .
Nor machinery, vehicles, trade, nor revenues — but you . . .
So loved — O you banner leading the day with stars brought from the night! . . .
I too leave the rest — great as it is, it is nothing — I see them not,
I see but you, O warlike pennant! O banner so broad, with stripes, I sing you only,
Flapping up there in the wind.

(Song of the Banner at Daybreak)

Thus, to me, if not to you, beckons the American Idea in Walt Whitman.

Do you see O my Brothers and Sisters?
It is not chaos or death — it is form, union, plan — it is eternal life — it is Happiness.

(Song of Myself 50)
Whitman’s Lack of Humor

Oscar Lovell Triggs

It has been asserted by the critics of Whitman that the element most lacking in his make-up was the sense of humor. Mr. Ruskin, acknowledging Whitman’s capacity in other respects, thinks him very deficient in the grace that saves the mental faculties from disorder. If this defect be actual it is to be lamented, for there is much reason in Carlyle’s opinion that humor, when interwoven with seriousness, gives the last finish and perfection to character.

This criticism does not refer, I presume, to the poet’s perception of the simply laughable, for he could laugh with the rest when the occasion required, not boisterously, indeed, as Carlyle laughed, but slyly, something like Tennyson. Jesting and persiflage he opposed on principle, observing that these tended to hurt and divide men. But a good story met his approval, and he himself had at his command many apt and quaint tales, derived from his Quaker associations, which gave him and others pleasure in the telling. Occasionally in his poems, as in the first sections of “The Song of the Exposition,” there is evidence of a playful fancy, which he might easily have increased, if he had chosen, to broad humor. He had power of satire, as is shown by an early poem entitled “Respondez,” which, it is interesting to observe, was omitted from the last editions, probably on the ground of its severity.

I would understand, then, that this criticism refers to humor in its technical meaning, “perception of the incongruous,” the evidence of the lack being taken from the apparently incongruous association of persons and objects in certain catalogues and poems. If applied in its literalness the charge of defect is no doubt a just one. But, to my mind, the absence of humor in his works is due not to defect, but to the fact of the absorption of the faculty of humor into higher and nobler perceptions.

Technically humor consists in the perception of the incongruous. It springs, as Emerson noted, from comparing fractions with wholes. Professor Vida Scudder illuminates the definition by pointing out that the great humorists of the world have been its pessimists and unbelievers. Aristophanes, master of the comic realities, jested belief out of mind. Heine was a humorist of the first order, because of his knowledge of the vast gulf fixed between desire and fulfillment. Carlyle, who always perceived the differences in things, was a typical
humorist. He indulged in sardonic laughter by reason of a profound skepticism and consequent despair. Humor carried to excess becomes cynicism, which fact is a further proof that laughter is often an armor designed to protect the naked soul from the world’s hurt.

A man of large views and of perfect faith, who lives in harmony with the order of the world, is rarely a humorist. His perception of the unity of things is so comprehensive that what appears difference to others is to him united in larger synthesis. His utter faith in humanity saves him from the dog-bark of cynicism. Increase faith and the incongruities that appeal to a man of humor are resolved in a nobler unity. The serenity of philosophers who deal with the one and not the many is a proof in point. There is a tradition that Christ never laughed. Plato and Emerson, idealists and optimists, lived in calm serenity of spirit. I think that Browning is the only exception to the rule that the great humorists are pessimistic. But it is not difficult to explain how Browning could jest and prophesy at the same moment. It was because of his exceptional faith. I think it was Richter who said that one must be able to laugh at or sport with one’s faith in order to really possess it. In exhibiting in almost the great grim way of Carlyle the terrible irony of fate, Browning is simply exercising his power and testing the sovereignty of faith. He perceived the incongruous, but he had also the penetration to reconcile hate and falsehood and deformity in the oneness of spirit. His humor, therefore, presents characteristics totally different from those of Heine or Carlyle, and he is to be classed rather among the great serene men.

Whitman, above all men of his generation, had faith. His faith indeed was absolute. As he had the most faith he saw the farthest and the clearest. Objects and persons, which are conventionally incongruous, fell into order and harmony in the cosmic sweep of his vision. Consequently he expresses more than humor — he radiates joy and exultation. Arthur Clive, in defending the thesis that Whitman is the Poet of Joy, calls attention to his distinguishing merit in these words: “First and beyond all others I would set this, that he always represents life as a boon beyond price, and is ever ready to invoke a blessing on his natal day.”

Whitman exhibits a character formed by joy and contentment. A defect of humor may be allowed in the interest of fuller and nobler consciousness. The world wants peace and not discord, joy and not despair. We can spare the jester sooner than the seer.

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Whitman’s Comradeship

Laurens Maynard

Read at the afternoon session of the annual meeting of the Walt Whitman Fellowship, Philadelphia, May 31st.

John Addington Symonds has said that “speaking of Walt Whitman is like speaking of the universe” and the epigram rings true to all who know the immortal *Leaves of Grass*. But we may sound in one word the keynote not only of Walt Whitman’s writings and life but of the universe as well. That word is Love. Love dominated Whitman’s life, love breathes in every page of Whitman’s book. Not the love which, attaching itself to one object, may become only a species of selfishness, but love for all mankind expressed in varied symbols and permeating the whole body of his poems, until finally, as though with the thought that, despite its all-pervading presence, its importance might not be sufficiently emphasized, he sums up

As base and finalè too for all metaphysics . . .
Yet underneath Socrates clearly see, and underneath Christ the divine
I see,
The dear love of man for his comrade, the attraction of friend to friend,
Of the well-married husband and wife, of children and parents,
Of city for city and land for land.

(The Base of All Metaphysics)

It was not until the third edition (1860–61), five years after the original publication of *Leaves of Grass*, that there appeared the remarkable group of poems entitled “Calamus,” which especially celebrates the love of comrades and emphasizes its necessity as a basic element of true democracy. But it has been well said that the successive editions of *Leaves of Grass* can be likened to a perfect and symmetrical tree in its various stages of growth, beginning as a slender sapling with a few limbs of sparse foliage, and ending with the sturdy forest giant, its main limbs amplified with the ramifications of many branches all filled with living leaves, but from first to last each complete in itself. We are, therefore, not surprised to find that the earliest edition contained the outlines of the thoughts which later crystallized into a separate section, to many of us the most important section of the book.
Long before the publication of *Leaves of Grass* Whitman had perceived the necessity of the mutual love of comrades, and in its earliest pages he announces himself as an “Extoller of amies and those that sleep in each others’ arms” (“Song of Myself” (22)) — and he had discovered that “There is something in staying close to men and women, and looking on them and in the contact and odor of them, that pleases the soul well” — and that

... the spirit of God is the brother of my own,
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers,
And that a kelson of the creation is love.

*(Song of Myself 5)*

And while he announces “I am eternally in love with you and with all my fellows upon the earth” (“Song of Myself” (2)), he also realizes the inadequacy of printed words for his message. “I pass so poorly with paper and types — I must pass with the contact of bodies and souls” (“Come Closer to Me...” 1855 ed.). He was accustomed to “Wandering...w i t hm yf a c et u r n e du pt ot h eclouds... My right and left arms round the sides of two friends, and I in the middle” (“Song of Myself” (33)). And neither learning, nor culture, nor any attainments were requisites of his companionship. On the contrary

I am enamour’d...
Of men that live among cattle or taste of the ocean or woods,
Of the builders and steerers of ships and the wielders of axes and mauls,
and the drivers of horses,
I can eat and sleep with them week in and week out.

*(Song of Myself 14)*

He indicated then and throughout what was clearly illustrated in the concrete examples of his comradeship: “I do not ask who you are — that is not important to me, / You can do nothing or be nothing but what I will infold you” (“Song of Myself” (40)). And in another passage, which many a philosopher might write as a theoretical expression of his belief in the common people and spend his life in practically disregarding, we know that Whitman stated the actual preference of his soul in the search for fit comrades.

No shutter’d room or school can commune with me,
But roughs and little children better than they.

The young mechanic is closest to me, he knows me well.

*(Song of Myself 47)*
Not that these passages have only these interpretations. Like so many of his expressions they may be found to contain one meaning within or blended with another. But looking from this standpoint these meanings may be seen.

Although the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* is our starting point, yet, as Emerson said, it “must have had a long foreground somewhere for such a start,” and this is true in regard to the utterances on comradeship. Whitman's acceptance of the concept of the brotherhood of man did not flash upon him in an instant to be written down in its place in the volume. It was the formulation of his life habit. The earliest glimpses which we are able to catch of Whitman show him in terms of loving intimacy with his fellows. And here let us note that his friendship was never confined alone to the “powerful uneducated persons” whose company he so often sought. Throughout Whitman's life, in early days as well as in his later years, he numbered among his comrades some of the most intellectual and cultivated men of the day. In fact, mere lack of culture never gave any entrée into Whitman's friendship. Quite the reverse: his charity welcomed all mankind and his love included the absolute giving of himself. The wounded soldier who needed his ministrations received full measure of loving service, regardless of what manner of man or half-man he might be. But in the bestowal of personal comradeship Whitman never cast his pearls before swine. He simply never made a fetish of education or culture or technical refinement. If we could look through the list of those whom he admitted to the sacred precincts of his love and companionship, I am positive we could find them all sane and large-souled men or women, with at least elementary nobility of character well defined. The stage drivers and pilots with whom he associated were the sturdy American workingmen of half a century ago — men who knew well their rights and duties as good citizens — one might almost say primitive men in the simplicity of their lives and the rugged honesty of their natures.

I cannot believe that the full import of “Calamus” is realized by those who read in these poems only a celebration of the comradeship of man with man, even although as has been suggested in the “Short Reading Course in Whitman” (by Miss Porter and Miss Clarke), the meaning be extended to include comradeship between women. Although in a few of these utterances it seems clear that Whitman sings a relation thus limited, I cannot but feel that the comradeship indicated in a majority of the poems might exist between man and woman. I believe that Whitman fully recognized this fact and that his relations toward those women with whom his friendship was closest were of the same essential nature as his comradeship with John Burroughs, William O’Connor, Peter Doyle, or any of the friends of his soul, as he designates them. I am also compelled to disagree with the statement contained in the same paper that,
in declaring this superiority of the love of comrades, he does not recognize
the possibility of an ideal marriage in which the love of the man and woman
for each other is raised to that plane of high and equal companionship re-
sulting from a perfect union of mind and heart, which is the distinguishing
attribute of the love of comrades —

for I cannot doubt that Whitman considered it perfectly possible for true com-
radely love to exist between husband and wife, independent of or growing out
of the sex love which originally brought them together.

If in his celebration of the love of comrades, carried away by the nobility of
the passion which he chants, Whitman seems to give it the highest award, in
other places he has given at least equal praise to the love “of the well married
husband and wife,” and he has once for all answered those who would find
contradictions here or elsewhere in *Leaves of Grass*:

Do I contradict myself?
Very well, then, I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

*(Song of Myself 51)*

Peter Doyle, speaking of Whitman’s habits, says, after emphasizing the
cleanliness of his life and relations: “Toward women generally Walt had a good
way. He very easily attracted them. But he did that with men too. He had an
easy, gentle way — the same for all, no matter who they were or what their sex.”

Still more important in this connection are Whitman’s own words in a con-
versation with Horace L. Traubel: “‘Calamus’ will never be understood until
we have developed a race of men and women whose love is capable of cross-
ing, at times obliterating, all boundaries of sex.”

The position of “Calamus” in the final edition of *Leaves of Grass*, placed as
it is between the “Children of Adam” and “Salut au Monde,” seems significant,
not only in its apparent division of love into three kinds — self-love, the love of
comrade, and love for all mankind — but because herein we may perhaps find a
reason for the fact that Whitman seems to have assigned to the love of comrades
a higher place than that given to the love between man and woman. The
“Children of Adam” poems celebrate sex-love justified by the need of perfect
offspring, but sex-love may contain elements of selfishness which are largely
absent from the love of comrades and wholly lacking in the love for humanity
in general:

My spirit has pass’d in compassion and determination around the whole
earth,
I have look’d for equals and lovers and found them ready for me in all lands,
I think some divine rapport has equalized me with them.

(Salut au Monde 13)

From the prominence given to love and comradeship in Whitman’s poems may be plainly read our duty as a Fellowship. With Whitman love was not only a necessity to the soul, as breath to the life of the body. It was also a solvent for all the evils of our civilization today and the hope of the true and ideal democracy of the future. In so far as we can aid in the establishment of this spirit of fraternity in Whitman’s name to this extent is our Fellowship justified. May it not have been in some such hope that Whitman wrote these lines, which in the 1860 edition preluded the hymn “For you, O Democracy,” and which I, for one, regret have ever been omitted from the subsequent editions?

There shall be from me a new friendship — It shall be called after my name,
It shall circulate through The States, indifferent of place,
It shall twist and intertwist them through and around each other —
Compact shall they be, showing new signs,
Affection shall solve every one of the problems of freedom,
Those who love each other shall be invincible,
They shall finally make America completely victorious, in my name. . . .

It shall be customary in all directions, in the houses and streets, to see
manly affection. . . .

The most dauntless and rude shall touch face to face lightly,
The dependence of Liberty shall be lovers.
The continuance of Equality shall be comrades.

(Calamus #5, 1860 ed.)

MAY 1898 (9:40)

Whitman and Socialism

M. V. Ball

“Without yielding an inch the working-man and working-woman
are to be in my pages from first and last.”

A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads

Is Whitman to be called a socialist? This is a question that in order to be answered must first be defined. According to whose idea of socialism shall
Whitman be judged? The kind of socialism that I shall here speak of is that which is described as “scientific socialism” — the socialism of the Marxians, the socialism professed by the political socialist parties. This recognizes the struggle going on between the man who has labor to sell — the proletariat, be he intellectual or otherwise — and the person or class that buys such labor and employs and exploits it, the owner of machinery and the means of production — the so-called capitalist. This struggle, the socialist says, grows ever fiercer and stronger, industry, in the meanwhile, becoming more specialized and the ownership of capital more concentrated. A time will come when through a peaceful revolution, probably at the ballot box, the great army of the dispossessed will assume the ownership of land and machinery and operate them for the general benefit. The outcome of the class struggle will therefore be the abolition of classes. Meanwhile the proletariat of all countries must unite under one class-conscious banner in the interest of that as yet unaccomplished order. This is the socialism that has over two million votes in Germany, a million and more votes in France, a strong vote in Belgium, Italy, England, Switzerland and America, holds international congresses, and declares with Marx: “Workmen of all lands, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains. You have a universe to win.”

By his own admission Whitman was not a student of economics. His Democratic Vistas, he says, are “not the result of studying up in political economy but of ordinary sense.” But he did read at least some of Mill and Sismondi. He thus quotes the latter: “The great wealth of a special class is not the true prosperity of a nation, but only in the bulk of people provided with homes or land in fee simple is this to be obtained.” He desires an agricultural nation, a class of small farmers:

I must confess I want to see the agriculturist occupation of America permanently broadened. Its gains are the only ones on which God seems to smile. What others — business, profit, wealth — without a taint? What fortune else — what dollar — does not stand for and come from more or less imposition, lying, naturalness?

And again:

The final culmination of this vast and varied republic will be the production and perennial establishment of millions of comfortable city homesteads and moderate sized farms, healthy and independent, single separate ownership, life in them complete but cheap, within reach of all.

He had little idea of cooperative production or distribution. He knew something of monopolies and individual greed but had no appreciation of the
part corporate wealth was to play. In an unfinished lecture he deals with “The Tramp and Strike Questions” (printed in *Specimen Days & Collect* (1879)). This was written about 1879. It has the true ring and shows that had Whitman been alive and active today he would have written labor songs as powerful as those from William Morris. In the lecture spoken of Whitman says:

As in Europe the wealth of to-day mainly results from, and represents, the rapine, murder, outrages, treachery, hoggishness, of hundreds of years ago, and onward, later, so in America, after the same token — (not yet so bad, perhaps, or at any rate not so palpable — we have not yet existed long enough — but we seem to be doing our best to make it up). . . .

The American Revolution of 1776 was simply a great strike, successful for its immediate object — but whether a real success judged by the scale of the centuries, and the long striking balance of Time, yet remains to be settled. The French Revolution was absolutely a strike, and a very terrible and relentless one, against ages of bad pay, unjust division of wealth-products, and the hoggish monopoly of a few, rolling in superfluity, against the vast bulk of the work-people living in squalor.

If the United States, like the countries of the Old World, are also to grow vast crops of poor, desperate, dissatisfied, nomadic, miserably-waged populations, such as we see looming upon us of late years — steadily, even if slowly, eating into them like a cancer of lungs and stomach — then our republican experiment, notwithstanding all its surface successes, is at heart an unhealthy failure.

Whitman did not sing of the degraded white slave of industry but of the dignity of labor, each man being the equal of every other man and all labor being noble because there was a man back of it. He asserted the divinity of the individual, whether saint, prostitute, king, workman or anything else. He penetrated broadcloth and linen, looking for “equals and lovers” and finding them in all races and lands. What could be more sublime than his lines on the dead prostitute in the morgue?

The divine woman, her body, I see the body, I look on it alone,
That house once full of passion and beauty . . .
That immortal house more than all the rows of dwellings ever built!

*(The City Dead-House)*

In his worship of the divine body Whitman seems never to have conceived that this same body might be so enslaved as to entail its slavery and sordidness also upon the soul. There is nothing romantic in being tied to a machine to
turn out so many parts of a part of a thing. There was a time in mechanics when to fashion an object elicited the workman’s skill and invited him to philosophy. Nowadays labor is grinding toil. Whitman’s “Song for Occupations” enforces one of the primary principles of socialism, namely — that the great works of the earth only have significance because they come from men and women and men and women enjoy and use them in social union.

When the psalm sings instead of the singer,
When the script preaches instead of the preacher . . .
I intend to reach them my hand, and make as much of them as I do of men and women like you.

(A Song for Occupations 6)

Henry George likewise believed that as land values result from the living together of individuals who constitute a community such values can never in justice be privately appropriated. The socialist also addresses singer, artist, inventor, all creators, in fact, declaring that all they produce, belonging so much to the past, drawing so much upon inherited opportunity, subjects them likewise to the communal claim. Did Whitman comprehend this social law? He was with the revolutionaire because the latter was a rebel but not because he accepted the philosophy of the rebel. “I do not know what you are for, I do not know what I am for myself.” Still he was undoubtedly the poet of rebellion. He sought to show that the people deserve a more representative literature than so far has fallen to their lot. He saw in the people, after all, “a measureless wealth and latent power and capacity, a certain breadth of historic grandeur, far surpassing all the vaunted samples of book heroes or any haut ton coteries in all the records of the world.” And if he could not write such literature he would at least free the way for it. “A more universal ownership of property” would enable the people in the leisure it brought to enjoy the treasury of the world’s literature. He saw in democracy the power to bind “all nations, all men, however various, into a brotherhood.” Though recognizing individualism he also spoke of “adhesiveness or love that fuses, ties and aggregates, makes the races comrades and fraternizes all.” This is what he asks in “Years of the Modern”:

. . . is there going to be but one heart to the globe?
Is humanity forming en-masse? for lo, tyrants tremble, crowns grow dim,
The earth, restive, confronts a new era, perhaps a general divine war,
No one knows what will happen next, such portents fill the days and nights.

And then he adds: “The space ahead . . . is full of phantoms.” Phantoms? Morris, socialism’s great bard, saw no phantoms. Morris felt that the dream of
a reconciled humanity must come true. Whitman declared that the large func-
tion of government must be to develop all individual and social potencies —
that it is not merely to rule, to repress disorder, but to assist in bringing out
man’s latent independence and self-respect. While thoroughly individualistic
he still held that consolidation was necessary to the furtherance of an “inde-
pendent separatism.” This was to be the American problem — how to com-
bine “benefits and necessities of association with individual thinking and act-
ing.” Fraternity will assure us a greater individualism.

Socialism will not level everyone up or down, do away with native inequal-
ities, legislate for dress, regulate social custom, and the rest that is charged to
it. Socialism contends that individualism cannot exist where the weaker are en-
slaved by the stronger and the stronger are at war with each other. Whitman
himself observes that “exceptional wealth, splendor, countless manufactures,
immense capital and capitalists, artificial improvements, hard as it is to say so,
form more or less a sort of anti-democratic disease and monstrosity.” With
property controlled as at present every word of this is justified. But suppose
this power socialized? Then no splendor of accumulation would be a menace.
All would possess some share in it, partake of its benefits, be in some way part-
tners in consumption and production. Whitman failed to see, or did not clearly
portray, what was so well put in Lowell’s question “If there breathe on earth a
slave are ye truly free and brave?” Whitman “felt the chain when it worked a
brother’s pain” but he conceived of this as caused by some superiority within
himself. He did not say that we who refuse to free a fettered humanity must
ourselves be in bonds, that America could not be a glorious democracy until
the whole world was democratic.

Whitman sings of political freedom. But it cannot be said that he wrote
much for economic freedom. It is true he writes:

Then my realities;
What else is so real as mine?
Libertad and the divine average, freedom to every slave on the face of
the earth,
The rapt promises and luminè of seers, the spiritual world, these
centuries-lasting songs,
And our visions, the visions of poets, the most solid announcements of any.
(As I Walk These Broad Majestic Days)

And here and there Whitman indicates what he thought of the situation. But
nowhere in his writings have we any tangible evidence that he appreciated the
gravity of the crisis. In contrast remember the stirring songs of William Mor-
ris — these detached lines, for example:

    I tell you this for a wonder, that no man then shall be glad
    Of his fellow's fall and mishap to snatch at the work he had.

    Come then, let us cast off fooling, and put by ease and rest,
    For the cause alone is worthy till the good days bring the best.

    Come, join in the only battle wherein no man can fail,
    Where whoso fadeth and dieth, yet his deed shall still prevail.

    (The Day Is Coming)

    Come shoulder to shoulder ere the world grows older!
    Help lies in nought but thee and me;
    Hope is before us, the long years that bore us
    Bore leaders more than men may be.

    Let dead hearts tarry, and trade and marry,
    And trembling nurse their dreams of mirth,
    While we, the living, our lives are giving
    To bring the bright new world to birth.

    (The Voice of Toil)

    O ye rich men, hear and tremble! for with words the sound is rife:
    Once for you and death we labored; changed henceforward is the
    strife;
    We are men, and we shall battle for the world of men and life.

    (The March of the Workers)

For the very reason that Whitman could not brook a system, that he
could not find himself contained in any one set of beliefs, economic or
other, was he prevented from being a socialist. He believed that the “city in-
vincible” would be “the new city of friends” where “robust love” should
supremely prevail. But as to the program by which this was to be brought
about he seemed to have no opinion or was unwilling to speculate. “It is
no lesson . . . I lie abstracted and hear beautiful tales of things and the
reasons of things . . . I cannot say to any person what I hear — I cannot say
it to myself — it is very wonderful.” Whitman commands us to be patient.
Democracy is inevitable. Universal comradeship, conceived and protected
in freedom, must issue from all present conflict. Whitman gave us enough.
Let us not squeeze him into an ism. This is how Sam Walter Foss salutes Whitman:

We shall not find neath heaven’s vault
Another Walt.
He gave a gift beyond all pelf,
Man’s greatest gift — he gave himself.

{Sam Walter Foss (1858–1911), an author, journalist, and librarian, became noted for his witty dialect verse.}

SEPTEMBER—OCTOBER 1898 (9:100)

Walt Whitman: A Character Study

Oscar Lovell Triggs

Read at the annual meeting of the Walt Whitman Fellowship International, New York, May 31.

A warm, magnetic personality penetrates Leaves of Grass, felt through the poem as sunlight through vapor. It is this presence that gives the poems significance. Indeed the opinion may come to prevail that the life was greater than the literature. “In Walt Whitman,” said Robert Buchanan, “I see more than the maker of poems. I see a personality worthy to rank even above that of Socrates.” And it has always been true that those who derided his poetry held it an honor to revere the man. One of the old Pfaff group used to say that Whitman would have served the world better had he stuck to the printer’s case and left poetry alone; but as to the man — he was large of heart, large of soul, and large of nature. It may be deemed more important, therefore, that Whitman should come to be known for his expansive personality rather than for any particular literary gift. Let the doubt stand for the moment in order to emphasize the query as to the character of the man. Curiously, it will be found that the book presupposes the man, and that the man — his features, walk, speech, touch, the glance of the eye, his mind and spirit — enters into and completes the book. His influence, in short, is mesmeric; that is, he does not affect men by his thought or conduct, but seizes them directly by his living personality.

I

Physically Whitman was a man of remarkably perfect proportion and impressive ensemble. Fortunately, on account of the many portraits* of the poet,
photographs, paintings, sculptures, and descriptions, it is not difficult for one
who did not know him to image to the sense his form and features. One ob-
serves from the portraits the physical largeness and majesty of the man. There
is expressiveness about the whole body, a character attached to the trunk and
limbs as well as to the face. This gives him a certain primitive look and suggests
ideas of the Beginners. One also notes the symmetrical high domed head, com-
bining elements of weight and ascension, the strength and repose of the face,
the arching eyebrows, the drooping eyelids, the straight and broad nose. In the
paintings the face is florid and rich in color, the eye not flashing and intellec-
tual but blue and absorbing. Some photographs have touches of the savage, an
alertness like the Indian. Some are stern and unyielding. Of the two busts by
Sidney Morse, one conveys the sense of serenity, a calm, Jovian expression; the
other — what Browning would call a “rough hammered head” — has the sense
of rapidity resting on depth. One of the Cox photographs has the look of a
laughing philosopher. The Johnston daguerreotype conveys the aspect of a
man of sorrows, one acquainted with grief. The Gilchrist painting has the
bearing of an Apostle of Love. All have the look of amplitude and scope. At the
sight of one of the Cox portraits, {Eleonora} Duse is reported to have ex-
claimed: “But the soul! How can one photograph the soul!”

The contemporary descriptions are numerous. One of the earliest recorded
comments is that of Thoreau, in 1856, undoubtedly made as much with refer-
ence to the physical as the spiritual impression: “He occasionally suggests
something a little more than human.” William Dean Howells saw him in the
autumn of 1860, and thus describes the event:

Whitman was often at Pfaff’s, and the night of my visit he was the chief fact
of my experience. I did not know he was there till I was on my way out, for
he did not sit at the table under the pavement, but at the head of one farther
in the room. There, as I passed, some friendly fellow stopped me and
named me to him, and I remember how he leaned back in his chair, and
reached out his great hand to me, as if he were going to give it me for good
and all. He had a fine head, with a cloud of Jovian hair upon it, and a branch-
ing beard and mustache, and gentle eyes that looked most kindly into mine,
and seemed to wish the liking which I instantly gave him, though we hardly
passed a word, and our acquaintance was summed up in that glance and the
grasp of his mighty fist upon my hand.

William D. O’Connor was intimate with the poet during his residence at
Washington through the sixties. He described him as “a man of striking mas-
culine beauty — a poet powerful and venerable in appearance; large, calm,

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superbly formed. . . . I marked the countenance serene, proud, fluid, grave; the brow seamed with noble wrinkles; the features massive and handsome, with firm blue eyes; the eyebrows and eyelids especially showing that fulness of arch seldom seen save in the antique busts; the flowing hair and fleecy beard, both very gray, and tempering with a look of age the youthful aspect of one who is but forty-five; the simplicity and purity of his dress . . . the whole form surrounded with manliness as with a nimbus and breathing, in its perfect health and vigor, the august charm of the strong.” The same writer described Whitman again in his story of “The Carpenter.” “In his aspect were singularly blended the prophet and the child. The child in him inspired love; the prophet, awe. He drew and he repelled.” Another portrait of the poet as he appeared in 1877 has been drawn by the pen of Dr. Richard Mauride Bucke:

He was a man of about six feet in height and weighing about two hundred pounds, erect, broad chested, dressed in a light gray suit — a white shirt with broad turned down collar open at the throat and no necktie. His face was broad and red, the picture of robust health, his hair and beard long and almost white. After he had welcomed me, which he did with cordiality, and we had sat down to talk, I saw that his eyes, which were a good part of the time half covered by heavy lids, were pale blue, that his nose was strong and straight, his lips full and more expressive of tenderness than firmness, his cheeks rosy and smooth almost as a boy’s; his ears large, fleshy and extraordinarily handsome, his head massive and well rounded both from front to back and from side to side, his brows prominent and very high arched. Head and body were well and somewhat proudly carried. His ruddy face, his flowing, almost white, hair and beard, his spotless linen, his plain, fresh looking gray garments, exhaled an impalpable odor of purity. Almost the dominant initial feeling was: here is a man who is absolutely clean and sweet — and with this came upon me an impression of the man’s simple majesty, such as might be produced by an immense handsome tree, or a large, magnificent, beautiful animal. The poet’s voice, which was soft, clear and sympathetic, added much to the charm of his presence.

In 1878 he was present at the funeral of William Cullen Bryant, and the New York Sun of that date makes this record: “The man most looked at was the white-haired poet, Walt Whitman, who presented a Homeric picture, in which were combined the easygoing nature of Grandfather Whitehead and the heroic build of an antique statue.” A casual observer at the same time said: “I think the old fellow the most human being I ever met.”

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Edmund Clarence Stedman described his presence at the time of the New York Lincoln lecture, in 1887: “As he entered haltingly, and took the seat placed for him, his appearance satisfied the eye. His manly figure, clothed in a drab suit that sat loosely and well became him, his head, crowned with flowing silvery hair, his bearded, ruddy and wholesome face, upon which sat a look of friendliness, the wise benignity that comes with ripened years — all these gave him the aspect of a poet and sage.” Dr. J. Johnston, an English friend, saw the poet in 1890. “The whole face,” he wrote, “impresses one with a sense of resoluteness, strength, and intellectual power, and yet withal a winning sweetness, unconquerable radiance, and hopeful joyousness.” By John Burroughs Whitman’s portrait has been most skillfully drawn again and again. The obituary notice in *The Critic* contained the following portrayal:

In person, Whitman was large and tall, above six feet, with a breezy open-air look. His temperament was sanguine, his voice was a tender baritone. The dominant impression he made was that of something fresh and clean. His physiognomy was undoubtedly remarkably unique. The full beauty of his face and head did not appear till he was past sixty. After that, I have little doubt, it was the finest head this age or country has seen. The lines were so simple, so free and so strong. High arching brows, straight, cleancut nose, heavy lidded bluegray eyes, forehead not thrust out and emphasized but a vital part of a symmetrical, dome shaped head; ear large, and the most delicately carved I have ever seen, the mouth and chin hidden by a soft, long white beard.

Edwin Arnold considered the poet one of the most beautiful men he ever beheld, “with his clear keen eyes, sculptured profile, flowing silver hair and beard, and mien of lofty content and independence.”

As to general impression, these various records are singularly concurrent. And the descriptions become more than ordinarily suggestive, inasmuch as they relate to one who so curiously and completely identified the body and soul. His poems were purposely the counterpart of his physical makeup. His body actually finds itself utterance. This was permitted consciously, in accordance with his theory that life should be more physical than it had become through generations of repression and abuse, in order that the prophesy hidden in the form “shaped in the likeness of God” should appear, and also that more perfect physical equilibrium might give freer play for the soul. “As if life,” he used to say, “this wonderful, mysterious life, were not primarily a physical phenomenon. How beautiful to live a free and healthy life complete in all parts until old age.”

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II

A feature of Whitman's personality is defined by the term emotionalism. The Presence behind *Leaves of Grass* is charged fully with emotionality. Compassion seemed to have been born in him with the infusion of his Quaker blood. Because of an infinite interest he was able as a boy to absorb the natural sights about him and turn them to his soul's growth. Comradeship with men and women became the basis of his life in manhood. The universality of his attachments is without a parallel in modern history. His character culminated grandly in the Civil War, for there as nurse he had an opportunity to display to the uttermost his magnetic love. His physical breakdown at that period was due in large part to the emotional intensity of his service. Emotionality is the element that floods his poems. They float deep in a sea of feeling. Havelock Ellis has expressed an opinion that Whitman's emotional expense in life was the largest of any one since Christ. Certainly *Leaves of Grass* contains the largest emotional element that has appeared anywhere in books. The words he employs become magnetic media, messengers of insurpassable sympathy between himself and readers. For once in literature, feeling is brought flush with the intellectual, perhaps carried beyond it, leading to mysticism, “soul's work” being made as manifest as “mind’s work.” His humanity so fuses and dominates his culture that the impression given by his works is not that of a man of letters but of a fresh strong human nature. This is the reason why his personality is so much needed in our national life to affect the solidarity of the race. The intellect isolates and divides men, love binds and unifies. And after all feeling is more fundamental than thought. It is more necessary to feel right than to think right. Furthermore, Whitman's enormous sympathy explains his apparently wayward experiences. As Mr. Burroughs puts it: “What would seem colossal egotism, what would seem shameless confessions, what would seem unworthy affiliations with low rude persons, what would seem confounding good and bad, virtue and vice, etc., in Whitman the man, the citizen, but serves to illustrate the boundless compassion and saving power of Whitman as the spokesman of ideal Democracy.” O'Connor said: “His is the strongest and truest compassion I have ever known.”

III

Another of Whitman's chief characteristics is egotism — an egotism, let it be at once affirmed, not of the ignoble sort that separates men and is selfish, but an ideal kind, vicarious and all inclusive, consistent with fellowship. He who shared the fortunes of all, who merged himself so fully in the thought of nationality, who assumed even the frailties and vices of his fellows, can hardly be accused of selfishness or arrogance or improper self assertion. Out of his pride
proceeded charity, and out of his egotism the free gift of himself. “I celebrate myself, but what I assume you shall assume.” By a process of idealization the name Whitman came to stand for ideal manhood. He was the Adam: nature culminating in a single experience, the race epitomized in a single individual. On the one hand the germinal essence of the universe, on the other hand the soul of universal humanity. This indeed was his enormous claim. But it was not presumption but fact. Egotism is closely related to emotionality. The sympathetic identification of oneself with the multitude of men and things accrues to one’s sense of being. Oneself then becomes coterminous with the universe of things and men. By the assertion of his own individuality Whitman rose into a state which was inclusive of all individuality. At times in the very intensity of his individuality, like Tennyson’s Ancient Sage, like the mystics of the Orient, he would fade away into boundless being. At the same time he could assert: “It is not the universe that is great, it is I who am great.” His egotism encouraged self-reliance. “I too have felt the resistless call of myself.” He was Emerson’s absolutely self-reliant man — the very one invoked by the elder sage, one who could obey his inner promptings and persist in moving forward in the face of contradictions of others — even though Emerson himself stood in the way.

{End of first installment.}

IV

The ground is now cleared for the statement that Whitman is a colossal mystic, an occultist, a religious genius of the first order. Egotism joined to emotionalism produces mysticism. Special personal intensity working upon ample emotional material creates Orientalism. According to Robert Buchanan the seer is one who sees life newly and assimilates it emotionally. By reason of the special intensity of his sight the world of the seer’s vision becomes a new world and his very existence constitutes a new experience. By virtue of the emotional assimilation of impressions the intellectual occupies a subordinate place and utterance is elevated above ratiocination to the plane of poetry. If the seer be also a poet then his speech proportions itself to the quality of the poetic emotion, and thought and vision come to completion in musical representation. The poet-seer realizes life newly, assimilates experience emotionally and gives to consciousness musical utterance. Such a poet-seer was Whitman. “How like the Orientals,” said Thoreau when he first met him. In every way, in truth, he approaches the Oriental type. Occultists claim that he states the fullest measure of mystic truths, as concerning death and reincarnation, to be met with in any modern poet. His habit of concentration and power to enter the rhythmic removed state of self contemplation evidences a kinship with Eastern seers.

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His dominant state of feeling was that of the exalté who regards everything with wonder, reverence and love. In his mental processes he avoided the intellectualization of a subject. His face does not suggest intellectuality but life. He saw but he was not the “maker see.” His works abound in paradoxes and mystical declarations. He offers conclusions but not arguments. Speaking of Carlyle’s want of soul sight he maintained that in the makeup of every superior human identity there is a wondrous something quite apart from argument that realizes the absolute truth of things. “Common teachers or critics are always asking ‘what does it mean?’ Symphony of fine musician, or sunset, or sea waves rolling up the beach — what do they mean? Undoubtedly in the most subtle elusive sense they mean something — as love does, and religion does, and the best poem; but who shall fathom and define those meanings?” (“After Trying a Certain Book,” Specimen Days). This was said not to justify his own or another’s vagaries but to give warrant to the soul’s joy in perceiving what cannot be intellectually defined. There was always for him something in the universe untold though not felt, something understood though eluding statement. Leaves of Grass is full of this certainty yet mystery. To the sunset breeze Whitman could whisper companionably: “Thou hast, O Nature! elements! utterance to my heart beyond the rest — and this is of them” (“To the Sun-set Breeze”). Though he could not give a reason for his knowledge, yet he knew the universe was a vital whole, that eventual harmony would be reached, that all being was somehow immortal. “There are arguments against immortality,” he said, “but there is no vision of denial.” Of course the intellectual is not denied or the real overlooked. While an Orientalist he was Yankee too. But the rational and the real formed only an area of his dwelling. In conclusion he would say: “Give me to sing the Great Idea.”

This tendency toward Orientalism is not exceptional in Whitman’s case. Orientalism has been slowly conquering the Occident for fully a century. The renascence of the twentieth century in the West will be due not as in the sixteenth, to the Greek, but rather to the Indian. One feature of Orientalism, pessimism, has characterized one branch of European philosophy since Schopenhauer. Wagner set Orientalism to music. Matthew Arnold sang it in verse. Emerson reproduced the fine thoughts of Hafiz, Saadi and the Persian mystics. Thoreau was steeped in Oriental lore. Alcott had the air of an Eastern priest. This tendency in the West is natural and free from affectation. Whitman’s most mystical poem, “Passage to India,” expresses a genuine longing on his part to return to primal thought, to wisdom’s birth, to innocent intuitions. In Whitman the Eastern and the Western lovingly fuse and live together.
Throughout his life Whitman grew in kindliness, serenity and optimism. In youth an easy-going tolerance was matched by sterner “fighting qualities.” Probably at all times he was capable of hate and scorn, despondency and despair. He could sound occasionally harsh notes of dismay, as in “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life”: “Out of struggle and turmoil I have written.” But as he advanced in age the spirit of good will obtained complete supremacy, showing the conscious subordination of evil, and this was done in the face of such irony of life, such odds of encounter, such scorn and vilification, such poverty and illness, as but few men of his generation endured. The adverse influences of the time conspired against him in vain. Scorn was never answered with scorn or hate with hate. He never showed antipathy or complained or remonstrated. “Better the pride of the comrade, great in his vision of greatness, than the pride of the sage or the scorners, letting his kind pass by” {source unidentified}. When the onset against his book was strongest he simply said: “It’s a poor book that can’t weather such storms.” By no adversity was his calmness affected. When about his work he usually sang or whistled. Doyle relates how in their walks in Washington Walt went always singing or whistling or he would recite poetry, especially Shakespeare; always happy, cheerful, good natured. After his paralysis at Camden he would spend days out of doors at Timber Creek in perfect contentment, looking at the grass, the trees, the flowers, the aspects of sky, the play of light and shadow, listening to the birds, the squirrels and the crickets in the woods. In his severest illness at this time he wrote to Doyle: “Pete, it seems pretty clear that there is no substantial recovery probable (hardly possible) for me — how long it will last this way it is of course impossible to tell — I take it all without growling — things are steadily growing worse with me — But I must not worry you — and maybe there is something more favorable ahead.” If needs be he was content with small and common things. He liked the lilacs that bloomed in every door-yard. The elevation of thought and sentiment, the seriousness and calm, that characterized him betokened somehow his harmonious adjustment to the universal order. “I listen and wait.” To the last hour, through untold suffering, he remained cheerful and serene.

About this feature of his character there is abounding evidence. Mr. Howells, meeting him in 1860, testified that “the apostle of the rough, the uncouth, was the gentlest person; his ‘barbaric yawp,’ translated into the terms of social encounter, was an address of singular quiet, delivered in a voice of winning and endearing friendliness.” In O’Connor’s story of “The Carpenter” he is pictured as the image of simple charity and wisdom: “‘Love,’ said the gray
redeemer, lifting his clear face, bright with deathless smiling, and wet with the sweet waters of immortal tears, ‘love, love! that includes all. There is nothing in the world but that — nothing, in all the world. Better than all is love. Love is better than all.’” Mr. Edmund Gosse, acknowledging himself “a stiff-necked and froward unbeliever,” in visiting Whitman, in 1884, was captivated — on his own confession — by his “serene self-unconsciousness, the sweet dignified urbanity, the feline immobility.” Captivated but, we know, not converted. Still he gives his witness: “As I passed from the little house and stood in dull deserted Mickle street once more, my heart was full of affection for the beautiful old man, who had just said in his calm accents: ‘Good bye, my friend.’ I felt that the experience of the day was embalmed by something that a great poet had written, but I could not find what it was till we started once more to cross the frosty Delaware; then it came to me, and I knew that when Shelley spoke of

A peace within, a calm around,
And that content, surpassing wealth,
The sage in meditation found,
And walk’d with inmost glory crown’d.

(Stanzas Written in Dejection Near Naples)

he had been prophesying of Walt Whitman; nor shall I ever read those lines again without thinking of the old rhapsodist in his empty room, glorified by patience and philosophy.” Confirmatory testimony comes also from Mr. Burroughs: “Old age may be a valley leading down and down, as it has been so often depicted, but I always thought of Walt Whitman as on the heights, and when I made my annual or semiannual pilgrimage to visit him, I always found him on the heights — at least never in the valley of doubt and despair or of spiritual decrepitude — always tonic and uplifting.”

Whitman’s optimism was not a mere matter of temperament — it was a conviction. His serenity was doubtless due to the harmony existing between himself and the universal order. As Jeremy Taylor says: “He to whom all things are one, who draweth all things to one, and seeth all things in one, may enjoy true peace and rest of spirit.” But beside this repose in nature there was an optimism in belief that rose to a philosophy. By conviction, that is, he was an absolute optimist. His belief was firmly grounded in reason, based as deeply in rationality as the pessimism of Carlyle or the doubts of Tennyson.

Pleasantly and well-suited I walk,
Whither I walk I cannot define, but I know it is good,
The whole universe indicates that it is good,  
The past and the present indicate that it is good.  

(To Think of Time 8)

All forces have been steadily employ’d to complete and delight me.  
Now on this spot I stand with my robust soul.  

(Song of Myself 44)

My rendezvous is appointed, it is certain,  
The Lord will be there and wait till I come on perfect terms,  
The great Camerado, the lover true for whom I pine will be there.  

(Song of Myself 45)

Do you see O my brothers and sisters?  
It is not chaos or death — it is form, union, plan — it is eternal life — it is  
Happiness.  

(Song of Myself 50)

VI

[For a consideration of Whitman’s lack of humor, which has place here,  
the reader is referred to a paper by the present writer in the Conservator for  
September, 1896 {see 154}.]

VII

As Whitman saw life steadily he saw it whole. He aimed at the symmetrical  
development of every faculty. Physically and spiritually there was no lack of  
proportional organization. Attaining completeness in himself he freely be-  
stowed himself upon men and freely received from all. His manhood was such  
that he became fully representative of humanity. “In a word,” to quote from  
Gabriel Sarrazin, “he appears as a specimen, rare in the modern world, of  
those powerful and flexible organizations which rose in the antique cities of  
the golden age, anxious to cultivate numberless aptitudes and tending instinc-  
tively towards the incarnation of a complete manhood.” Or in the words of  
William Clarke: “We see in him the genuine democrat of the very highest type,  
sharing all the feelings of the average man, and yet adding something unique  
and precious, something we call genius, unconventional, powerful, with a  
healthy rudeness, combined with a delicate refinement, born out of deep hu-  
man sympathy, and therefore outlasting the mere politeness of society. His  
figure has in it somewhat of the antique heroic type, and yet withal a sweet  
benignity, so blending the Pagan and the Christian elements into a thoroughly
new tone — the tone of the New World Democrat, who is the peer of anyone, and whose vision sweeps the vast horizon of a mighty continent. His own manhood is even greater than anything he has produced; and all that he has produced has flamed forth naturally from the fountainhead of his own humanity.” Whitman’s message is the expression of his own deepest passion. That passion is the very flower of the life of the race.

*Nearly every photographer of note has portraits of him, the most notable being the three Cox photographs taken in New York. The picture prefixed to the “Song of Myself,” which was daguerreotyped from life one hot day in August in 1855, is the earliest of the series, with the exception, perhaps, of the Johnston daguerreotype, which may have been taken in 1854. He was painted in oils by Hine in 1859, by Gilchrist in 1894, by Waters in 1877, by Eakins in 1887, and by Alexander in 1892. A crayon of heroic size was made by Kurtz in 1873. Two portrait busts were sculptured in 1887 by Sidney H. Morse, and one in 1891 by Samuel Murray, and one in 1898 by William Ordway Partridge.

JUNE 1899 (10:55)

Whitman’s Example in American Society

Frank B. Sanborn

Remarks at the sixth annual meeting of the Walt Whitman Fellowship International, Boston, May 31st.

I have chosen this topic for my brief remarks today because we have never, since the evil days before the Civil War, seen a time when the broad-minded, democratic example of Walt Whitman was so much needed in American society as now — when a snobbish and wholly un-American pursuit and enjoyment of material wealth has emasculated the republican sentiments of the great party which Whitman and some of his surviving contemporaries helped to found, before the memory of most of those who listen to me today. I say Whitman helped to found the Republican party of 1854–56 — although he may have been nominally in the party then called Democratic — because the whole inward desire of Jacksonian Democrats like Bryant the poet, his friend Leggett, Silas Wright of New York, and the rural Democracy of New Hampshire, who first (in 1845) broke the solid phalanx of their party, in
its shameful support of the slaveholders’ oligarchy — their whole doctrine and impulse — was towards what Jackson himself called “equal rights”; and it was to maintain equal rights for white men more than for negroes that the Independent Democrats of New Hampshire, the Free Soil party of Ohio, Wisconsin, Massachusetts and New York, and finally the Republicans of 1856, came into organized existence. Whitman, himself one of the superior men of his day, belonged by blood and inheritance to the party of equal rights.

Descended from the liberty loving Hollanders who had thrown off the yoke of Spain and checked the arbitrary despotism, in state and church, of Louis XIV — and from those English Quakers, whose doctrine, even more than democratic Calvinism, favored equality of opportunity in this world and the next — Whitman could never understand that effeminate aristocracy of sentiment which now shows itself so unabashed in the country of Franklin and of Jefferson. Whitman upheld the dignity of manual labor, as Franklin did — he stood by the American policy of Jefferson, giving power to the mass of the people. To him rank and wealth were but means to an end, never an end in themselves, never instruments for the enslavement of a race or a class, nor means for the establishment of caste in the land whose whole history was a protest against caste.

How free and uplifting was Whitman’s spirit! how democratic and Christian were his manners! “One is your Father — all ye are brethren,” was the language of his every act and gesture; that is the text, often strangely illustrated, of his long sermons in prose or unwieldy verse; that is the utterance of his lyric poetry, in those passages of unrhymed melody that put to shame the clinking couplets and quatrains and dancing tunes of other poets, his contemporaries. Like the earlier oracles, he often involved his utterances in a mist of words, clouding the inner meaning; but ever and anon there flashed forth the lightning of his thought in phrases never to be forgotten. And this thought was always the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of Man, the equality of Woman, the knightly service of the powerful for the weak.

But now we have reached a dismal, idiotic period when our politics are base, and the organs of opinion in press and pulpit are disgracefully servile; when Washington, where Whitman so nobly illustrated in act the doctrines of his life, has sunk into an Oriental submission to fictitious Destiny worse than that which pollutes Constantinople. Hence I say we need to bear in mind the example of Whitman, as our forefathers did the example of Franklin, and as Christians who are not poisoned with caste and ecclesiasticism remember the example of the carpenter’s son and his fisherman disciples. As they raised the
standard of freedom in the most despotic times and countries, so has Whitman
done in our dwindling and Mammon-worshiping age. His literary merit, great
as it is, shrinks beside this spiritual insight which made and kept him true to
the only principle that can save our republic from infamy and our religion from
blasphemy and priestly hypocrisy.

NOVEMBER 1902 (13:136)

The Democracy of Whitman and
the Democracy of Socialism

Leonard Abbott

Read at the annual meeting of the Walt Whitman Fellowship, New York,
May 31st.

I suppose there has never been a man who was more democratic, in the true
sense of that much abused word, than Walt Whitman. He was thoroughly
cleansed of every taint of caste feeling and snobbishness. He chose to associate
on the most intimate terms with the humble of the earth — shop and factory workers, common laborers and street car conductors. He had no patience
with smug, conventional people, or with the shams and conventionalities they
uphold. In his poems he goes out of his way to voice a sense of unity and com-
radeship even with those whom we have been taught to regard as utterly vile,
if not actually outside of the pale of our civilization. He links himself with the
men who are doing the menial and dirty tasks of the world, and he can say to a
woman of the streets:

Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you,
Not till the waters refuse to glisten for you and the leaves to rustle for you,
do my words refuse to glisten and rustle for you.

(To a Common Prostitute)

The spirit of equality is the heart of democracy. I do not mean by “equal-
ity” any attempt to force men into the same molds or to cut them the same
lengths. I mean rather the mental attitude assumed toward the equality of our
common humanity, whether we be white or black, high or low, rich or poor,
learned or unlearned. The passion for equality was wrought into the very fiber
of Walt Whitman’s being, and he could say: “I will accept nothing which all
cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms.”

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It was Whitman’s concept of the organic unity of the world, of the ultimate unity of society, which gave his democracy its logic and strength. When he declares,

Whoever degrades another degrades me,
And whatever is done or said returns at last to me.

(Song of Myself 24)

he voices not merely a sentiment, but a scientific fact, for in very truth we are “members one of another,” whether we are willing to admit the fact or not. And nature has a grim way of reminding us of this fact even when we are most ready to disown it.

Again, I think that Whitman is profoundly right in his thought of equality when he says: “Of Equality — as if it harm’d me, giving others the same chances and rights as myself — as if it were not indispensable to my own rights that others possess the same” (“Thought”).

Was ever a finer rebuke administered to the narrow selfishness of the predominant type of human temperament today?

The world was never more in need of this kind of teaching. Our boasted democracy is after all a good deal of a sham. It is a plutocracy based upon class rule and the degradation of the most useful members of society — the workingmen. The healthier instincts of more primitive community life have almost all been broken down, and we are doing our best to establish classes and castes — petty artificial grades, each with its own narrow and exclusive codes. We see society in miniature in the wealthy household of today, with the loungers above and the servants drudging below. We are surrounded on every hand by evidences of the brutality which condemns whole classes to a life of wretched and monotonous toil in order that a few may live in luxury.

A new thought is coming into the world and Walt Whitman was one of its greatest spokesmen. It is the thought he expressed when he said:

Each of us is inevitable.
Each of us limitless — each of us with his or her right upon the earth,
Each of us allow’d the eternal purports of the earth,
Each of us here as divinely as any is here.

(Salut au Monde 11)

Democracy has hitherto been limited. We have believed in it for some but not for all. Aristotle thought democracy was right for Athenians but wrong for Helots. The slave-owners before our Civil War thought that democracy was
right for whites but wrong for blacks. The men who stand at the helm of American politics at this moment think that democracy is right for Americans but wrong for Filipinos. We are most of us agreed that democracy is right on election day at the ballot box, and we give to the workman the same vote that we give to the millionaire. But we are not willing yet to concede democracy on the industrial field. We have autocracy and despotism there, and permit one man to exercise jurisdiction over the lives of thousands of others.

Many sweating, ploughing, thrashing, and then the chaff for payment receiving,
A few idly owning, and they the wheat continually claiming.
(Song of Myself 42)

The thought I would like to impress is this: That we shall never win a really vital democracy until we win industrial democracy, social democracy.

Did Whitman recognize this? Not very clearly, I think. In fact, he expressly declares in one place that he is “neither for nor against institutions.” “What, indeed, have I in common with them,” he asks, “or what with the destruction of them?” He meant that if the spirit was right the institution would be right. That may be true, but is it not also true that the institution often determines the spirit? Is it not a fact that environment makes or mars the lives of millions?

And, after all, in considering social problems in the large, we have to take into account the average man. Walt Whitman may emancipate himself. A hundred others may emancipate themselves; they may rise above and contrary to their environment. But the majority of human beings are incapable of that kind of development; they are clamped, stunted, stifled, by hostile economic conditions. They cannot live democracy beneath the weight of a social system that, from top to bottom, is a denial of democracy. Men who are wage-slaves cannot discern freedom.

Democracy will have to root itself in institutions, in social machinery, in property statutes; and socialism, which proposes the public ownership and administration of the means of life in the world, is simply the democratic thought carried into the field of industry. More than that, it is an interpretation of the industrial evolution of modern times, which is irresistibly binding together social forces and is making more and more inevitable the coming of social democracy. Our objection, as socialists, to the trusts and combines of today is not that they are too big, but that they are not big enough. We want a trust that is big enough to take us all in — a Cooperative Commonwealth.
Some of the critics of socialism prophesy that its regime will be despotic. Herbert Spencer has dubbed it “the coming slavery.” Others have talked of its “paternalism.” When a man can be his own father it will be logical to admit that socialism can be paternal. Socialism is nothing if it is not democratic. In its purity it is nothing less than the very flower of democracy.

I believe that it is the democracy of socialism that is finally going to make possible the democracy of Walt Whitman. The socialist movement is coming into life like a great cleansing tide. It is shaking the thrones of Belgium and Germany and Italy. It is breaking the ranks of the reactionaries in France. It is permeating the thought of England and America. It affords the only possible rallying point for the progressive forces of the world. And it will triumph, ushering in a new epoch in the world’s history.

The socialist society of the future will scatter its bounties to all alike. It will recognize that the lowest has its function as well as the highest; that the foundation of a building is no less useful and important than its glittering spires and pinnacles. The talented man will learn that the genius with which he has been endowed is a means of service, not of self-aggrandizement. The few hours of work which will be demanded of every man — for it will be only a few hours, when once industry is organized — will become so pleasant that none will willingly shirk them. Equality will finally cleanse society of that worst of vices — the habit of forcing our dirty and unpleasant work on to other people. We will face life shoulder to shoulder, as men should.

Life will blossom in those days to come. Human nature is like an untilled garden. Its potentialities are limitless but its actualities are meager and disappointing. Socialism will lift the dead weight from men's souls and will give the human spirit a chance to soar. We shall take hold of the world and recreate it in forms of purest beauty.

And so at last we shall win the ideal democracy that Whitman visioned, and shall

... establish in the Mannahatta and in every city of these States inland and seaboard,
And in the fields and woods, and above every keel little or large that dents the water;
Without edifices or rules or trustees or any argument,
The institution of the dear love of comrades.

(I Hear It Was Charged against Me)
Whitman, the Lover

Ernest Crosby

Speech at the meeting of the Walt Whitman Fellowship International, New York, May 31st.

I was in Concord for the first time last week and went through Emerson’s house. His bust upon the stairs was covered with flowers and I learned that, by a curious coincidence, it was his birthday. I have been reading his *Representative Men* lately, and, while admiring his wonderful insight, thinking also of his limitations. The types which he selects are Plato, the Philosopher, Swedenborg, the Mystic, Montaigne, the Sceptic, Shakespeare, the Poet, Napoleon, the man of the World, and Goethe, the Writer, and with these he believes that he has boxed the compass of humanity, but he has really been boxing the compass of himself. No man gets far beyond himself, and it was Emerson, the philosopher, the mystic, the sceptic, the poet, the man of the world and the writer, who bounded his own horizon. It is only as a man of the world that we may have difficulty in recognizing him, but he doubtless took himself for one and to a certain extent he was right. Emerson was no artificer or artist, and hence Michael Angelo and Rembrandt are omitted. He was no militant reformer, and consequently he gives us no Mohammed or Luther. But there is one greater omission — one fatal gap — in the list. Where is the great lover? Plato, Swedenborg, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Napoleon, Goethe — here we have six colors of the spectrum, but the warmest of all, the richest of all, the red ray, is absent.

For a time I thought that Emerson had altogether forgotten the lover of mankind, but at last, in the essay on Napoleon, I came across some trace of him. Napoleon, he says, stands for the “party of property. . . . The counter-party still waits for its organ and representative in a lover and a man of truly public and universal aims.” Emerson left the lover out because he had never seen or heard of one! Apparently he was ignorant of Buddha, and of Jesus and John, of Francis of Assisi, of Howard and Clarkson and Wilberforce. He often met Garrison and Phillips on the street and he had yet to wait for lovers of their kind! What monstrous blindness! Emerson knew all about love; he had a marvelously clear intellectual conception of it; he could weigh it and measure it and classify it and write essays about it; he could do everything with love but feel it. And failing to feel it himself he failed to recognize those who felt it.
It is no wonder then that Emerson mistook Walt Whitman. He was the very man he was longing for, the very lover whose place in the skies his instruments had correctly demonstrated, but whose rays he was constitutionally unable to see and feel. And it is as a lover that we must think of Whitman, if we wish to understand him, and not as a poet or philosopher, for his poetry and his philosophy were subordinate to his love. His *Leaves of Grass* is one long love letter to mankind and we must look upon it as such. What literature can equal a love letter in the hands of the person for whom it was meant? That is why we who love Whitman rank his book above the classics. And what writing soever can be more ridiculous and inane than the same love letter in the hands of a third party? That accounts for the disdainful attitude of the uninitiated critics. Whitman is a pioneer of a new human instinct, the love of comrades, which, at bottom, is the sense of union with all that lives, the “cosmic consciousness” of Carpenter and Dr. Bucke. It is a passion for humanity — a development apparently of that sex feeling which underlies all religion, and Emerson was looking for it, but it shocked him when it met him face to face, for, to recognize it, you must have some share in it yourself.

**January 1906 (16:167)**

**Walt Whitman in the Present Crisis of Our Democracy**

*Thomas B. Harned*

Abstract of remarks made at a Whitman dinner in Philadelphia, December 19th.

I am here under orders from Traubel (the high priest of the Whitman propaganda) to respond to the toast he has given me. He has also selected some texts from *Leaves of Grass* which I will read as a prelude.

The President is there in the White House for you, it is not you who are here for him,
The Secretaries act in their bureaus for you, not you here for them.
The Congress convenes every Twelfth-month for you.

(A Song for Occupations 4)

He says indifferently and alike *How are you friend?* to the President at his levee,
And he says, *Good-day, my brother*, to Cudge that hoes in the sugar-field,
And both understand him and know that his speech is right.

(Song of the Answerer 1)

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And I will make a song for the ears of the President, full of weapons with menacing points,
And behind the weapons countless dissatisfied faces.
(Starting from Paumanok 6)

It is John Addington Symonds who speaks of Whitman’s “unrestricted faith and imperturbable optimism.” Whitman believed in man. It was no half-way, half-hearted, make-believe faith. It was absolute and unrestricted. I sometimes think that his faith in man was greater than that of any other figure in literature. Others write about democracy, about human goodness, but they strike so many false notes that we really question whether they believe in it at all. Tennyson and Lowell and others had more or less to say about democracy, but they did not have unrestricted faith in their fellow man. Tennyson was really giving his own views when he said “the poor in a lump is bad.” I once said to Whitman: “Walt, I have been reading Lowell’s essay on democracy.” He was silent for several minutes and then said: “Tom, Lowell knew nothing about real democracy.” You can read *Leaves of Grass* from cover to cover and you will find that Whitman never sounded a false note. His faith was “unrestricted.” His belief in democracy was sublime. He never doubted. It was not a belief in man merely as an animal. It was a belief in man as “the acme of things accomplished and the encloser of things to be.” It was not a belief in man only as we find him discussed in scientific books such as Man’s Place in Nature. It was a belief in man as a spiritual as well as a physical force — man the “acme” of the creation which we see and the encloser of the beyond. This is why Whitman’s wonderful optimism will stand every test. It was simple faith — no qualms, no doubts. No suggestion that if he had had the making of the world he would have made things different. And the more we think of it the more we must be convinced that there can be no sound religion, philosophy or even politics unless it is based on a belief in the integrity of things. We must believe above all that it is through man — the common man, the man who has thus far evolved to the acme of things accomplished — that our civilization is to be further advanced. If we do not believe this, if we are pessimists, if we allow ourselves to be influenced by the philosophy of despair, we are false to the teachings of Whitman and fail to accept the great blessing of his life. For Whitman not only taught democracy. He lived democracy. He was democracy. We who knew him can bear witness to this. His was no pose, no affectation. His mingling among all kinds and conditions of men was genuine. He was full of human kindness and sympathy. The ragged urchin was as great to him as the learned scholar, and often greater. And then he had as much love — often more — for the bad,

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the criminal, the outcast. Where the faith of others faltered, his was unrestricted. It would have been easier for him to have lost himself than to have lost his faith in any man or woman or child. He believed when others needed help for their unbelief. His optimism was without boundaries or qualifications, when the so-called optimism of others was but an empty sham. And I want to say right here that I think the hope of the human race is in the fact that all progress must come from below. Society may be rotten at the top (certainly some of it is) but it is sound at the bottom. The peasant, the plain, unspoiled, common man, is essentially good and sweet and contains the germs of endless possibilities. And when we look at the great world movements of today (in Russia, for instance) in a large way, how can we doubt that eventually somehow these principles of democracy must triumph? Do not suppose for a moment that Whitman was blind to the imperfections, the dangers, the inhumanities, with which man’s growth has been impeded. He had the eye of the seer. Nothing escaped him. His *Democratic Vistas* disclosed that. What I am trying to say is that he was so great that he could at all times, and under any condition, strike a balance between the forces which build up and those which destroy, and he knew — he knew — that the balance was always in favor of man, of progress, of democracy. To doubt this would be disloyalty to all the teachings of the past. How easy it is for us to lose this simple faith and how easy it was for Whitman never to lose it. Then again Whitman believed

> Each of us inevitable,
> Each of us limitless — each of us with his or her right upon the earth,
> Each of us allow’d the eternal purports of the earth,
> Each of us here as divinely as any is here.

*(Salut Au Monde! 11)*

What a magnificent declaration of human rights. How it disposes of the exclusive divine rights of kings, of priests or even of presidents. Each of us with our right upon the earth. The poor Russian. The oppressed Irishman. The degraded coal miner. The man, whoever he may be, who may differ from us in his ideas of government. Freedom to breathe, to live, to think, to act — each as divinely as any. No special privileges. We have hardly yet grasped the idea. We are so dazzled with our seeming prosperity that we fail to realize the work ahead. Are we satisfied with the democracy of today? Are we satisfied with the present laws of distribution? Whitman gives us a hard rule, but oh! how just. “By God!” he says, “I will accept nothing that all others cannot have the counterpart of on the same terms.” It is the Golden Rule stated with even greater emphasis. It is idle to say that we will not have to recognize the inherent
justness of this law of progress. Our democracy has reached a crisis. We are in
the midst of this crisis. Some of us, most of us, do not realize it. Each of us —
the poor, the humble, the lowly, the outcast, the oppressed, the criminal — {is}
divinely here and entitled to a square deal. No preferences which wealth and
power so tyrannically bestow, but equal justice to all — that is the problem of
civilization. Is it a dream to say that this problem will remain forever unsolved?
It is cowardice to say so. Let us have the faith in our fellow man that Whitman
had. Let us believe in the ultimate solution of these mighty questions. Let us
believe in justice. Whitman did and he practiced it. An outlook on the world
today discloses “countless dissatisfied faces.” This forebodes good not evil.
Man is thinking. It will be a long, perhaps an unending, struggle, but always
toward democracy — the democracy which Whitman always believed in be-
cause his faith in man never faltered. This to me is the significance of Walt
Whitman in the present crisis of our democracy.

FEBRUARY 1906 (16:182)

Whitman’s Superman

Isaac Hull Platt

Read at the Walt Whitman dinner, Philadelphia, December 19th.

When Traubel asked me to say something tonight I told him I thought I
had said enough about Whitman and it would be well to give someone else a
chance. To which he replied that he did not believe that I had yet said all I
thought about Whitman, which is very true; but if I were to try to say all I think
on the subject I should never catch up with myself — that is, my speech would
never catch up with my ideas. The more I think about Whitman the more
difficult I find it to put my ideas into words. He teaches straying from him but
who can stray from him? His words itch in our ears till we understand them.
As in the Bible and Shakespeare everyone seems to be able to find his own
ideas in Whitman. The socialist proves his socialism by him, the anarchist his
anarchy, the single-taxer his single-tax, the woman-suffragist her woman-
suffrage, the imperialist and the anti-imperialist each his own pet notion. Now,
whatever Whitman was he was not a faddist. We hear lately a great deal of cant
about “the simple life.” The Rev. Charles Wagner came all the way from Paris
to tell us about it. From Paris remember, to tell Philadelphia about the simple
life! Now, I do not for a moment imagine that Mr. Wagner is other than a kind-
hearted and lovable person and thoroughly sincere — in fact I know it. But
why all this bother about undisputed facts? Why say an undisputed thing in such a solemn way, and set the newsboys on the street corner bawling themselves to death to sell five cent editions of a book announcing that twice two is four? Gilbert Chesterton has a happy way of putting it:

It does not so very much matter whether a man gets a grilled tomato or a plain tomato; but it does very much matter whether he eats a plain tomato with a grilled mind. The only kind of simplicity worth preserving is the simplicity of the heart, the simplicity which accepts and enjoys. There may be a reasonable doubt what system preserves this; there can surely be no doubt that a system of simplicity destroys it. There is more simplicity in the man who eats caviare on impulse than in the man who eats grape-nuts on principle.

Walt knew all that. I don’t know whether he had a taste for caviare, but I know he liked champagne and drank it with all simplicity of heart for which he got it — pardon the locution — in the neck from a recently deceased preacher of Brooklyn. Well, the founder of Christianity was reviled as a glutton and a winebibber, and this is not the only point where he and Walt are in touch. But I think both might be said to have lived “the simple life.”

Now, here comes that most disturbing man, Bernard Shaw. The Superman is what he springs on us. Good! The Superman by all means! That is just what we have been looking for. But where are we to find him? This notion of the Superman is about as original as the Rev. Mr. Wagner’s “simple life.” Haven’t we had Prometheus and Samson and Moses and Julius Caesar and Napoleon and Walt Whitman and Bernard Shaw and Anthony Comstock and Mr. Makeado — I have forgotten his first name, but I mean the head policeman in New York — who stopped Bernard Shaw’s play because it was immoral? It is to laugh! A policeman deciding questions of morality! Oh pshaw! But Mr. Shaw’s notion is not quite so simple as it appears at first sight — so silly simple, I mean. Of course the occasional occurrence of the Superman — the nine or nineteen or ninety thousand — is an old story. Their appearance is what has led to monarchy — to oligarchy — to hero worship. It never led to democracy. This is where Shaw plays trumps. This is what he says:

The need for the Superman is, in its most imperative aspect, a political one. We have been driven to proletarian democracy by the failure of all the alternative systems; for these depended on the existence of Supermen acting as despots or oligarchs; and not only were these Supermen not always or even often forthcoming at the right moment and in an eligible social
position, but when they were forthcoming they could not, except for a short
time and by morally coercive methods, impose super-humanity on those
whom they governed; so, by force of “human nature,” government by con-
sent of the governed has supplanted the old plan of governing the citizen as
a public-schoolboy is governed.

When social aggregation arrives at a point demanding international or-
ganization before the demagogues and electorates have learnt how to man-
age even a country parish properly, much less internationalize Constan-
tinople, the whole political business goes to smash; and presently we have
ruins of empires, New Zealanders sitting on a broken arch of London
Bridge, and so forth.

To that recurrent catastrophe we shall certainly come unless we can have
a democracy of Supermen; and the production of such a democracy is the
only change that is now hopeful enough to nerve us to the effort that revo-
lution demands.

That is good and it rings true, but is it original with Shaw? Listen to Walt:

Where the city of the faithfulllest friends stands,
Where the city of the cleanliness of the sexes stands,
Where the city of the healthiest fathers stands,
Where the city of the best-bodied mothers stands,
There the great city stands.

(Song of the Broad-Axe 5)

That seems to be the same idea as that of the Superman.

“Produce great individuals, the rest follows.” But where are we going to get
these great individuals, these Supermen? Our friend Ernest Crosby seems to
understand Shaw to mean that they should be bred like prize cattle and he ob-
jects to this plan on the ground that it would take all the romance out of life. I
quite agree with Crosby in this but I do not think such an idea was in Shaw’s
head at all. On the contrary he acknowledges “the futility of breeding men as
we breed cocks for game, greyhounds for speed, or sheep for mutton.” But the
fact is that Shaw is such a lover of paradox that “you never can tell” exactly what
he does mean. The idea of breeding men as cattle are bred is no new one even
in practice. It is practiced even yet by royalty, by the nobility and by the idle
rich who ape the habits of nobility, and it seems to have thrown our worthy
President — I mean of the United States, not of this Fellowship — into some-
thing like hysterics at the prospect of “race suicide.” Nonsense, let those
people commit “race suicide” if they want to. Their ranks will be filled fast
enough from the ranks of the “common people,” whom Lincoln thought God must love because he made so many of them.

Well, there you are. Where we are going to find this Superman I do not know; but I know that where the city stands which has the noblest men and women, there the great city stands, and that I learned from Whitman. Did I learn it from Whitman? Did he not show me that I knew it all the time? I believe so. I believe the greatest evidence of genius is to show people what they knew and did not know they knew. I believe the Superman will be ground out of the mills of the gods in due time and will attend to his own breeding, and I think that is what Walt thought.

Somebody, I believe it is Bliss Carman, says that a paradox is a truth standing on its head to attract attention, and then along comes Charles Ferguson and says Bliss is all wrong, that the ordinary accepted view of truth stands on its head and the paradox stands it on its legs. Very good. I don’t care as long as we get it on its legs at last. But all the point about the paradox is this: it does seem to be a form of expression of great minds. He who loses his life shall save it. Whitman did not know what is untried and afterward, but he knew it to be sufficient and that it cannot fail.

JULY 1911 (22:71)

Walt Whitman’s Significance to a Revolutionist

Eliot White

An address made at the Whitman Fellowship meeting in New York on the afternoon of May 31st.

I have the pleasure of announcing that the revolution is well underway. Mr. [Gustave Percival] Wiksell has just read Whitman’s splendid defiance, beginning, “Shut not your doors to me, proud libraries!” which implies that Leaves of Grass was once excluded from those august precincts. And yet this copy of the book I have with me (having borrowed it while my own copies are in storage), you will see is duly stamped and labeled “New York Public Library; Central Collection, Fifth Ave. and 42nd St.” It is certainly justifiable to declare the revolution more than started, when the unexpurgated edition of the book we so highly prize can thus be furnished without quibble or reservation from the “proud library” at Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street.

A vital part of Whitman’s significance to a revolutionist is that his call to faltering spirits to bear bolder witness, and undertake more audacious deeds, is
always from his own confident place in the deep waters, and that he does not, as is the wont of some so-called radicals, urge swimmers to dare the full tides while they themselves maintain their safe position on the shore of essential conservatism:

Long have you timidly waded, holding a plank by the shore,
Now I will you to be a bold swimmer,
To jump off in the midst of the sea, rise again, nod to me, shout, and laughingly dash with your hair.

(Song of Myself 46)

No one could have uttered such a challenge as that who had not himself experienced the joys of the dangerous deeps. This promoter of superb ventures knew the delight also of seeing many a “timid wader” accept the shouted summons. This satisfaction came to take precedence of almost all others with Whitman; it became an insatiable ambition to him to call as many as possible of the hesitating, timorous spirits he found everywhere about him out into the foam-capped, turbulent tides of revolution, which to him was only another name for life itself under keenest pressure and at fullest splendor. He fails of his due significance to a present-day revolutionist if he does not inspire the other with the same ambition. Such delight is in the same realm as the missionary’s exaltation in “seeing souls born”; the revolutionist conceives a “thirst for souls,” and is never satisfied unless using some fresh opportunity to draw another timid wader by the shore to become a bold swimmer, until this one also shall leap off into the deep, rise again, nod a greeting of zest and gratitude, and laughingly dash with the streaming locks.

In a group of lines included under “Calamus,” Whitman answers the charge that he seeks to destroy institutions, by declaring his invincible purpose to establish throughout These States, “without edifices, or rules, or trustees, or any argument, the institution of the dear love of comrades.” Here we may confidently affirm is the dynamic core of Whitman’s revolutionary being and influence; he believes that the love of comrades can be trusted without any adventitious “safeguards” of “edifices, rules, trustees and arguments.” The love of man for man, of woman for woman, of man for woman and of woman for man, he proclaims enough! Indeed this will ultimately be disclosed as the unresolvable and fomenting element in all revolution deserving the name. If Whitman then fails to exert this influence on the present-day revolutionist, that he inspires him to trust human love to the uttermost, beyond all artificial stimuli and exhortations, all fetters and fears, the poet has failed to convey his militant faith, the prophet his radiant vision. In the “Carol of Words”
Whitman declares with solemn weight of conviction:

The song is to the singer, and comes back most to him,
The teaching is to the teacher, and comes back most to him,
The murder is to the murderer, and comes back most to him . . .
The love is to the lover, and comes back most to him.

He might well have included in this assertion of retribution for both weal and woe, “The revolution is to the revolutionist and comes back most to him.” It is well to remember this as we tread on the ashes of former revolutions and try to reproduce in imagination the fire and rapture that filled the souls of participants now long vanished. Each revolution of the past was to its own champions, and came back most to them. It is not otherwise with the present revolution; its advocates according to Whitman’s ascription find their reward in the uplift of self-forgetting action itself, in the undismayed confronting of fierce hostility, or the yet more difficult hindrance of cold neglect, and the flame that kindles them to heroic achievement most of all warms and gladdens their own souls. Such is the sufficient recompense that Whitman allots to this day’s revolutionist, enabling him to look without misgiving to the time when others shall walk over the ashes of our fires and wonder at the noble excitement of the present struggle. This promoter of revolt against hoary wrongs would seem to sympathize with every form of such uprising; he could have used of himself with slight verbal changes the declaration of the Latin dramatist, “I am a man, and nothing human is alien to me,” making it read, “I am a rebel, and no revolution is alien to me.”

Finally, it is no exaggeration of Whitman’s significance to a revolutionist of this or any approaching time to recognize him as a “wound dresser” not only of bodies, as in the desperate emergencies of the Civil War, but also, and yet more expertly, of souls. So drastic is the contagion of his revolutionary spirit that he brings to birth, wherever his words penetrate, ever new comrades of the open road and the great adventure. These men and women far from being deterred are rather incited to more resolute confronting of peril by his warning, “He going with me goes often with spare diet, poverty, angry enemies, desertions.” But afterward, when his companions who in stern truth have experienced “second birth” into the tonic atmosphere of revolution, feel most keenly the smarts and stings, the malevolence and ridicule, that inevitably fall to their lot as pioneers, and are sometimes stricken almost unto death in the desperately long campaign, then it is that they enter most deeply into debt of gratitude to the spiritual wound dresser. Bending over his faithful comrades
he heals their hurts with that medicine with which he is so richly endowed — the love of a heart that excludes none from its passionate sympathy:

I give you my love more precious than money,  
I give you myself. . .

(Song of the Open Road 15)

Inevitably the men and women who value at its true worth such a gift as this must go forth resolved to give no less on their part to others. They too would be spiritual wound dressers as truly as revolutionists; indeed, every unstinting giver of self to others in love thereby becomes a revolutionist in the midst of this day’s welter of mistrust and selfishness. And as they fare on their victorious way, it is no wonder that they turn now and then to lift the high hand of greeting to “Walt,” provoker of Love and Revolution, mightily twinned, to thank him with significant glance, since they too now belong among those “who ache with love.”
Its editor being a literary coexecutor of Whitman’s estate, the Conservator was bound to give considerable attention — and substantial free advertising space — to editions of the poet’s works and words. Executorial projects were, of course, treated well, and hateful “semi demi Whitmans” purporting to be the complete Leaves of Grass were regularly damned. In the early years, the stock of Leaves left behind was also sold through the journal; in an August 1893 ad, readers learned that the “Literary Executors of Walt Whitman offer for sale valuable copies of his works, autographed by him.” Two years later a “Walt Whitman Publications” ad priced an autographed 1889 edition at $10, the 1892 Leaves at $2, and an autographed Complete Works at $12.

A typical essay of publisherial interest was Thomas Harned’s “Walt Whitman and His Boston Publishers” (6:150), an analysis of a “bundle of letters carefully tied together with rough brown string” found in Whitman’s “den.” Traubel, in an editorial note, emphasizes that “this will be a very complete record” of the demise of the 1881 Osgood edition over what the poet called “the sexuality odes.” Quotation from Whitman’s letters here is extensive and Harned’s views in passing sometimes revealing. One letter, dated March 7, 1882, furnishes “the only instance in Whitman’s career in which he showed the slightest disposition to modify for external reasons text otherwise chosen.” Harned ends with this small, consolatory historical footnote: “I have been reliably informed that the [Boston] District Attorney in later years admitted that he had not sufficiently acquainted himself with the character of the book before taking action — that he probably would never have made it a subject of official complaint if this had been done.” The long narrative required two installments; it is not included here because it appears in The Complete Writings of 1902.

New light was shed on the Whitman of twenty years earlier when Daniel Brinton was assigned to greet The Wound Dresser, Bucke’s 1898 edition of
Whitman’s letters from the hospitals of Washington to his mother between 1862 and 1864. “No weeping, no sentimentality of the baser sort, but dreadful earnestness, courageous sorrow, manly pity,” Brinton summed up. He closes with eloquent dudgeon: “And this is the man whom some scribblers, even in this very year, have dared to call of flagitious life, degenerate, ‘immoral’! Who can rise from the reading of these letters and not think with unspeakable loathing of the critic creature striving to defile the memory of this man?” (9:44). In 1912 Traubel welcomed Waldo Browne’s compilation, The Rolling Earth: Outdoor Scenes and Thoughts from the Writings of Walt Whitman, with a perceptive article on the genre of nature writing. He begins, “There’s a lot of trash talk about the open air. Just as if being out of doors made a man civilized and healthy. Just as if being in doors made a man barbarous and effete. . . . The question is not so much whether you have a house that’s in the open as whether you have a mind that’s in the open” (23:44).

In 1912 the remarkable publisher Thomas B. Mosher of Portland, Maine, reissued his 1904 Memories of President Lincoln. Traubel embraced it warmly, producing a fine statement of his notion of an ideal book publisher: “I like to have Mosher books round where I am. They touch my craft instinct. . . . He hasn’t made the beautiful common. He has made the common beautiful.” Another noteworthy Traubel rave appeared in 1914, when a Leaves with twenty-four daring illustrations by Margaret Cook appeared: “She got onto the Whitman impulse. No compromise. So her work from first to last is consistently noble. . . . She has used color. She has used nudity. She has used freedom. . . . Margaret Cook has scaled the lookout.”

A good example of a minor event producing an eloquent Conservator item was the appearance of a new British edition of Drum-Taps from Chatto and Windus in 1915, obviously with the thought that its poems would resonate during World War I. Traubel pours scorn on this attempt “to construe Whitman anti-Germanally,” producing a bracing little essay reminding readers that these poems are “probably great war poems because they’re really great peace poems. Because they’re great comrade poems. There is no enemy in these poems. There are only friends.”

Very brief notices, some of the “books received” kind, provide hints of the advancing Whitman cause. A paperback Leaves from Whitman’s old publisher David McKay is announced in 1896 (7:45), and in 1900 a “Dollar Edition” of Leaves from Small, Maynard appears. In 1905 arrives a notice of Traubel’s own “compilation,” The Book of Heavenly Death, from Mosher (16:92); another compilation, Anne Montgomerie Traubel’s Nature Thoughts from Walt Whitman, also came from Mosher the next year and was praised by Horace for
its “skillful and sympathetic editorship” (17:43). Of particular interest is an ad in the March 1906 issue announcing Traubel’s intention to “publish in facsimile Walt Whitman’s personal copy of Leaves of Grass, edition of 1860–61” (17:14), a venture finally achieved by the New York Public Library in 1968.

Over the years, several short items reported on Whitman editions overseas. In 1895 a Glasgow Herald article is reprinted that recalls Rossetti’s 1868 selection, which introduced “that loud-voiced giant to the notice of decorous English drawing-rooms” and then reacts to the announcement by Richard Le Gallienne of yet another “selected” with a plea for a complete English Whitman: “we are a good deal more outspoken to-day than we were in 1868” (6:155). The item ends boldly: “Whatever Mr. Le Gallienne may contemplate as ‘an edition for English readers,’ the work of the Bowdleriser can form no part of his plan.” In the next issue Traubel called disapproving attention to a popular one-penny London edition of Whitman that excised “Songs of Sex, especially . . . those entitled Children of Adam” (6:174).

Several times the Conservator cast stones at publishers who produced editions that did not “contain the poetic writings of Whitman added to the Leaves in the final thirty years of his life” (16:157). Later Traubel wrote that “publishers who produce a hodgepodge of rearranged or disarranged pieces without stating their incompleteness are hoodwinking the public.” In later outbursts he continued irascible on the subject of “grossly imperfect compilations” and “piecemeal Whitmans” that are “done in contravention of his known theory of the vital sequence of the poems.” Traubel’s final gasp on the matter came in 1917, when he condemned “confusing or imperfect issues purporting to be Leaves of Grass.” These editions, he said, “would have done no great harm if they’d been given out frankly for what they were. But they were always marketed in counterfeit competition with the authoritative version.”

Changes in publisher for the Whitman estate can also be followed in this section. The reception—good, bad, and ugly—of the first three volumes of Traubel’s great oral history, With Walt Whitman in Camden, is also on view here. From 1906 on, Traubel presented a spirited logomachy between Whitmanphiles and -phobes over the need for such a project. On the pro side: “No other such intimately personal and lovable home picture of any American poet has ever been put into print,” and “It is easy to find fault with it. But fault-finding falls away before the stupendousness of it.” On the con side: “This deluge of trivialities and self-asserting vulgarities” and “wearisome exposition of Whitman’s vast ignorance, provincial narrowness, amazing lack of taste, puerile prejudices and, finally, his inordinate, even fetid, self-conceit.” One critic to whom Traubel gave space wondered slyly about WWC: “Does it not...
suggest the thought that there should be a Society for the Protection of Dead Authors?" Another sensible suggestion, this from the New York Evening Sun, evidently went unheeded: “If somebody will thresh out the wheat a very good loaf of bread may be made out of these gleanings.”¹

Traubel became adept in placing excerpts of WWC in such periodicals as the Century Magazine, Appleton’s Magazine, and American Magazine. He also sometimes placed excerpts from not-yet-published volumes in Conservator articles. In a 1915 essay that asked the vexed question, “Was Walt Whitman a Baconian?” (that is, did he believe Sir Francis Bacon wrote Shakespeare’s plays, a topic often debated in the Conservator), the author, Julius Chambers, clearly was given access to Whitman’s conversations in the yet-unpublished volume 4 of WWC (26:86). In an article on an exhibition of Thomas Eakins’s work at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Traubel dipped into the first two volumes of WWC for several Whitman comments on Eakins’s famous portrait of himself (28:184).

Note

1. The present editor could not help admiring the acuity of the point, however, having in 2001 produced just such a “loaf” from the nine volumes of WWC in the form of Intimate with Walt: Selections from Walt Whitman’s Conversations with Horace Traubel, 1888 –1892. A revealing discussion of the reaction of Traubel’s intimates to WWC can be found in his review of Henry Bryan Binns’s A Life of Walt Whitman (273).

June 1897 (8:60)

Whitman’s Letters to Peter Doyle

William Sloane Kennedy


One shrewdly suspects that people who thought they understood their Whitman pretty well after an acquaintance with the man during the last decade only of his life will find themselves readjusting their focus on reading the Peter Doyle letters, just edited by Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke. I have, to a slight extent. Not that we did not know of his comradely ways with the hand-workers, and that he was one himself for a part of his life (the man who has not been will never know humanity properly); not this, but that we had not been admitted into the inner shrine of his soul’s friendship for another soul. We had no such
concrete instance of his boundless and passionate love, no expression of it in words to a known and particular person. It is all in the “Calamus” poems, generalized. But in the Doyle letters the wistful, yearning Christ-love, passionate as that of mother for child or man for woman, takes us into still deeper and more sacred recesses of the soul. In the last decade of his life the fire of passion had burned low, and his Dutch-English impassivity united with the calmness of age to give an impression of a more passionless nature than was his in the early Brooklyn and Washington days when, as Doyle says, Whitman was an athlete, full of hot blood and indomitable vigor, and ready for feats of running, walking, lifting, that astonished people.

As they throw light on the love of a great soul for another soul, these letters are invaluable. As literature for the general public, for people who never read *Leaves of Grass*, they are naught. Let none such attempt to read them in detail, unless he or she is fond of the pretty nothings that lovers say to each other. The bard writes to his friend as one workman to another; he adapts his style and his matter to his lover’s likes and level. His passionate longing for a constant return of his affection makes him ignore all that would set up estrangement between them. Love, love, ever ceaseless, quick, tender, is his want; all else he scorns. A thousand times he lavishes upon his friend such terms as “dear darling son,” “dear son Pete,” “my darling boy.” He constantly lends him money, lays by little sums for him of Doyle’s earning, counsels him, warns him, treats him as his own child. These letters will strangely quicken and freshen your old love for your poet. They will tighten the heart-fastenings anew, renew the thrill you felt when you first threw open the door of your soul to the electric pulsations of the New Comradeship and knew that this world henceforth could give you nothing more precious, that you had tasted its costliest attar.

Those who have been trying to bric-a-brac their poet of democracy, swing him into line, whitewash his grim repellant traits, divinize him, dwelling only on the sweet rhetorical-lyrical parts of his tremendous and vitalizing gospel, will be perhaps shocked by these letters, which show their poet in undress, and in familiar converse with one of the hand-toilers. I am glad they are likely to be shocked — the dapper little gentry of the eye-glass and critical pen. They will once more find out what great men value in this world — namely, a deed, a true soul, love, honesty, faith. And it may occur to them that if they want a loyal friend they will get it always in one of the toilers and not among the cowardly, knavish idlers and dilettante loafers of the frivolous classes.

The Peter Doyle letters are such as Abraham Lincoln might have written to Ann Rutledge or to his partner Herndon. Their unstudied simplicity of language only adds to their value. They are letters to be run through at a
sitting or two for their atmosphere. They leave one with warmed and exalted feelings, with ennobled ideals of friendship. And that is enough.

On page 150 there is a passage which makes one suspect that Doyle and others of us who have seen animal pets with Whitman have not got his true attitude toward them after all — that he had more of a quiet appreciation of them than one suspects.

The “Interview with Peter Doyle” by Dr. Bucke and Horace Traubel contains interesting things about the personal relations of Garfield and Whitman in Washington. President (then Congressman) Garfield, it seems, always jocularity signaled the poet on the street, when approaching him from the rear, with a title of one of Whitman’s productions — “After All Not to Create Only.” Then they would talk together as they walked on.

The extensive chronological notes prefixed to the volume are accurate and valuable. The publisher’s part is extremely well done.

March 1903 (14:6)

Whitman’s Executors Defended

Isaac Hull Platt

In December last I addressed the following letter to the Philadelphia Ledger:

Will you kindly favor me with an expression of your idea of what is “fit to print”? Are misstatements of fact fit to print? Will you also kindly tell me whether your book reviewers are in the habit of reading even the tables of contents of the books they write about?

In your review of the last five volumes of the new Putnam edition of Walt Whitman’s complete works I find this: “The work concludes with several articles by Whitman’s literary executors. Thomas B. Harned contributes some personal recollections, as does Dr. Bucke, but all are too worshipful to produce anything of critical value.” The work concludes with nothing of the kind and contains nothing of the kind. The last volume contains notes by Whitman found among his papers, a list of newspapers and magazine clippings preserved by him, a bibliography and an article by Professor Triggs, of the University of Chicago, on “The Growth of Leaves of Grass,” and absolutely nothing else. Moreover, there is nothing of the kind described in any of the five volumes which are the subject of the review.
Volume VIII contains three short papers by Harned aggregating sixty pages, entitled “Whitman and Physique,” “Whitman and Oratory,” and “Whitman and His Second Boston Publishers.” These are not in the nature of criticism at all. The two former are simply statements of Whitman’s views on the subjects indicated, almost entirely in his own words, and the last a simple account of a business transaction. Volume IX has a preface of five pages by Dr. Bucke, not in the way of criticism but merely descriptive of the matter following. Two other brief prefaces of like character by Dr. Bucke to different collections of Whitman’s letters complete the list of all the matter in the five volumes not written by Whitman himself. The first volume of the complete set which is not one of those with which the review I refer to deals has a general introduction by the literary executors. This cannot in any sense be called worshipful, but is absolutely calm and temperate. It is hardly to be expected that the literary executors of a deceased author would edit his works in an unfriendly spirit. Printing presses are available for those who wish to criticize.

It is a shame and a disgrace that you should open your columns to such misrepresentation under the guise of criticism and under the caption of “news that is fit to print,” and I think you owe the publishers reparation. This letter was printed almost entire under the caption, “Whitman’s Executors Defended,” with a brief paragraph in reply, which I subjoin:

Readers of the Camden edition of Whitman’s works who are not “worshipful” would scarcely enter into the spirit of the articles on the poet’s physique, the marginal notes, the accounts of his preparatory reading for his writing, the variorum renderings, etc., etc. The biography which introduces the work is not a critical writing, nor does the work show this character in any of its parts.

I felt that further light might be thrown upon a subject which the Ledger editor had done so much to confuse. I therefore returned to the controversy with a note which I append, but which the Ledger did not see fit to print:

My objection to your criticism of the Camden edition of Walt Whitman’s works seems to have been founded on a mistake on my part of what you meant by the word “worshipful.” As in your original article the word could not possibly have been used in its proper sense, “worthy of worship.” I was obliged to guess at your meaning and guessed wrong. I supposed you meant having the attitude of a worshiper. Your explanation shows that you merely meant having an interest in the personality of a distinguished author and in his
manner of work. With this understanding I withdraw this objection. You will probably have noticed that your citations apply to Prof. Triggs rather than to the literary executors and you omit to explain why you should complain of a work as containing nothing of critical value and at the same time state that nothing in the work is in the nature of critical writing, which of course it was not intended to be. As there are no marginal notes in the work your reference to them confirms me in the opinion that you have never looked into it very carefully. If you had you would have discovered that the work done by the literary executors in the latter volumes is practically limited to reporting Whitman’s own words and those of others concerning him, and you might have found yourself in agreement with the reviewer in *The Atheneum*, who says: “Whitman’s literary executors have, of course, a high view of his achievement, but they are free from the extravagances we have been led to expect and write personal notes rather than criticism in their introduction.”

**June 1904 (15:60)**

**Long and Short Editions of *Leaves of Grass***

“T.”

What edition of *Leaves of Grass* should you read? Any edition you choose. Only you should know what you choose. In 1891–92, just before his death, Whitman fixed up finally and left a certain book. He said of this book that it was the book he called *Leaves of Grass*. That so far as he had power to perpetuate an arrangement of his poetic work this was the arrangement he advised. This book has been left untouched by Whitman’s executors except for the addition of *Old Age Echoes*. He would himself have so continued the *Leaves* had he lived. This is the volume produced by Small, Maynard and Company and used by the assent of the executors in Putnam’s ten-volume Whitman. The work in this form can be secured from no other source. McKay has issued a book which he calls *Leaves of Grass*. It is as big as the authorized volume but involves an entire redistribution of the poems. It could not of course contain all the poems. Some of the Whitman copyrights have expired. The material covered by these copyrights is drawn upon for the McKay volume. That volume in addition contains discarded poems and lines. It could not fail to be suggestive and to have variorum value. But it is not in Whitman’s own sense Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. It not only falls short one way and goes long another but does the thing which
Whitman in anticipation condemned. Crowell has issued a *Leaves* which is simply a reprint of the Thayer and Eldridge collection of the early sixties. Some copies of this volume have been published with the Crowell imprint and some with Kerr’s. But they are only what they are. I said at the start, buy any edition you choose. But know what you choose. I do not say do not buy the McKay and Crowell books. On the contrary I say buy them. But know what you are buying. They are both interesting books for study. Sidestudies. But there is only one thing to do if you want the complete book. And if you only get one Whitman you should have Whitman’s Whitman. I am not against the other books. Indeed, I am for them. For Crowell’s especially, which has retrospective value. And even for McKay’s, much as it does to confuse the student and falsify Whitman. Why should I put my body or my soul in the way of any Whitman? I wish all square Whitmans luck. But I imagine from the many letters of the one strain addressed to me that some booksellers are selling incomplete Whitmans for complete. And some booksellers should be honest.

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**FEBRUARY 1906 (16:189)**

**With Walt Whitman in Camden**

From the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*.

Within a few weeks Horace Traubel’s book, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, will be issued by Small, Maynard and Company, and the world then will be given what is perhaps the most complete portrait of the author of *Leaves of Grass*, as well as one of the most remarkable biographical volumes that has appeared in the last hundred years. Mr. Traubel, who is one of the “Good Gray Poet’s” literary executors, had the good fortune to know Whitman for many years. Nearly every day he saw the poet; and every time they met the conversation of the author was of so engaging, illuminating a character that Mr. Traubel finally decided to keep notes of it. Unfortunately much has been lost, because the diary does not begin until March, 1888, and but four years of Whitman’s span yet remained to him. But the old poet, when he learned that Mr. Traubel would probably write something about him if he were the survivor, which it was extremely probable he would be, being a young man, assisted him in various useful ways. He gave precious letters from the great men of literature of two continents to his biographer, and the passing of a letter in this way always suggested
reminiscences, which have in no small measure helped to fill out the portrait. The style of the book is unlike anything known in biographical literature. It is unlike Boswell’s Johnson or Lockhart’s Scott, although it is bound to be associated with them. Neither does it suggest Spencer’s *Anecdotes of Pope and His Times*, nor Pinkerton’s *Walpoliana*. Its nearest kin is Pepys’s *Diary*, and still it is rather in spirit than in manner that it may be likened to that classic work. Mr. Traubel has the simple directness of Pepys; he goes straight to the point always, and nothing important or unimportant in his picture is omitted. No more gossipy record has ever appeared, and the conversations upon diverse subjects, including the poet’s contemporaries, are further enhanced by the inclusion of most entertaining letters by men and women whose names are known on both sides of the Atlantic. In his preface To Readers, Mr. Traubel says: “My story is left as it was originally written. I have made no attempt to improve it. I have taken nothing off and put nothing on.” Regarding Whitman’s connection with the diary, he has this to say: “Did Whitman know I was keeping such a record? No. Yet he knew I would write of our experiences together. Every now and then he charged me with immortal commissions. He would say: ‘I want you to speak for me when I am dead.’ On several occasions I read him my reports. They were very satisfactory. ‘You do the thing just as I should wish it to be done.’ He always imposed it upon me to tell the truth about him. The worst truth no less than the best truth.” Whitman desired an honest record and Mr. Traubel has given the most truthful biography in the language. It seems strange to call it biography; perhaps it should be looked upon as Whitman’s unconscious autobiography, for Mr. Traubel’s record is principally in the poet’s words. It is Whitman’s opinions we are given, not Mr. Traubel’s.

{This was the first item in the *Conservator* on *WWC*, the first of many intended to create interest and encourage sales of the three volumes Traubel was able to bring out.}

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**October 1908 (19:121)**

**With Walt Whitman in Camden**

*From the *Springfield (Conn.) Republican.*

If ever man had need to pray to be saved from his friends that man was Walt Whitman. The rugged verse, for example, which he used for such large poetic ends, what doggerel it becomes at the hands of his imitators! Yet still worse are
the Boswells who insist on giving us Whitman day by day, as though his every word were inspired. Here, for example, is dear good Horace Traubel with another huge volume of extracts from his notebook, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, covering the period from July 16 to October 31, 1888. One hundred and seven days and 562 pages, about a column of this newspaper for the average day’s record! Imagine biography written on such a scale! There could not, of course, with a man of Whitman’s individuality of character, fail to be interesting things in the record, but how much more telling they would have been if Mr. Traubel had elected to use his judgment instead of his memory. No man ever lived who said at all times things worth printing. If of those select thoughts which are evoked with literary intent the best authors choose a few and reject many how much more rigid must the selection be in the case of chance spoken words! The book has the interest which is not likely to be lacking from any intimate account of a great man, but it would have been far more interesting if three-fourths of the details had been omitted. But just this is Mr. Traubel’s one chance of being remembered, as Boswell is remembered, and he therefore exploits himself.

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**October 1908 (19:121)**

**With Walt Whitman in Camden**

*Charles Warren Stoddard*

From letters. C. W. S. lives at Monterey, California.

1906: When the great {San Francisco} trembler seized us and shook the life out of some of us, on the 18th of April, I was deep in your precious volume *With Walt Whitman in Camden*. I was reading it after we were all driven out the house, for it was falling about our ears, and for five days I was glad to find shelter in the stable. It was my consolation when, perhaps, it was the only book that could have consoled me.

1908: With all my heart I rejoice to find announced as on the press the second volume of your wonderful work. Camden ought to be mighty proud of it. I am so glad that the third and fourth volumes are in preparation. My prayer is that I may live to see all these precious treasures in my library. They are books to live for. Books as dear to me as *Leaves of Grass* itself because I never saw Walt, but in your pages I seem to see him and get wonderfully near to him. Surely you must know that I consider *With Walt Whitman in Camden* one of

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the best biographies ever written of one of the greatest poets that ever lived — and I wish that the world might know you as I do.

{Stoddard had famously corresponded with Whitman as a young man about his “adhesive” adventures in the western Pacific. Traubel reproduced one letter in the *Conservator*’s June 1910 issue; see 361.}

April 1914 (25:29)

*With Walt Whitman in Camden*

“T.”

The third volume of my Walt Whitman series is now out. It contains a great deal of new matter which Whitman people everywhere will want to see. Some of this fresh material is documentary and some of it is discussional. Among other items of the first importance is Whitman’s own personal account of his discharge from the Interior Department and his own personal statement of that older transaction between James Parton and himself which certain of his critics have chosen to magnify into life or death importance. The London *Nation* recently said that no definitive life of Whitman can ever be written till this series of records is complete. I may add that volume four is already in manuscript.

July 1914 (25:73)

*Whitman and Friend Horace*

From the *New York Evening Globe*.

Are the “movies” and the talking machines to be our future historians and biographers? Is Prescott’s occupation gone, and also Boswell’s? In the future shall we listen for the master’s voice and the roar of battle at the big end of the funnel, and shall we retrace the steps of genius and follow the march of armies on a cinematographic reel for the price of ten cents, shall we say, instead of ten dollars?

None of these things seem improbable in view of the present activities of the moving-picture companies down in Mexico — and on reading another big volume (volume three) of Horace Traubel’s phonographical biography, or autobiography, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (Mitchell Kennerley). Mr. Traubel,

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as everyone knows, took the records for this work during Whitman’s last years in his Mickle Street home in Camden, N.J. Now he is merely turning the crank, although this is some job itself.

The time covered in the present volume is a little part of a year, November, 1888 — the year of the publication of November Boughs — to January, 1889, three years before Whitman’s death. Yet there are nearly six hundred closely written pages. For Mr. Traubel has made good the promise he gave in the beginning, not to leave anything out, “to let Walt alone” to tell his own story of his last days.

To say that Mr. Traubel’s work is comparable with Boswell’s in fulness of detail is short of the truth. Boswell’s book is a model of literary selection and compression and arrangement compared with these Traubel volumes, which are as big and shaggy and unkempt, and even as untidy, as we have had the picture of Whitman himself in this Mickle street home, knee deep in manuscripts and bills and memoranda and jottings and books and letters, into which he would dig down once in a while to bring up some much-coveted bit for friend Horace.

But how worth while the “diggings” often were there is abundant proof. For example, the letter A. Van Rensselaer wrote to Whitman telling him what Lincoln once said of him. Lincoln was standing at a window of the White House in conference with two men when Whitman passed by, his broad-brimmed felt hat set well back on his head as always. Lincoln interrupted the conversation to ask who he was, and when told, said: “Well, he looks like a man.”

Interesting, too, is a letter Whitman gave to Mr. Traubel one day, saying it was from a young Englishman, it would seem a “nob” (nor did he mean this “offensively”), who “had lost his girl,” who “grieved” and was “restless,” and so set out on his travels, and in Algiers happened upon Leaves of Grass, which helped him to “bear his sorrows.” This young Englishman who had “lost his girl” was Justin Huntley McCarthy, one-time husband of Cecilia Loftus, the actress. And while we are quoting we might add, as being pertinent now, what Whitman said to Mr. Traubel one day about war. Here too it will be seen Mr. Traubel makes good his promise not to leave out any of the damns to “prettify” his hero:

O God! that whole damned war business is about nine hundred and ninety nine parts diarrhoea to one part glory. The people who like the wars should be compelled to fight the wars: they are hellish business: wars — all wars: Sherman said, “War is hell”: so it is: any honest man says so — hates war, fighting, bloodletting: I was in the midst of it all — saw war where war is worst — not on the battlefields, no — in the hospitals: there war is worst: there I mixed with it: and now I say God damn the wars — all wars: God damn every war: God damn ’em! God damn ’em!
As in the other volumes, here again Whitman’s comments on his contemporaries and his literary likes and dislikes are interesting and sometimes amusing and shocking. He is always generous toward Carlyle, calling him the one “big gun,” even if Carlyle did say of him that he was the fellow who just because he happened to live in a big country thought he was a big man. Milton, however, “wont go down” with him, nor Tolstoy, which latter seems strange. He “wrestled” with Anna Karenina, “never had such a task.”

Yet the one predominating preoccupation of Whitman is of course first and last himself and his books. Is the old guard still loyal? Are the young fellows coming on? Namely, do they subscribe to Whitman’s genius — and, what is more important, to his books? Whether this is an altogether admirable picture of genius there is difference of opinion. Genius is not often so meticulously mindful of itself.

Are the young fellows coming on? We dont know. And it would be interesting to know how many young men today, as so many in Whitman’s time, are powerfully moved and influenced by Leaves of Grass. But as to the remnant of the old guard, both in England and in America, there can hardly be doubt as to its continued loyalty. They keep up the “ardor,” as was Whitman’s favorite phrase. While as to Mr. Traubel’s arder — well, words fail to express our appreciation of this. Our advice to genius today would be early to pick out a young friend Horace.

**April 1915 (26:23)**

**With Walt Whitman in Camden**

*John Erskine*

From the *Yale Review*, January.

The third volume of Horace Traubel’s journal of Whitman’s last years covers the period from November 1, 1888, to January 20, 1889. On the title-page appear also the dates “March 28 to July 14, 1888.” The significance of these latter dates on this title-page is not clear, since they limit the days described in the first volume and have nothing to do with the contents of the third. In other respects the new installment is handsomely and correctly printed, like the earlier issues. Unfortunately it continues their bad precedent of an inadequate index. To collect so much interesting and miscellaneous information into books of nearly five hundred pages, with indices of nothing but the names of persons mentioned, is to discourage the serious use of this large work. It may be that a
general index is planned for the final volume, but it would have been more practical to make each issue complete in itself.

Most readers probably know what Mr. Traubel has undertaken — to give verbatim his talks with Whitman from March 28, 1888, to the poet’s death, together with such incidents of the poet’s daily life as came within his observation, all just as they occurred, without selection, trimming or comment. The work will be complete in about eight volumes. It is not its size, however, which gives it importance. We shall have here — indeed, we have already — through the multiplied illustrations of his demeanor the most effective approach to an understanding of Whitman’s personality; and in his own conversation and in the letters of his friends here given, we have the best comment on his poetry. But more than that, we have in this biography on a large scale the pressing question which Whitman always raises as to what we really think of democracy — how far we believe in man, or only in a few “best” men; how far we respect the rights of the race, or only of the select and qualified. It is hardly too much to say that Whitman is the truest and most insistent expounder of American democracy. Though we decide that we do not think much of him nor of his art, he is still at our heels to ask what we think of our fellow man. He is our only poet who never confuses the issue between humanity and the more selfish kinds of culture. When a Matthew Arnold lectures us on our too great trust in numbers, and preaches the doctrine of the saving remnant, Whitman’s genius is still with us to reply that such a theory of culture may easily become an inhuman programme; it is too like that military strategy which uses the common soldier as food for powder, or like that strange solicitude for society which proposes to chloroform the hopeless invalid and the unfit. Who are the unfit? Whitman asks. On one occasion, when Arnold had delivered his famous lecture, a man from the audience came up and expressed his thanks, saying that Arnold had made him resolve to be one of the saving remnant. The man was P. T. Barnum. Arnold tells the incident humorously. Whitman would have seen in it democracy’s challenge and justification. Who is to select among men? Who is to determine which of his fellows is negligible or beyond the pale?

In this biography Mr. Traubel’s diary-method is excellent for setting before us Whitman the democrat. If the work is as elaborate as all diaries are, the length is justified by the great veracity it secures; and the significance of Whitman’s environment, of the circle of friends that made his last years comfortable, could hardly have been given in another way. Here is a broken-down old man, who writes a kind of poetry that few people like, who has no money and no prospect of rewarding any service that the calculating might do for him; yet he is surrounded and cared for by a group of men and women who understand and love

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him, though few of them at the time were well known, or in the Arnold sense, “of the saving remnant.” This picture of invariable courtesy, kindness and tact on the one side, and of courtesy, cheerfulness and appreciation on the other, is hard to equal, and this daily record establishes it at first hand with the utmost sincerity and conviction. One wonders what the severe critics of Whitman, who still exist, can make out of this phenomenon. If Whitman and his friends were common, in any sense you please, then in common folk were found honor, goodness, a passion for truth and a reverence for genius. To say that they lacked culture provokes the question, What could culture give them that they did not have? If Whitman had not been a genius, their generosity would still claim admiration. Considering how great a genius he was, his critics may as well dodge the issue by including him and his friends among the saving remnant.

The plan of Mr. Traubel’s work is advantageous also in showing the remarkable appreciation Whitman had from the first from competent literary people. The list of these admirers is impressive, even if we confine ourselves to America and England — Emerson, William Rossetti, Tennyson, Alcott, Edward Carpenter, Ernest Rhys, Mrs. Gilchrist, J. A. Symonds, Lord Houghton, Edward Dowden, Edmund Gosse, Gilder, Burroughs. In the average biography the history of Whitman’s relations with these persons would have to be summed up in one place, perhaps in one chapter, and either the importance of their friendship would be obscured or else the marshalling of so much evidence would give the impression of special pleading. In this diary the names enter the conversation naturally, important letters to Whitman are quoted as they turn up incidentally, and the effect is altogether convincing. It is easy to see for oneself what friendships Whitman valued most highly. Emerson’s oft-quoted letter welcoming *Leaves of Grass* was clearly the great literary event in his life, and he seems to have been ready at all times to speak of it, and to discuss with his friends the burning question whether Emerson ever retreated from his first brave position. Whitman here followed a true instinct for what was significant in his experience; for his message and Emerson’s were the same — Emerson the earlier and Whitman the stronger mind, both announcing the same truth. Their friendship was no accident.

Yet Mr. Traubel’s method of elaborate record will doubtless yield occasion to those who look for offense. According to Whitman’s desire, this journal reports every infelicity and roughness and frankness of speech just as it came from his lips. The number of expressions that might be mended is smaller than one would expect in any talk so inexorably caught, yet an occasional strong term or a human “don’t” for “doesn’t” will confirm some readers in their persuasion that Whitman was not a gentleman. But being a gentleman is sometimes a
matter of definition, and in the roll of fame it is too often a matter of suppressing the facts. If you would seem a Lord Chesterfield, you must appear only with your wig and ruffles in order. A prudent selection of this kind has always been the remedy the lukewarm have proposed for Whitman. But he refused to masquerade, and time already begins to justify his honesty. Many a strong man goes down to posterity enfeebled or made ridiculous by the false taste of his expurgating biographers. So far as refinement goes, the official Life of Tennyson satisfies the most sensitive objectors to Whitman; it shows the English laureate in an unbroken atmosphere of intellectual precision, esthetic delicacy and moral aspiration. Gossip, however, has supplemented the portrait, until now every student knows the dozens of fairly authentic anecdotes in which the Victorian poet figures as a large, massive, even rough personality, given to a grim frankness of speech which Whitman, apparently, never equaled. Of course, the general reader may choose to disregard the anecdotes, and to keep his Tennyson unspoiled. He should reflect, however, that by such a method Whitman might be made to seem as exquisite as Tennyson. One would need only to select such passages as this remark on literature: “Here is a thing from Joubert: ‘Where there is no delicacy there is no literature.’ How much there is in that! Don’t you think so? Oh, how subtle!” Or this: “The easy touch of French writers does not necessarily come from frivolity, insincerity: Arnold was wrong if he ever thought that. There are incomparable things in Hugo — in some others of the French littérateurs: immense, immortal things: things that belong to every day of all time.”

The best service this more honest, unselected record will do for Whitman is to show the kind of mind he had. Where his poems are read there ought to be no question of his intellect, but should there be, this diary will answer it. The mind here revealed is singularly balanced and judicial, singularly wise in practical affairs, keen in literary opinions and modern in its philosophy. Why not, indeed, since modern philosophy draws so much from Emerson and from him! Whitman’s judgment of other writers is always important and for the most part strikingly sound, as in his insistence on the genius of Bryant. Even when he strikes at an idol he makes a point. “Dr. Johnson,” he says, “is not our man: he belongs to a past age: comes to us with the odor, the sound, the taste, the appearance, of great libraries, musty books, old manuscripts. My chief complaint against Johnson is that he lacks veracity: lacks the veracity which we have the right to exact from any man — most of all from the writer, the recorder, the poet. Johnson never cared so much to meet men — learn from men — as to drive them down roughshod — to crowd them out — to crush them against the wall. He is a type of the smart man — a ponderous type: of the man who says the

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first thing that comes — who does anything to score a point — who is not concerned for truth but to make an impression.” What he says of abolition agrees with the attitude of Hawthorne, and in consideration of his strong patriotism may well be quoted to show his balance of mind: “Phillips — all of them — thought slavery the one crying sin of the universe. I didn’t — though I, too, thought it a crying sin. Phillips was true blue — I looked at him with a sort of awe: I never could quite lose the sense of other evils in this evil — I saw other evils that cried to me in perhaps even a louder voice: the labor evil, now, to speak of only one, which to this day has been steadily growing worse, worse, worse.” And though he has written the best poems about Lincoln which we have, and never could sufficiently express his admiration for the great President, yet he gives this warning: “Lincoln don’t need adorers, worshipers — he needs friends. . . . The great danger with Lincoln for the next fifty years will be that he will be over-done — over-explained, over-exploited — made a good deal too much of — gather about himself a rather mythical aureole.”

It will be a pity if this life of Whitman does not become widely known in America. Already it is appreciated abroad. For in England and France and Belgium Whitman’s poetry has a large influence, and it colors the work of Continental poets, such as Verhaeren, or is read in admirable translations, such as Bazalgette’s. In Germany it had an early vogue, though of late years, as the empire has become less democratic, Whitman could hardly find an intelligent reception there, and has in fact been perversely misunderstood. But at all events, he has become our second international poet, with a bigger destiny, we must believe, than Poe’s; for he speaks to common men everywhere, in an age when common men are waiting for just such a wonderful and sympathetic voice.

JULY 1915 (26:71)

Walt’s Unmitigated Self {On WWC volume 3}

From the New York Evening Sun.

If ever a disciple was true to his master’s memory, it is Horace Traubel. Year after year he keeps on publishing the endless record of his talks with Walt Whitman. If somebody will thresh out the wheat a very good loaf of bread may be made out of these gleanings. But Horace won’t do that. He loves it all — chaff and straw. And these words of Walt’s printed in the July Forum show that he is following instructions. “I think as time has passed,” said the poet, “I have
got an increased horror of expurgation: would not think of such a thing as the exclusion or the alteration of a single word now: it seems so false. . . . Be obdurative, yield nothing, insist upon your unmitigated self. . . . Censorship: I dont like it, its all bad, all wrong, all corrupt: it reduces a fellow to a cipher: seems just like an apology, a confession: its a sort of suicide.”

Rossetti and Emerson both asked him to leave out some words, but he wouldnt and he didnt, and Horace is leaving out nothing now that he is gone. It may be a good thing once in a while to have a man glory in self revelation. Perhaps he is only seeking by confession to get over some of the terrors of the judgment. But for most of us the privilege of reticence is not wholly to be despised. We know too much evil of ourselves to desire publication of our complete works. No doubt our friends are grateful for our occasional silences, for the blank half pages in our letters. As for those who attempt to expose their unmitigated selves, Time is a censor that can neither be evaded by the individual nor abolished by statute or edict.

{The passage on expurgation did not see print until the long-delayed fourth volume of WWC appeared (W4:28–30). See Traubel’s important discussion of his friends’ advice on WWC in the course of his 1915 review of a new edition of Henry Bryan Binns’s biography, 21.}

...
Whitman is a definite thing. The publishers who produce a hodgepodge of re-arranged or disarranged pieces without stating their incompleteness are hoodwinking the public. McKay imprints a disjointed *Leaves of Grass* which he says he keeps on his list out of love for the old man. That’s rather funny. Since the old man in his last edition supervised just before his death imposed it upon those who love him to hereafter keep the *Leaves* in the shape he left it.

**NOVEMBER 1912 (23:136)**

**Memories of President Lincoln**

“T.”


Mosher has brought out this group of Walt’s Poems in a sumptuous way but not at a sumptuous price. He has added the Gettysburg Address to the volume and a few incidentals on Lincoln by other people. The book’s a beauty. And yet it’s an accessible book. It’s not held back for rich collectors. It’s a great joke how publishers work off some of their bluff. Barnum said the people liked to be humbugged. Publishers often apply Barnum. They issue an everyday book for two or three dollars. They put a few cents more in the paper and offer an edition at ten dollars. They put a little extra tooling on the ten dollar edition, give it another name and put it up at twenty dollars. They buy a piece of manuscript for fifty cents or a dollar at auction and add it to the twenty dollar edition which they sell for fifty dollars. They print a certain number of copies on India paper or Japan vellum and splash some color on the portraits and print the headlines in red instead of black ink and sell copies of it to the hundred thousand dollar men for two hundred and fifty apiece. You’ll think this the limit. But it’s not. The millionaires are still to be reached. There are only a few of them. But if they can get up copies sufficiently exclusive they can reach the millionaires. So they add a few dados of one sort or another with perhaps a half dozen or dozen pages of the author’s manuscript scattered through the book. They will make only a very few of the books this way. Ten maybe. Maybe only five. Maybe only one. And for these copies or this one copy they’ll get a fabulous sum. You may know about bubble securities. Here you have a bubble book. Now, Mosher has made the most unique books. But he never made any bubble books. And his books are exclusive books. But what they exclude is not the poor buyer but the poor book. I wrote Mosher the other day: “I love the Mosher books not because of their authors but because of their publisher.”

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Mosher has made it possible for you to love the bookmaker as well as the book-writer. Not by making one beautiful book, at a thousand dollars. By making a thousand beautiful books at one dollar. I like to have Mosher books round where I am. They touch my craft instinct. They are good company. Even if I don’t read a word in them. They are good to look at. When we published The Artsman I always argued: “The test of the printshop is not whether we can make something ugly and worthless with sixty-three-cent paper but whether we can make something beautiful and worth while with ten-cent paper.” And I also said: “The test of the printshop is not whether we can do something magnificent as an aristocrat but whether we can do something simple as a democrat.” Mosher triumphs in both tests. He hasn’t made the beautiful common. He has made the common beautiful.

May 1914 (25:43)

Poems from Leaves of Grass

“T.”


I’ve heard all varieties of democrats express all kinds of interest in Leaves of Grass. Anarchists like it for its Anarchism, Socialists like it for its Socialism. Revolutionists like it for its revolution. Every complexion of dissent likes it for its rebellion. I’ve heard all that. But I’ve never heard any of the conventions endorsing it for its conventionalism. I’ve never heard the orthodoxies lauding it for its bourbonism. Leaves of Grass is universal negation. And then it’s just as imperatively universal affirmation. It goes the whole hog both ways. It votes so vehemently no that you think the no’s have it till you hear it vote yes. Then you know the yeses have it. We quite well understand how impossible it is to make any use of yes until you have exhausted your no. The fact sifted out of all facts then is that Leaves of Grass is the unconscious mouthpiece first of denial and then of faith. One thing it don’t know what to do with is compromise. A sculptor showed me a wax model designed for a Whitman memorial. The old man was represented resting on a rock, his breeches on, his hat near by and his cane at his side. I didn’t seem to see this right. I wondered why the breeches were there. I wondered why he didn’t have a shirt on. You see? I wanted him all clothed or all naked. The cane was an impertinence without the shirt. The hat was an insult without the shoes. Whitman wouldn’t have done that himself.

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He’d have proceeded all one way or the other way. That’s where Margaret Cook is strong. She got onto the Whitman impulse. No compromise. So her work from first to last is consistently noble. She knew Leaves of Grass couldn’t be illustrated by literalism. She realized that it didn’t belong to the tailor or the hairdresser. She saw she had to get down to elements in attempting to tally it. No sophist could feel at ease with Whitman’s mysticism. But she betrays no uncertainty. She don’t waste herself in any vain gestures. She made up her mind and stuck to her last. Whitman wrote a root book. She found in it the inspiration for these root pictures. I have seen Leaves of Grass illustrated on the other principle. I have known mathematics to be applied to it. But the result was death not life. But Margaret Cook’s result is all life. There’s no death in it from start to finish. No down hill. It’s all ascent. Up and up. She has used color. She has used nudity. She has used freedom. She has used the dark when you lose almost everything. She has used midday when you are dazzled and blinded. But she has not been overwhelmed. She has kept herself from going too far and has forced herself to go far enough. She has kept close enough to Whitman not to forget her text. She has kept close enough to herself not to forget her obligation to her art. She may be a technician. But her insight is so keen you are unconscious of it. She seems sometimes to rise to higher levels than usual. But her average is very lofty. She is dignified without stiffness. She is fluid and graceful without lush. She is weak enough in her strength to be gentle. She is strong enough in her weakness to be stern. So far as I know this is the first pictorial treatment of Leaves of Grass on its own plane. I have seen nothing certainly that goes above it. I have seen much that was below. Margaret Cook has scaled the lookout. That which to others is politically or economically or sexually or otherwise revolutionary in Leaves of Grass is to her mystically and symbolically revolutionary. Just as irrevocably as the others has she seized the spirit of its unhesitating summons. Just as immediately as they has she put its logic to the test and found it inevitably victorious.

JULY 1914 (25:77)

Getting Whitman Right and Wrong

“I.”

{Mitchell} Kennerley has just brought out the whole list of Whitman books under his imprint. He is the only authorized publisher. He is the only one who can supply complete Whitman editions in America. There are
Whitman books made by others which while having the usual Whitman titles are grossly imperfect compilations. It’s up to the bookstore people to know the difference between the right and the wrong books. To know what they are doing when they sell a customer what purports to be a Walt Whitman book. I am constantly in receipt of letters from people all over the country who have in good faith bought Whitman volumes which they have discovered to be abridged or otherwise faulty. They seem to think the executors are in some way responsible for it. They say to a bookseller: “I want *Leaves of Grass.*” They get a book but not the book. One book in particular that has been very extensively circulated, that is made up of dismissed poems and lines, and of poems on which the copyrights have expired, and that has been arranged hodgepodge in the face of Whitman’s own expressed wish that the book constructed as he left it in 1892 should be considered his own final statement to posterity, has caused us unlimited trouble. If the publisher had made the character of his book clear there could have been no objection to it. But to sell that book as *Leaves of Grass* is clearly a deception practiced upon the purchaser and an outrage committed upon the memory of its author. Kennerley is grappling with this problem by making it possible for the market to supply itself without trouble with all manner of complete Whitmans. I have plenty of interest myself in Whitman’s discarded lines and poems. But I have a greater interest in the book he describes as being structurally consistent and whole.

**January 1916 (26:171)**

**Drum-Taps**

“T.”


The publishers call these “great war poems.” They are probably great war poems because they’re really great peace poems. Because they’re great comrade poems. There is no enemy in these poems. There are only friends. Whitman celebrates that enemy who is the same sort of divine man as himself. Some people take these poems as an argument for war. As justifying war. As putting Whitman on the side of war. But if you could place these poems in the trenches and have them understood and acquiesced in there’d be no war. The fighting men would become the peace men. The enemies would become friends. You couldn’t get Whitman to say a word against the other fellow. This
fellow was the same as the other fellow to him. North was South, South was North. The London Times writer whose article is turned into an introduction for this edition of the Drum-Taps does his best to construe Whitman anti-Germanally. He goes back to eighteen seventy to do it. He says: “Whitman fancied the Germans were like the Chinese only less graceful and refined and more brutish.” But you cant find texts for such nonsense in Leaves of Grass. Walt was capable of going too far afield to share the petty asinities of provinces. Even his glorified America wasn’t a geographical America. It was a universalized America. He was as well aware of nations as anybody. But he never clubbed one nation with another. It was alien to him. And so even his war poems are not armed against anybody. He takes enemies to each other. He introduces them. He levels all the anti-fraternal barriers between them. Nothing could be wholesomer than to propagate these poems at this time. No man ever comes away from them with more war in his heart. And yet even at that it’s doubtful if Whitman himself wouldn’t today have expressed his philosophy in more unequivocal terms. While the war people think they’re having everything their own way other influences are being fostered. In the two generations since the breaking out of the Civil War far more formidable non-resistant or semi-non-resistant attitude of mind has demanded the attention of the world. This movement may not be great in numbers but it’s vast in potentiality. It’s the sort of tendency that Whitman’s virile Quakerism would have found very consoling. Leaves of Grass is not Whitman’s book but a man’s book. It’s not supposed to reflect Whitman’s literal life but an average man’s figurative life. But the new American would have to use another verbalism. This book would not have said all his say for him. Drum-Taps didn’t teach sectionalism in the Civil War. It cant be made to teach nationalism in this war. It didn’t glorify battles. It glorified love and healing. Whitman never figured as the wound giver. He was always the wound dresser. Are you afraid you’ll go soft if you dont kill somebody? Are you afraid you’ll become degenerate? Do you think that if we go too long without wars we’ll forget how to fight? And then, if we forget how to fight, that we’ll also forget how to live? Drum-Taps wont spur you to fight. It’ll move you to love. It wont inspire you to take up a gun. It’ll make you regret anybody has taken up a gun. Do you call this going soft? Roosevelt says to us: Look at China. I say: Look at Roosevelt. There may be a thrill in the beat of a drum. But is it the murder thrill or the creative thrill? Do you feel guilty of innocence until you’ve proved that you’re no longer innocent of guilt?
Walt Whitman’s New Publishers

“T.”

Walt Whitman’s new authorized publishers are Doubleday, Page and Company. Piecemeal Whitmans are being brought out by other publishers. But the Doubledays are the only people who bring Whitman out whole and in the form he himself chose. For *Leaves of Grass* is not a fragment of a book but a book. It’s not a desultory collection of poems but a poem. It belongs together as Whitman arranged it, the very last line with the very first line. You can’t omit one poem with impunity. And you can’t insert one poem with impunity. The lines from early editions that Whitman dismissed he finally concluded didn’t belong to the scheme. And the lines he added at the last were necessary to fulfil the scheme. Any issues of Whitman done in contravention of his known theory of the vital sequence of the poems is therefore a misrepresentation. Whitman had a right to his own *Leaves of Grass* even if he was wrong. Walt once said to me: “I wonder if I’ll ever be really published?” I asked him: “What do you call being really published?” He answered: “I mean, being adventurously, enterprisingly published.” In that sense I don’t believe Walt ever was really published. But he’s sure to be really published now. The Doubledays have an interest in Whitman that’s not purely or perhaps even mostly business. Whitman was taken over by them through the unsolicited intercession of John Phillips, to whom Whitman has been a beautiful enthusiasm. When Osgood took *Leaves of Grass* from Whitman back in the eighties he threatened to do what the Doubledays are sure to do now. It looked as if he’d enterprisingly publish Whitman. But the authorities chased after *Leaves of Grass*. Osgood got cold feet. Whitman took his plates for the royalties Osgood owed him and turned them over to Rees, Welsh and Company in this city, who, from that time on, till they were bought out by McKay, published *Leaves of Grass* and *Specimen Days* and *Collect* without any legal interdictions or interruptions. Osgood was always regarded as a fool for not defending his author. O’Connor and Stedman and Burroughs and Trowbridge and others of Walt’s friends thought he should have put up some fight. Even the gentle George William Curtis, who had no particular interest in Whitman’s work, declared in a beautiful letter to William O’Connor that the freedom of authorship was the issue that Osgood had run away from. One of Osgood’s own men subsequently told O’Connor in Washington that Osgood’s
fear to stand by his agreement with Whitman was responsible for his failure as a publisher in America. O’Connor said picturesquely: “He should have defied Walt’s persecutors, fought the case to the bitter end in the courts, and sold a hundred thousand copies of *Leaves of Grass!*” It’s likely that Osgood eventually realized his mistake. In later years he became the first member of the house of Osgood, McIlvaine and Company in London. After Walt’s death he wrote letters to Doctor Bucke, Harned and myself, as well as to George Childs, almost begging that he might be allowed to publish something, anything, of Whitman’s in England. It looked very much like an appeal that he should be given a chance to make good for some past error. In his copious talks with me Walt showed to the end that he was only half persuaded that he’d come to stay. He’d remark: “I guess I’ve about got a foothold — that’s all.” He laughed a lot one night when I said his doubt of the survival of *Leaves of Grass* reminded me of the man who had one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel. “Yes,” he said: “it’s almost as uncertain as that.” In the early years of the *Leaves*, when he wrote some reviews of his own book, he said in effect: “This man is destined either to great glory or an ignominious eclipse.” In eighteen ninety-two, on his death bed, he said to me: “I still feel that nothing so-so can happen to my book: I still feel as if it would continue and circulate universally or entirely disappear.” It looks as if it would circulate universally. The Doubledays are going to test Whitman out. They intend to give him a chance to be really read by producing him in diversified and always accessible forms. This refers not only to *Leaves of Grass* but to prose volumes which so far have been only too little read by Whitman people. There will be a new edition of *Leaves of Grass* containing the variorum readings. There is likely to be a popular reprint of the ten-volume Putnam Whitman, which was originally put upon the market at a figure that made it impossible to the everyday Whitmanite. Among the things seriously intended are various Whitman volumes containing verse and prose. In assuming Whitman the Doubledays also accepted *With Walt Whitman in Camden*. The fourth volume of the series is ready in manuscript. I’m not at liberty to say when it will be published. But its time should come soon. There’s very little new Whitman available except that which is given through *With Walt Whitman in Camden*. Walt spent a good deal of time in the last year or two of his life sitting before the wood fire in his bedroom and consigning what he considered useless manuscript to the flames. He probably threw away considerable good stuff. But he explained that he dreaded having any of his discarded or immature work brought out after he was gone as had been done in the case of Longfellow and Lowell and Emerson. He’d laugh and say: “I’ll dispose of it in the way I think best: and this is the way!” I rescued some bits at odd times from this oblivion by
almost grabbing them out of his fist. He’d not oppose me. He’d then exclaim resignedly: “Well: have it your own way.” On one occasion he humorously said: “I’m only my own master when you’re not here.” He got a heap of fun out of my frequent assertion that I expected to live to see him sold for fifty dollars a volume. I did live to see it. After he’d become Whitman’s publisher Kennerley wrote me this: “I never realized till I got close to Whitman how universally he’s accepted. I hardly ever pick up a literary paper in any language which don’t contain some reference to him long or short.” And John Phillips says the same thing to me. “Whitman has ceased to be a speculative personality. He’s an accepted equity among the classics of the world.” The Doubledays are proceeding on that supposition. They will do for Whitman that which no publisher has done for him before. It may be that the time hadn’t come for it. Walt was largely his own publisher. And he had two publishers who did what they could for him bravely and well. Now he will take his place with the admitted masters.

OCTOBER 1917 (28:125)

Leaves of Grass {First Leaves variorum, edited by Oscar Triggs}

“T.”


Whitman was always anxious to be published right. The last thing he did with his great book was to whip it into what he called final shape. He wished it kept so. He asked those who loved him to let it remain untouched. Leaves of Grass was written in fulfilment of a plan. That plan can only be comprehended as long as the poems are there in full and in the order to which he gave his concluding seal. Walt was no sooner dead than some people who professed to respect him violated the implied compact not to put confusing or imperfect issues purporting to be Leaves of Grass upon the market. These editions would have done no great harm if they’d been given out frankly for what they were. But they were always marketed in counterfeit competition with the authoritative version. People who got these false Whitmans would write me angry letters about them after they discovered the fraud. They somehow believed I was to blame. The fact was that our publishers never combatted their rivals with sufficient spirit to inform the bookselling trade rightly in the matter. All that is now about to be remedied. Doubleday, Page and Company have made a conclusive Leaves of Grass. In this comprehensive volume are included the two hundred more
pages of variorum readings compiled by Triggs. There are three volumes in this one volume. It bulks out in all to about nine hundred pages. It’s to sell for a dollar and a quarter. As a piece of bookmaking I think it’s rather more remarkably efficient than beautiful. Later on I hope we’ll have a Leaves likewise esthetically conclusive. The main thing achieved here is the Whitman book as the old man wanted it himself along with the always curious dismissed and tinkered-over lines of earlier years. Walt always asked to be let alone. He didn’t like extracts from Leaves of Grass. “This is the life story of a man,” he said to me, fingering his book: “cutting pieces from it is like taking a leg or arm or something else off a man: it leaves him mutilated.” We dont intend to mutilate his unquestionable text. We mean him to exist according to his own formula. The Doubleday imprint preserves the record intact. Is done in the fullest spirit of acquiescence. It takes Walt without question for good or bad just as he left the vision of himself when he departed. To violate Walt’s mandate without frankly avowing it is like rifling the tomb.
Walt looked back on his career in early 1889 and told Horace, “I expected hell: I got it: nothing that has occurred to me was a surprise.” Then he added, “there probably is still more to come” (W3: 515). He was right. The etiquette of not speaking ill of the dead was not observed in his case.

Hell kept a-coming, but loyal hell-fighters were usually ready to come to the defense: members of the Whitman circle, more far-flung Whitman partisans, and the Conservator itself. A typical example of such attacks and sorties would be Francis Howard Williams’s 1895 “Reply to a Criticism,” which responded systematically to an article by one Walker Kennedy that objected to the poet’s “(a) Want of form. (b) Egotism. (c) Immorality. (d) Incoherence of ideas.” Williams ends with this eloquent (and justifiable) peroration: “Nothing is more evident than that Walt Whitman is not to be gotten rid of by ridicule. He is quite too large a fact for that.” On another occasion, Burroughs’s “Two Critics of Walt Whitman” handily let the air out of the animadversions of Edmund Clarence Stedman and Edmund Gosse. Burroughs, too, ends with a compelling and significant gloss: “Whitman knew from the start that he would puzzle and baffle his critics and would escape from them like air when they felt most sure they had him in their verbal nets. So it has been from the first, and so it continues to be.” The items in this section offer a bracing view of the critical crossfire that was exchanged during the generation that established Whitman’s “foothold” once and for all.

The most visible battlefields of the Whitman wars up to 1920 are the books on the poet that appeared during this time and the reviews they evoked. Under the Conservator’s watch, Whitman became an “industry.” In 1918 the Chicago News could observe, “Collectors of Whitman literature are threatened with bankruptcy during the coming year, for the poet’s centenary will doubtless bring forth a flood of books and magazine articles to
lighten their purses” (29:151). Book reviews, therefore, figure prominently in this section.

Whitman harbored two great fears about his posthumous fortunes. The first was that authors would lose interest in writing books about him; the second was that authors would not lose interest. Traubel reminisced about the first fear in 1909, in one of his numerous reviews of the latest book on Whitman. He recalls once telling Walt that he expected to live to read a dozen books on him. Walt laughed and replied, “You must expect to last to a ripe old age!” Horace’s optimism, we now know, was justified, and he did not mind exulting himself—or printing the exultations of others—that Walt’s light appeared to be burning ever brighter. But since Whitman was “the best loved and best hated of modern poets,” as Edmond Holmes said in his Whitman book, this crescent reputation was outrageous to some. In 1897 the London Vegetarian Review drew attention to two facts of “somewhat ominous significance,” the second being “the rapidly increasing bulk of Whitman literature, which promises by the end of the century to surpass all that has grown up round any contemporary name” (8:74). The next year the New York Independent puzzled over the “Whitman delusion”: “Nothing in nineteenth-century civilization can be compared to it, unless it is the colossal myth of hypnotism, or the absurd claim of the theosophists” (352).

About Whitman’s second fear Traubel wrote vividly more than once. In 1899 he recalled, “Whitman dreaded the interpreter. He was afraid not so much of the guess as the dogma of interpretation” (9:13). Then he explained Whitman’s consolation: “His reassurance arose in the feeling that the interpreter always brought the iconoclast and truth inevitably survives their battles.” 1 Years later, in 1916, Traubel opened a book review once again with a reminiscence: “One night Walt said to me: ‘I dread a Whitman literature: I am afraid of expositors: do all you can to discourage the explicators. . . . If we should continue, look out for the interpreters: dont let them get in the way’” (23). To which the Traubel of 1916 responded, “But he couldn’t escape. He had to go the usual course. Expositional studies have appeared one after another since his death. There’s already a whole Whitman literature.”

Yet another feature of the Conservator that makes it a splendid — I believe the most splendid — venue for studying the reception of Whitman in his first posthumous generation is the light it casts on Whitman’s fortunes among the early expositors. As the above quotations indicate, Traubel was, in Whitman’s fashion, hospitable to both the lovers and the haters, and that gives a keen sense of the debate and the competing values and agendas that continued to
buffet Whitman in the *Conservator* years. Hence this substantial section (still but a sampling of the expositors’ fisticuffs printed by Traubel).

Traubel’s “tussles”—his word choice is characteristically demotic—with books on Whitman are especially fascinating. It is fair to summarize that he managed to avoid playing Cerberus and posing as the privileged, peremptory “discourager,” as Whitman once urged. Slightly condescending, modified rapture was his more usual style. Leaps for an author’s jugular were rare. In a few instances, Traubel simply suppressed what he apparently perceived as unfit for public digestion. In fact, that suppressive note is struck at the very outset. Among “Books Received” in the May 1893 *Conservator* was this entry: “*Walt Whitman: A Study.* By John Addington Symonds. London: John C. Nimmo.” Though the previous issue had, on news of Symonds’s death, praised Symonds as having “dedicated his days to the highest service of letters and progress” (4:31), no proper review or even short notice of the book subsequently appeared. The reason is not far to seek: the book treaded too close to the subject of Whitman’s sexual identity.

Two other instances of suppression can be cited. Among the “Books Received” in the October 1895 issue was *Conversations with Walt Whitman* by Sadakichi Hartmann (6:126). The author had made himself persona non grata in 1877 by soliciting funds for a Whitman society in Boston without the poet’s permission, and it is not surprising that the book proved to be beneath notice in the *Conservator*. In 1889 a German, Eduard Bertz, wrote Whitman to express his “deep and true devotion” (the letter is reproduced at W5:330). Many years later, in a 1907 *Conservator* article titled “Whitman and the Germans Today” (18:55), Amelia von Ende took grim note of a book just published by Bertz, *Der Yankee Heiland* (The Yankee savior), in which, von Ende reports, Bertz “speaks of Whitman in terms like charlatan, humbug, fakir, and warns Germans not to accept his philosophy.” She adds that to “spread the theories of Dr. Bertz would mean to give my readers the opportunity to absorb them. I would not assume such responsibility.” Her editor, so often inclined to print the “worst” Whitman bashing, evidently chose to abet this suppression.

The *Conservator* was by no means shy with the cudgel, as demonstrated by its treatment of Max Nordau’s *Degeneration*, which appeared in 1895 (see Bucke’s rebuttal, 121). The *Conservator*’s memory was long; several years later it reprinted a letter from the *New York Times* that ends, “M. Nordau’s attacks on Walt Whitman as a person show him to be fast ripening for classification as a ’degenerate’” (11:75). Among other books that ruffled feathers was Barrett Wendell’s *History of American Literature* (1900), containing such quaint
observations as that “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” “sounds as if hexameters were trying to bubble through sewage” (13:118). No Whitman study more infuriated the Conservator than Harvard professor Bliss Perry’s Walt Whitman: His Life and Works (1905), as a series of items collected here show.

George Rice Carpenter’s Walt Whitman (1909) brought a return of Traubel’s good humor — in spite of the fact that the author was an English professor (at Columbia). No academic scored as well with Traubel, who imagined that Whitman himself “would have put an approving forefinger on Carpenter’s book and declared: ‘Here’s the whole thing in a nutshell without adulation or apology.’” Carpenter is “[c]ool enough for justice and warm enough for love. Carpenter knows how to handle eggs without smashing them and knows how to handle steel without smashing himself.” Traubel sums up, “He grasped the Whitman situation without being distracted by moral ephemera” (301–302).

A book from within the inner circle, like William Sloane Kennedy’s Reminiscences of Walt Whitman (1896), of course, was met with open arms, Traubel ushering it in with a warm blurb. (Though the word “blurb” was not invented until 1907, Traubel was a master of the art of the blurb, so famously employed by Walt on the spine of the 1856 Leaves.) Likewise, the December 1896 issue brought a glowing introductory review by Kennedy of John Burroughs’s Whitman: A Study, several of its chapters having already appeared in the Conservator. Traubel predicts an “eminent” place for Burroughs “in the subsidiary literature which is grouping itself around Whitman and his message.” Burroughs is “radical yet calm, positive yet cautious” — as, it might be noted, Walt often urged young Horace to be.

Traubel himself could be brilliant in his acerbic mode, especially when he sensed an “expositor” with a thesis that got in Whitman’s way. Look, for example, to his review of Edmond Holmes’s Walt Whitman’s Poetry or to the review of Henry Bryan Binns’s A Life of Walt Whitman, where an ungentle, derisive style is on entertaining display, producing an excellent example of two common complaints registered by book reviewers against biographers: too much learned lumber and too much biographer. Traubel’s piercing squelches, indeed, are one of the Conservator’s consistent pleasures. Of Mila Tupper Maynard’s Walt Whitman: The Poet of the Wider Selfhood, he wrote: “Whitman may be criticized. But he should not be apologized for . . . apology is a knife in the back” (13:140). Of the chapter on Whitman in Richard Burton’s Literary Leaders of America, Traubel curtly observes: “Burton seesaws the best he knows how trying to hit a balance for Whitman . . . He concedes. He takes back. He concedes again. On the whole he concedes. Concedes much . . . The selective Leaves of Grass which Burton and others call for is a Leaves of Grass with
Leaves of Grass left out” (270). Basil De Selincourt’s “polished legerdemain” in Walt Whitman: A Critical Study is archly daffed aside: “Selincourt goes long on phrasing. He’s overworded all through. He goes short on emotion. He’s underhuman all through.”

Traubel’s elations are relatively rare, but when they come they are impressive — and of course revealing of his tastes and principles. Look, for example, to his review of Edward Carpenter’s Days with Walt Whitman. This book, Traubel concludes, “is not made up of stale repetitions or confusing explanations. It is an instant blow at the anvil. You see the sparks fly.” By 1913 one finds Traubel capable of growling when a new Whitman study turns out to be, if not bad, just a waste of his time. “Every little helps, the old woman said as she spit into the sea.” Thus begins his review of Roland Sawyer’s Walt Whitman: The Prophet Poet (24:141). It is granted that Sawyer “writes in good spirit. He is catholic and loving. He gets the essentials.” But: “He’s nowhere novel . . . contributes no individual integers.”

One Whitman book the Conservator could not fail to notice was William English Walling’s Whitman and Traubel (1916). A short first notice by Phillips Russell provocatively summarizes this compare-and-contrast study: “Walling realizes it is time that Whitman and Traubel were set up each to stand on his own feet, Whitman to be recognized and appreciated for what he was, Traubel to be recognized and appreciated for what he is” (27:153). Months later, a main review followed, full of praise, from no less than Eugene Debs.

No book received a more emotional embrace than John Johnston and J. W. Wallace’s Visits to Walt Whitman 1890–1891. This is not least because the date of the visits of the two English admirers and the date of this new publication, 1917, almost perfectly synchronize with the life span of the Conservator. Traubel never met Johnston on his visit, but he did observe that, from their first meeting, “Walt and Wallace got on like two natural brothers. Anne Montgomerie and I and Wallace after a bit entertained for each other the final cherished regard. More than regard, let me say. Love. We named our boy for Wallace.” Approaching his life’s end, Traubel’s memory of that powerful bonding so long ago clearly came rushing back with the appearance of the new edition.

The Conservator’s eye on overseas Whitman doings is represented by the notice of a 1906 monograph by the longtime Whitman proselytizer in Germany, Johannes Schlaf. “[I]t is a delightful little study, warm with admiration, brilliant even, at times, with enthusiasm.” In March 1908 appeared a letter from Leon Bazalgette to Traubel announcing his 520-page “life and works” and promising his complete translation of Leaves (the first “in any language except the
Italian”); Traubel also published an excerpt from Bazalgette’s introduction, translated by the author (19:8).

In 1911 Walt Whitman und seine Nachahmer is briefly noticed by Traubel, who calls its author, Karl Knortz, “one of the earlier friends of Whitman” (21:189). Traubel notes that in the 1880s Knortz brought out a German translation of about a sixth of the Leaves poems. He recalls Whitman saying of it, “I wonder . . . whether the Leaves will ever be put into any other languages?” This pleasant musing follows from Traubel: “I have of recent years seen it go into the French, the Italian, the Spanish and the Russian. A little something or other was thrown into the water in 1855. It has manifested itself ever since in broadening circles. As I have said before, Walt had to die in order to live. He had to get out of the way before his book could have its fling.”

Among the highlights of this section, one might point to William Sloane Kennedy’s exuberant appreciation of Burroughs’s Whitman: A Study, in which he jauntily chides “the slugging and thugging Garrisonians who have been for a quarter of a century . . . garroting American literature that did not suit them.” Look for his amusing list of the five “classes of men who affirm they have no need” for Whitman.

NOTES

1. This superbly captures the rhythm of the successive “periods” of more than a century of Whitman scholarship. The thought is reminiscent of lines from a Calamus poem (#27): “O to disengage from the corpses of me . . . To pass on (O living! always living!) and leave the corpses behind!” Twentieth-century expositors produced not a few corpses of Whitman.

2. Symonds, and a probing correspondence that rattled the Mickle Street household in August 1890, was also involved in the one clear instance of suppression in WWC; it is detailed in Intimate with Walt (see xiii–xiv). In issues of later years, “safe” quotations from the Symonds book did appear now and then.

3. The phrase “moral ephemera” is one of Traubel’s many polite ways of alluding to condemnation of the sex in Leaves by America’s prudish Mrs. Grundys and doctors of divinity. This is a regular theme in the Conservator, as seen in the “Sex Morality” section. For example, when Traubel takes up Carleton Noyes’s An Approach to Walt Whitman (1910), he observes, “There are as many ways to Walt as there are people going to him. And they are all worth while” (21:10). But then he adds his bias: “Noyes goes to Walt through the great libraries. I go to him through the great streets. . . . Maybe I make more of Calamus and Children of Adam. Make more of revolt. More of sex, surely.”
Suppressing a Poet

William Sloane Kennedy

It is now twelve years and some months since the clergy of New England, through the Society for the Suppression of Vice, in Boston, undertook to stop the sale of Walt Whitman’s poems in that city. I ferreted out at that time the principals and the subordinates in this incident, which redounds so much to the shame of Boston, and think no time better than the present for telling the story. Whitman is the founder of a new religion, which accepts and rejoices in the body, glorifies it, and consecrates it to chastity, magnetism and purity. The entrenched religion which put him down is ascetic, anti-naturalistic, and spurns the body and its thrilling nerves as the work of the Devil. That is the secret of the Boston suppression, so called, of *Leaves of Grass*. It is simply a case of the Thirty-nine Articles versus nineteenth century science — jealousy of the new by the old.

Twelve years ago the pure therapeutic works of Whitman were not only locked up in the libraries with such high and mighty nastinesses as Paul de Kock and Zola, but they were not even allowed on the catalogues of Boston and Cambridge libraries, so frightened were the good men of books at this new and astonishing literature. To-day one notices that the card catalogue of the Public Library has a long list of works under the head, “Walt Whitman.” They woke up finally to the ridiculousness of ignoring an author of whom more was being printed than about any other living Anglo-American literatus.

Strictly speaking, *Leaves of Grass* has not been suppressed in Boston. It can be obtained through any bookstore. Only the scare occasioned by the threat of the Vice Society against Osgood, the publisher, which caused him, in a cowardly way, to drop the publication of the book, is not yet removed, and the bookstores still handle it as with insulating gloves and unwillingly or doubtfully — more shame to Boston. Even at the time of the backdown of Osgood very few Boston papers rebuked him for his lack of backbone and pluck to stand by his author in the courts, where, unquestionably, Whitman’s purity of thought and aim would have been amply proved. Only the *Boston Herald*, the *Globe*, *Commonwealth*, and *Liberty* frowned on the raid upon the “Old Gray,” as did also the *Springfield Republican*. A “fellow” of Trinity College, Dublin, was so
exhilarated by the disgraceful occurrence that he wrote his congratulations to Attorney-General Marston of Massachusetts and announced that he had had the work removed from the library of his college and returned to the donor, Professor Edward Dowden, the Shaksperean scholar. All the Church of England or Episcopalian clergy seemed to be immensely pleased with the persecution. Edward Abbott, editor of the *Literary World*, expressed his gratification in his journal, only he wished the suppression could have been done quietly, so as not to spread the circulation of the book — an event which fortunately took place, however. The head mover and starter of the crusade against the book was the Rev. Frederick Baylies Allen (Episcopalian), still secretary of the Boston Vice Society, which seems, by the way, to be doing considerable good. It will have to do a great deal to expiate that one act of monumental folly. Mr. Allen is a man with a clerical intonation of voice and a severe cut of face. His chief regret as I talked with him seemed to be (as in the case of his brother in the Lord, Mr. Abbott) that the work had been more widely advertised than if he had not meddled with it. He did not think the book was insidious, he said, only gross; still, it was thought best to suppress it! (Mr. Allen, it should be stated, was at that time assistant pastor of “Phillips Brooks’ Church” — the great Trinity Church of the Back Bay.)

Mounting one day in the spring of 1882 to the top story of the gloomy Old Court House in Boston (the rendition of Anthony Burns from this place is commemorated by Whitman in “A Boston Ballad”), I was courteously received by the affable District-Attorney Stevens, a man with heavy-lidded eyes and white hair; a generous-souled fellow, evidently, and one who, if he had known Whitman, would have loved him and been loved. He said he had never read a line of *Leaves of Grass* (beyond the few lines picked out by the informer), and had only served his order perfunctorily. He regretted that he had not more closely examined the book before taking official action, and said he had since exercised greater caution.

It is almost incredible, but this Society for the encouragement of prurience and prudery included among the passages to be excised from *Leaves of Grass* that exquisite bit of a poem describing the fall through the sky of two interlocked eagles and called “The Dalliance of the Eagles.” The Society’s circular at that time also sternly condemned the skating rinks, then very popular. The next step should logically be to turn all our churches and theaters into Shaker meetings, with complete separation of the sexes, and never under any circumstances to allow girls and lads to speak to each other. No more cakes and ale, only worms and funerals and perpetual listening to the preachers and contributing of pennies in the Sunday schools.
Among the vice presidents of the Society at that time were Edward Everett Hale, the late Phillips Brooks, the late Noah Porter (President of Yale College), and among the directors Robert Treat Paine, and Homer Sprague and many other clergymen and educators. The street agent is a melancholy-looking man with perpetually blinking eyes (an owl unused to bright light) who fell into a great rage when I suggested that both he and Whitman, curiously enough, were working for the same end — the ennobling of the body. He could not understand at all, poor man; said that the Children of Adam poems were full of passion. What did he expect otherwise from a poet? He acknowledged that in the South End, in a section containing about twenty-four blocks, there were at least fifty-nine houses, averaging two to each block, which served as places of assignation for the wealthy idlers of the Back Bay, and which he was powerless to suppress. Also said the language of Zola and Rabelais was so guarded that he could get nothing actionable against them. So, thought I, you pounce upon the pure physiology of the venerable poet, do you, in lack of anything else to vent your rage upon? I mentioned the book of Professor Burt Wilder, of Cornell University, *What Young People Should Know*, as an instance of a book treating of sex matters with plainness. He thought it all right. Couldn’t see the similarity of the two books at all.

This treatment of Walt Whitman by the stiff Puritan squireocracy of Boston is only one of a long list of similar persecutions in that city. When Kossuth came to Boston almost the only influential citizen who recognized him was Josiah Quincy; many of the whale-boned and camphorated respectabilities ordered their curtains drawn when the hero passed in the street, and would not allow their families to go to the window; Theodore Parker was treated as an outcast or a leper by Boston “society”; nobody “knew” Garrison; Wendell Phillips was ostracized; Charles Sumner avoided, dropped from visiting lists, cut on the streets; Dr. Samuel G. Howe, founder of the Asylum for the Blind, and hero of the Greek War for Independence, said once, after twenty years’ residence in Boston, that he had never been invited to a civic festival by the city authorities; Emerson was shunned; Channing treated with dislike and suspicion; John Pierpont expelled from his church for faithfully preaching against the liquor business, by which certain of his parishioners gained their wealth; and to these I might add the names of Charles Pollen, Lydia Maria Child, the Grimke sisters, Francis E. Abbot, and Edgar Allan Poe. As late as 1886 Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes could speak of Poe as “really a poor creature, a very poor creature” (see the *Critic* for January 23, 1886).

It is significant that all persecution of Whitman comes from the clergy. It was the Rev. James Harlan who deprived the old bard of his clerkship in Washington.
in 1865, and it was the clergy of New England who drove him from Boston by legal threats in 1882. It was these gelders of literature who castrated Milton’s *History of England*, caused his *Eikonoklastes* to be burnt by the common hangman, and came alarmingly near depriving the world of *Paradise Lost*, it being considered by their donkeyships that the simile of Satan and the rising sun, in the first book, contained treasonable allusion. It is due to these low-browed inquisitors also that the works of John Knox are so hacked up that his real opinion on certain subjects will remain forever unknown.

The spirit of persecution that inspired legal action against Whitman’s poems in Boston, thereby depriving the poet of the greater part of his income, and forcing the authors of England to come to his rescue with financial aid, is the same old diabolical instinct that provided Nero with his living candles, and Torquemada with his twelve thousand bonfires of human flesh; it is the spirit of Cyril, murderer of gentle Hypatia; the temper of mind that lighted the fagots around Giordano Bruno, and slowly roasted to death the body of Michael Servetus; that hung the witches of Salem and the Quakers of Boston, and today knouts, exiles and gibbets the noble patriot-Nihilists of Russia; it is the spirit that murdered Lovejoy and John Brown, remanded Thomas Sims and Anthony Burns to slavery, and branded in the hand with a hot iron Captain Jonathan Walker, of Massachusetts, for helping a fugitive slave to escape.

It was the bosom friends of Rev. Messrs. Harlan & Allen who destroyed the great library of Alexandria, with its priceless classic treasures, and, in Cremona, in the year 1569, threw twelve thousand copies of the *Talmud* into the flames. It was such men as Messrs. Harlan & Allen who presided at those costly priest-kindled pyres that contained the entire pictorial archives of the Aztec race. They were present in spirit when the Turks destroyed the great library of Matthew Corvini at Buda; when Pope Gregory VII devoted to the flames the rich classical library of the Palatine Apollo; when the Jesuits, by command of the Austrian Emperor Ferdinand, encrimsoned the midnight skies of Bohemia with the flames of a nation’s books, and when, in the reign of Henry VIII, the horse-faced Puritans made an auto-da-fe of costly books and rarest illuminated MSS. from the monastical libraries.

But Walt Whitman is placed in very good company by going on the Episcopal Church’s Index Expurgatorius. Here, also, are a few of the names from that of the Church of Rome: Catullus, Dante, Abelard, D’Aubigné, Bayle, Isaac Causabon, Condillac, old Antony à Wood, Voltaire, Rousseau, Rochefoucauld, Rabelais, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Petronius Arbiter, Congreve and Wycherly, Beaumont and Fletcher, Mrs. Behm, Robert Herrick, La Fontaine, Bossuet, Luther, Erasmus, Melanchthon, Huss, Madame Guyon, Fénélon, Hobbes,
Bacon, Balzac, Böhme, Boileau, Comte, Professor J. W. Draper, Sterne, Döllinger, Hume, Swift, Junius, Kepler, Lessing, Leopardi, Pascal, Rosmini, George Sand, Spinoza. Where is the craven soul that would not prefer to go to Sheol {the Hebrew equivalent to hell} in this illustrious company than to Heaven with Torquemada and his gang of pale-gilled wielders of red-hot pin- cers and nail-extractors?

Yet it is to be distinctly noted that, after all, Whitman is practically not suppressed in Boston. Only a threat has been made. The road of glory is open. Let us, then, see if the prurient prudes can prove one line out of the thousands written by this friend of Emerson and Tennyson to be immoral.

February 1895 (5:182)

Reply to a Criticism

Francis Howard Williams

This Reply to a Criticism was found among Whitman’s papers, and at the request of my friend Traubel I have consented to its publication at this time, although the occasion which evoked it has long since passed. It was intended to refute some quite virulent criticism published in a leading periodical over the signature of Mr. Walker Kennedy, and the line of that criticism is sufficiently indicated in the Reply. In explanation of the use which I have made of Emerson’s well-known letter to Whitman, I would say that I seek here to show merely Emerson’s opinion of Whitman’s lan- guage and form of expression, not of his matter. As to how far Emerson may have modified his view of Whitman’s philosophy, this is not the place to speak; but I wish to relieve myself from the charge of unfairness in pre- senting discredited evidence. — F. H. W.

Seeing that Whitman has been at pains to specify those for whom his book is intended, it is to be regretted that Mr. Kennedy should have pursued the reading of it beyond the point of warning thus indicated; he might well have rested content with the assurance that these poems were “not for him,” and so have rele- egated them to the limbo of his silent contempt. But he has thought well to give expression to his disapproval, a large part of which is based upon the fact that he cannot understand what Whitman means — a piece of information altogether unnecessary, since a single glance at the pages of the article rendered the circum- stance evident. That a writer should expatiate upon a subject which he does
not comprehend is, unfortunately, not so uncommon an occurrence as could be wished, but that a writer should calmly announce his ignorance of his subject and then proceed to produce a critical paper thereupon may be regarded as a novelty in polemical literature which is refreshing in its audacity.

Reduced to something like systematic statement, the objections which Mr. Kennedy has to offer are: (a) Want of form. (b) Egotism. (c) Immorality. (d) Incoherence of ideas.

(a) As to the first objection, it can only be said that it would obviously be a work of supererogation to attempt to defend a man against the charge of leaving undone that which he never pretended or felt called upon to do. Whitman said at the start that the words of his poems were nothing, the *drift* of them everything. He distinctly announced his refusal to be governed by the laws of poetic construction or to bow to the accepted canons of verbal art, and while we may well doubt the wisdom or the expediency of a man thus deliberately placing himself in antagonism to those forms of beauty which have crystallized from the aesthetic sense of the generations, it is quite evident that in a judicial examination of his work we must base our criticisms upon grounds similar to those upon which the writer makes his appeal to the world.

He who claims to be a chemist is not to be condemned because he is not a good astronomer, and whatever individual opinion may be regarding the broad question of art in its external manifestations, we have surely no right to attempt a special application of general rules in a case which lies outside the limits of the subject considered.

The title which Walt Whitman advances to the name of poet is based upon an understanding of the term much more primal than the popular mind is likely to comprehend so long as it is guided by a standard of criticism founded upon form as its principal factor.

Mr. Kennedy says: “Emerson is allowed to diverge widely from ordinary rhythm, but no one doubts that he has written poetry.” And yet this same Emerson found it quite possible to apply to Whitman a code of ethical law utterly at variance with that advanced by the latest adverse critic. As early as 1855 Emerson wrote to Whitman: “I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of *Leaves of Grass*. I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. I am very happy in reading it, as great power makes us happy. . . . I find incomparable things, said incomparably well.” . . . And then he goes on to call Whitman his “benefactor,” and to use language of as definitely eulogistic a nature as can well be imagined. That this approval was not confined to the mere *spirit* of Whitman’s work is shown by the words which I have italicised; that it was the result of something deeper than superficial
examination is proven both by the character of him who uttered it and by the specific statement of those elements wherein he found the work to excel.

It is manifest, then, that Whitman’s lack of form does not necessarily involve that lack of lucidity which is now complained of. There are people who can, and do, understand him, and as long as there is one man who can find in *Leaves of Grass* the incentive to high deeds, to a nobler life, to a more religious conception of universal law, just so long will it have established its claim and have answered the query concerning its *raison d’être*.

(*b*) He who complains that *Leaves of Grass* is egotistical would doubtless find fault with Bancroft’s History for being *national*, and object to astronomy because it has too much to say about the stars. If the book had been anything else than egotistical its author would have been dishonest. He announced that he proposed to write about a single subject, namely, Walt Whitman. He begins “One’s-Self I sing” and, as if the title “Song of Myself” were not sufficiently indicative, he declares “I celebrate myself.” And moreover, these warnings are given at the beginning, so that he who does not fancy the subject may drop it then and there. What could be fairer? What does our critic want? He says pathetically that he finds the subject distasteful. Very well; it were wise in him not to pursue it; but if he prefers gruel to meat, is that any reason why he should seek to spoil the digestion of those who prefer meat to gruel? Besides, the criticism is inconsistent in that, having first objected to the intense concentration upon a single subject — to “the delirium of self-conceit” — it veers around and vigorously attacks the book for being quite too discursive and having to do with quite too bewildering a number of diverse entities. And this brings us to the gist of the whole matter. The further this subjectivity — this fully developed egotism — is examined, the more apparent becomes the truth that in treating of himself Whitman simply regarded himself as a type of all humanity. The ego is as much and as truly you the reader as he the writer. The “Song of Myself” is a glorification of the body, the mind, the soul of man — a paean of praise for their wonderful attributes and functions. More than this, it is a hymn in honor of universal creation as symbolized and embodied in man. The poet loves Nature, and finds in her absolute perfection; he is awed by the majesty of her little things as well as by that of her great things; to him the odor of a violet is as sublime as the light of the sun; the construction of a honeycomb’s cell as tremendous a fact as the solar system. This is his religion:

I believe that a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars . . .
And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels.

*(Song of Myself 31)*

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Finding thus in external nature at once the most perfect development of the principle of beauty and the embodiment of the profoundest truth, he sought a suitable channel for the expression of this beauty and this truth, and found it in man, the paragon of animals. What more natural — what, indeed, more fitting — than that he should have begun a self-examination which induced him to take himself — the man Walt Whitman — living, thinking, hoping, loving, suffering, enjoying, as the most perfect available microcosm of the creation? He knew himself better than he could hope to know another; the inmost secrets of his heart, the silent workings of his brain, those springs of the will which guided the actions of his life — all were known to him. This picture of what he has termed “The Happy Personality” should then be his own portrait. It should be a poetic autobiography embodied in words of as potent a significance as he could command — a history wherein he would “nothing extenuate, nor set down aught in malice.”

This was the idea, carefully conceived and religiously carried out, which has found its final expression in “The Song of Myself,” as it exists in the last editions of Leaves of Grass. Nor has Whitman at all transcended the code of literary ethics in failing to veil the personality about which the action of his work revolves; he has the best precedents for treating his subject precisely on those lines of candor which he prefers to adopt. Mr. Kennedy will certainly find it difficult to prove his assertion that “the ego is usually voted a nuisance in fiction and works of the imagination.” So far is this from being a statement of the true feeling as evidenced in the popular verdict upon great works that it may be safely averred that the most lasting productions of the creative mind have been those wherein the personality of the author is most constantly felt, if not most constantly apparent; and even within the realm of the drama, in which more than anywhere else the motive power must be concealed, it requires but a slight analysis of the relationship between cause and effect to show that the “ego” has only been removed a step further back, and that in the diverse individualities of the characters interpreted, we are presented simply with the thoughts, feelings and aspirations of a single mind under various conditions of environment.

(c) The charge of immorality is very old, but that makes neither for nor against it. The question to be considered is whether it be true. If Leaves of Grass is an immoral book; if the lessons which it teaches, the theories which it advances, the principles which it inculcates, are such as do not “make for righteousness,” then we have here a just ground of condemnation, and although we may not, from this defect, logically devise other and different defects as a sequence, yet we shall be justified in assailing the work as likely to do more harm
than it ever can accomplish good. But let us not jump at conclusions nor be carried away by the clamor of a crowd or the zeal of the prosecuting officer of a neighboring state.

What is immorality? Does it consist in combinations of words or inhere in the words themselves? Does it lie in ideas, hinted or expressed? Does it consist in the mere narration of sinful histories or wicked acts? Or is it in innuendo — the *mot a double entente*?

I submit that if it be found that immorality is the synonym for mere openness of treatment and plainness in the statement of existing facts, then, we shall have to rule out a large part of the greatest literary heirlooms of the race. Moreover, Whitman is in a special degree entitled to pursue an undisguised treatment of his topic, because he comes at a time when that kind of treatment is being applied throughout the arts. There is a general tendency in the direction of truthfulness, not only in the higher walks of art, but in the details of all practical handicraft. It is a demand for reality at all hazards, a protest against all those methods of concealment which, if let alone, would crystallize into a vice.

False educational standards and false notions as to the relationship between beauty and utility have much to do with the erroneous conception of immorality as signifying openness of expression or treatment; but there is now everywhere manifest a determination to tear away all those adjuncts which serve only to conceal realities. We find this in household furniture, where honest bolts and screws are honestly shown, instead of being covered by a bit of meaningless “decoration”; we see flat surfaces treated flatly; the absurdity of perspective in a carpet design or of foreshortening in a wallpaper is a thing of the past; our moral sense has at last come to rebel against abusing honest decoration by a factitious pictorial attempt.

Passing to a higher field of human endeavor, we find the same feeling existent. The cry is for truth — fidelity to nature; that which conceals, unless it can show adequate cause for concealment, must be thrust aside in order that the ideal of beauty may be permitted its fullest development. This brings us face to face with the old question of the morality of the nude in art. Shall we affirm the intrinsic nobility of man’s handiwork, while we deny the innate purity of the creatures of God? Shall we discard the pseudo-ornamentation which conceals a mechanical contrivance, while we insist upon draping a bit of work upon which is the fresh impression of the Divine fingers?

I anticipate our critic’s rejoinder. He has given an intimation of it in speaking of going about *in puris naturalibus*. No sane man will advocate indecency or the abandonment of civilized methods. But is it not evident that the artist, be he painter, sculptor, or poet, must regard man in his normal development? He
cannot take cognizance of diseased moral conditions. To admit drapery as a necessary evil in art is to say that that is the purest art which eschews drapery. A physician may have to deal with a patient whose system is incurably infected with malaria. The man may have to pass his life in taking daily doses of quinine. Shall we from this circumstance deduce the broad general conclusion that quinine is the best of human foods? Is it not clear that whether a given nutriment or medicine be good or bad depends upon the set of conditions which the receiver thereof brings with him?

Henry D. Thoreau, lover of nature and keen analyst of truth that he was, had this fact in mind when he said: “Walt Whitman . . . has spoken more truth than any American or modern that I know. . . . Of course Walt Whitman can communicate to us no new experience, and if we are shocked, whose experience is it we are reminded of?”

Those who inveigh against Whitman’s morality are at liberty to make a personal application of Thoreau’s remarks, if they find the shoe to fit.

It is a complete answer to such objectors to show that Walt Whitman is only doing in literature what is being done in every other department of the fine arts. But, even if this were not so, he would have both the moral and the artistic right to fall back upon the necessary conditions under which poetry exists. For in poetry we have to do with the deeper forces of the soul and of nature; we are brought into contact with fundamental passions as they really are — not as the moral reformers would like to make them. Men will continue to love and hate after the manner of the old Adam, despite all the codes of etiquette which can be invented; and no amount of refined culture can convert the wild heart-throb of humanity into a polite and conventionalized vibration. If, then, poetry be the profoundest expression of revealed nature, she is bound to set forth undraped truth; she is bound to do it in virtue of the most fundamental of all rights — the right of self-preservation. If she covers up, she becomes the accomplice of a cheat; if she uses the “suggestive veil,” she becomes the very pander to vice and all uncleanness.

It is true that we find in Whitman’s pages many things not usually made the subject of general conversation, but we never find a meretricious, falsely-colored bit of theatrical scenery made to be looked at under the misleading lights of the stage and becoming abominations in the rays of the blessed sun.

It is claimed that there are passages in *Leaves of Grass* which, detached from their context, must bring the blush to the cheek of modesty. So there are (and I say it with the greatest reverence) in the greatest of all books.

It is claimed that *Leaves of Grass* is unfit for the very young. So is Euclid.
It is claimed that *Leaves of Grass* is likely to do harm to impressionable natures. So are the sonnets of Shakspere and Petrarch; so is the *Divina Comedia*.

Does not common justice demand that before condemning a book we shall inform ourselves concerning its meaning and purpose; that we shall note to whom it is addressed — for whose perusal it is specifically intended; that we shall consider its announcements in their entirety, and judge of each passage by the light of the context?

So judged, *Leaves of Grass* must stand, or if it fall, it must carry to the purgatory whither an immaculate criticism would consign it, a host of volumes between whose covers lie the accumulated wisdom and beauty and love of ages.

(\textit{d}) That which appears to be incoherence in a writer is often neither more nor less than a lack of the perceptive faculty on the part of the reader. Again, an apparent want of continuity results oftentimes from the determination by the reader to find some strained or abstract meaning where the statement of the author has reference entirely to matters of practical import.

The criticism which engages our attention quotes these lines from Whitman:

There was never any more inception than there is now,  
Nor any more youth or age than there is now;  
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,  
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.  

\textit{(Song of Myself 3)}

This is characterized as the climax of nonsense, and the critic then asks: “What becomes of evolution, progress, civilization?”

The reference to evolution in this connection is singularly unfortunate, since evolution and the kindred doctrine of the conservation of energy hold as their central idea that the sum of all forces is a fixed quantity; that there is change, redistribution, development and dissolution, but no creation of any new force or any new atom. The analogy in spiritual things renders Whitman’s statement complete and absolutely true. As to “progress,” the word does not apply either to perfection, which is a superlative condition, or to heaven or hell, which are supposed to be changeless conditions. As to “civilization,” what has that to do with a purely abstract statement? If there is any nonsense here, it is to be sought in the criticism rather than in the lines criticised.

Again, the sentence, “The unseen is proved by the seen, till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn,” is set aside as “mere verbal jugglery.” But let us apply it in the light of known scientific fact. Franklin sees the lightning and by experiment proves it to be identical with a great and subtle
agent — electricity. Here we have the demonstration of the first clause; the unseen is proved by the seen. Morse and Edison seize upon this newly identified agent, which in turn becomes the unseen power whose effectiveness is proven by marvelous mechanical results.

There is no need to strain after metaphysical applications where only material fact is involved. If Whitman’s statement is a piece of verbal jugglery, then is the telephone a bit of sleight of hand.

Mr. Kennedy says: “The next incident is a child bringing him a handful of grass, and asking him what it is. Of course he does not know, but he proceeds to make up a wild ‘yawp’ about it, nevertheless.”

It would have been fairer to quote the “yawp,” in order that Mr. Kennedy’s readers should have a chance to form their own judgment. I ask permission to supply the omission:

A child said What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.
I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.

Or I guess it must be the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly drop’t,
Bearing the owner’s name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark and say Whose?

(Song of Myself 6)

The “yawp,” then, turns out to be a piece of composition showing a rare and splendid felicity in diction, setting forth a profound and reverent aspiration, containing the expression of deep religious sentiment, and including one of the most exquisite metaphors which recent poetical literature has to show. Is this a specimen of the “incoherence” complained of? Our critic says that there is no meaning in Leaves of Grass, and, finding it devoid of meaning, proceeds to ridicule individual passages. He ought to, and probably does, know that the loftier the plane of any work the more readily does it lend itself to parody and ridicule, because both parody and ridicule, to be effective, must rest upon humor, and humor finds its main element in the incongruity of violent contrast. Hence a work which deals with exalted thoughts and images furnishes the best field for the introduction of trifling and burlesque images whose juxtaposition ensures the violence of contrast upon which humor depends. Hence ridicule, as an instrument of serious criticism, must always react upon itself, even as parody demonstrates the excellence of its original in proportion as it attains to excellence in itself.
Nothing is more evident than that Walt Whitman is not to be gotten rid of by ridicule. He is quite too large a fact for that. William M. Rossetti speaks of him as “one of the huge, as yet mainly unrecognized, forces of our time,” . . . and adds: “His voice will one day be potential or magisterial wherever the English language is spoken.”

August 1895 (6:84)

Two Critics of Walt Whitman

John Burroughs

It seems to me that very few of the critics have really grappled with Whitman, honestly tried to penetrate him and get at the grounds upon which he rests. Among the few that have seriously tried to master his point of view and who have treated him with candor and entire respect we must reckon Mr. Stedman, who, in his admirable volume on the Poets of America (1885) has devoted a chapter to the author of Leaves of Grass. Mr. Stedman was one of the few early readers of Whitman, and still fewer early appreciators of him. This fact, together with his admirable equipment as a critic and his fine, generous spirit as a man, make his survey of Whitman of rare interest and value. It is undoubtedly true, as has been urged, that Whitman seems a little out of place in the volume, a little incongruous. He is of a different breed from our pleasant singers — the breed of bards and prophets. But the critic manages him well. He keeps him down by refraining from quoting from him save very sparingly, by considering only his secondary literary characteristics, his lyrical gift, his verse form and kindred points. Of his prophetic character, of his modernity, of his relation to science, to democracy, of his political, national, racial and religious significance, we hear very little. It is a sort of literary class-room drill the critic puts him through, and the wonder is that he finds so much to approve and so little to condemn. The literary impulse did not alone beget Whitman any more than it did Job, or Isaiah, or St. Paul, and while it is true that if his work is not good literature, that ends it, he yet has vastly more than a mere literary significance.

Only once do I detect in Mr. Stedman’s criticism a reflection of the hostility and unfair mode of treatment towards Whitman current a decade or more ago. When he says, “the long prose sentences thrown within his ruder pieces resemble nothing so much as the comic recitatives in the buffalo-songs of the concert-cellars,” he is unfair, to say the least, because he does not quote one of
the prose sentences referred to, that his reader may judge for himself. For my part, I nowhere find in Whitman’s work the contrast or breakdown and anti-climax indicated by this comparison. Whitman’s form lent itself readily to this mode of treatment; it ran out easily into long, full-breathed, prose sentences, some of them a whole gospel in themselves, like this from the “Song of the Open Road”((14)):

Now understand me well — it is provided in the essence of things that from any fruition of success, no matter what, shall come forth something to make a greater struggle necessary.

Or this from “A Leaf of Voices”:

Surely, whoever speaks to me in the right voice, him or her I shall follow as the waters follow the moon, silently, with fluid steps anywhere around the world.

Or this from “Song of Prudence”:

No specification is necessary, all that a male or female does, that is vigorous, benevolent, clean, is so much profit to him or her, in the unshakable order of the universe and through the whole scope of it forever.

Or this picture from the love poems (“Spontaneous Me”):

The hairy wild-bee that murmurs and hankers up and down, that gripes the full-grown lady-flower, curves upon her with amorous firm legs, takes his will of her, and holds himself tremulous and tight till he is satisfied.

Is it these and the like of these that remind Mr. Stedman of the comic interludes in the buffalo-songs of the concert-cellar? Or does he refer to those long lists of tools, trades, occupations, etc., that occur in several of the poems, and that do, at times, give one’s poetic sense a rude jostle, but which really fit into the poet’s scheme, patterned as it is after nature’s doings? These lists and enumerations may prove tiresome to a reader keen for poetic tid-bits and a succession of artistic effects, but what would we not give if Homer or any of the poets of antiquity had given such pages of minute and graphic specifications of the life and doings of his day and land? Whitman’s scheme is so flexible, his form is so fluid, his quality so penetrating, that he can permit himself liberties and apparent contradictions that would ruin a lesser poet.
In summing up Whitman's defects Mr. Stedman arrives at two startling conclusions — conclusions that are directly opposed to what most of us have been led to feel about this poet. He says Whitman is narrow, and that his form is at the extreme of artificiality. These are certainly faults that one does not readily associate with the work of Whitman. About the only thing I can see to recommend this verdict is that it does bear some resemblance to that irony of fate that so often overtakes men in this world. I remember that the French critic Scherer thinks Carlyle, that apostle of the gospel of sincerity, insincere, and guilty of canting about cant. And now Mr. Stedman finds Whitman, this apostle of breadth and tolerance, narrow and intolerant, and that, with all his boasted escape from the shackles of verse form, he is a formalist. His “irregular manneristic chant,” he says, is at the “extreme of artificiality.”

Whatever were Carlyle’s faults, insincerity was not one of them; and whatever Walt Whitman is or is not, he is not narrow. It is only in a very restricted sense that we can apply this word to him. To be monotonous is not to be narrow. He is narrow in the sense that he is not versatile, that he sought but few effects, that he poured himself out mainly in one channel. His Leaves do not show a great range of artistic motifs. A versatile, many-sided nature he certainly was not; a large, broad, tolerant nature he as certainly was. He does not assume many and diverse forms, like a purely artistic talent; sporting with and masquerading in all the elements of life like Shakspere; but in his own proper form he gives a sense of vastness and power that are elemental. He is intolerant only as great objects are intolerant of small. To call him narrow is to call any great object narrow that goes its own inevitable way in the world. His spirit and method are uncompromising but not intolerant. “He who spreads a wider breast than my own proves the width of my own. . . . He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher” (“Song of Myself” (47)). His highest hope is to be the soil of superior poems. He would not impose himself upon others. The upshot of his example is that the poet must be a law unto himself and stand upon his own feet. He would have you free yourself from all hands that would hold you. “The blood of the brawn beloved of time is unconstraint” (“By Blue Ontario’s Shore” (13)). Mr. Stedman thinks he detects in the poet a preference for the coarser, commoner elements of our humanity over the finer and choicer, for the “rough” over the gentleman. But here again the narrowness is in his own view of the case. Whitman’s ideals certainly are not those of the parlor or drawing-room, but of the arena of manly endeavor in all fields. He is drawn by powerful natural persons wherever found — men and women self-poised, fully equipped on all sides.

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I announce the great individual, fluid as Nature, chaste, affectionate, compassionate, fully arm’d.

I announce a life that shall be copious, vehement, spiritual, bold . . .

(So Long!)

and much more to the same effect.

I say nourish a great intellect, a great brain; If I have said anything to the contrary, I hereby retract it.

(Says #2 {1860 ed.})

Whitman’s atmosphere is always liberating, expanding. Both by word and by example, he encourages his reader to give play to himself.

And Whitman is not a formalist, because he is not a stickler for form of any sort. He has his own proper form, of course, which he rarely departs from. At one extreme of artificiality Mr. Stedman apparently places the sonnet. This is an arbitrary form; its rules are inflexible; it is something cut and shaped and fitted together after a predetermined pattern, and to this extent is artificial. If Whitman’s irregularity was equally studied, if it gave us the same sense of something cunningly planned and wrought to a particular end, clipped here, curbed there, folded back in this line, drawn out in that, and attaining to a certain mechanical proportion and balance as a whole, then there would be good ground for the critic’s charge. But such is not the case. Whitman did not have, nor claim to have, the architectonic power of the great constructive poets. He did not build the lofty rhyme. He did not build anything, strictly speaking. He let himself go. He named his book after the grass, which makes a carpet over the earth, and which is a sign and a presence rather than a form.

Mr. Stedman remarks a contradiction between Whitman’s attitude toward his country as seen in his prose and in his poetry. The explanation is obvious. In his prose he is the critic of his countrymen; in his poetry he would be their prophet. He assumes and invokes what he would have them be; he celebrates his own ideal. In the one he is the indignant judge; in the other he is the lover and savior. In poetry Whitman is always an optimist; sees good in everything, accepts evil without reserve, and finds not one result at last lamentable in the universe. In his prose pieces he lays on the lash; he is the surgeon now, and not the nurse and healer. Prose probes, analyzes, arraigns, disciplines, applies the cautery, the knife, the drastic remedy. But the muse of poetry broods, cherishes, heals, transforms. Poetry gives results, not processes, and in his prose Whitman, in his final conclusions, is always tonic and uplifting.

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Whitman undoubtedly has the defects of his great qualities. What we might expect from his size, his sense of mass and multitude, would be an occasional cumbrousness, turgidity, unwieldiness, ineffectualness; what we might expect from his vivid realism would be an occasional over-rankness or grossness; from his bluntness, a rudeness; from his passion for country, a little spread-eagleism; from his masterly use of indirection, occasional obscurity; from his mystic identification of himself with what is commonest, cheapest, nearest, a touch at times of the vulgar and unworthy; from his tremendous practical democracy, a bias at times toward too low an average; from his purpose “to effuse egotism and show it underlying all” may arise a little too much self-assertion, etc. The price paid for his strenuousness and earnestness will be a want of humor; his determination to glorify the human body as God made it will bring him in collision with our notions of the decent, the proper; the “courageous clear voice” with which he seeks to prove the sexual organs and acts “illustrious” will result in his being excluded from good society; his “heroic nudity” will be apt to set the good dame, Belles Lettres, all ashiver; his healthful coarseness and god-like candor will put all the respectable folk to flight.

What is organic in a man's work, a vital part of the whole, is not to be separated from the rest and condemned. We may condemn his whole scheme, but let us understand it first. Most of the things in Whitman that have been selected for adverse criticism are there intentionally on his part and are a legitimate part of the whole. The absence of the regular verse forms, the absence of elaboration, finish, what is usually called art, the egotism, the realism, the strong sexuality, the blunt-ness, sometimes amounting to rudeness, the materialism, the al fresco character of the whole work, as of life and objects in the open air — all these things are there for a purpose. One is not to object to a poet's methods unless he perceives that some other method would have suited his purpose better. Let us first ask what does the poet intend? what kind of effect would he produce? It is evident at a glance that Whitman does not aim at the usual effects produced by the poets — the effect of something delicately carved or highly wrought; of course, therefore, he will not use their methods. The only question is, are his methods best suited to the effect he would produce — an effect analogous to that produced by the free careering forces of nature? In other words, the poet is to be tried by his own standards, his own ideals. Hold him to a strict account with himself. Then, of course, a consideration of the comparative value of his ideals and their relevancy to his own time and land is in order.

Mr. Stedman complains that Whitman paints the underside of things and violates the reserve and concealments in which nature delights; but to make good his point the critic feels compelled to class the sexual acts and instincts
with the noisome things of nature; with slime, and muck, and ruin, and decay; with the festering and the unsightly. This, of course, will not do. “If all come but to ashes of dung,” says the poet in one of his poems on immortality, “If maggots and rats ended us, then Alarum! for we are betray’d, / Then indeed suspicion of death” (“To Think of Time” (8)).

If muck and filth begin us, then alarum! also; then is there suspicion of birth. But Whitman does not paint the underside of things, does not throw the allurements of art over the forbidden. “He even takes away,” says Mr. Stedman — “he even takes away the sweetness and pleasantness of stolen waters and secret bread.” Of course he does. No stolen delights are hinted at in his pages. He treats the act of reproduction as frankly and, from our standards, as brutally, as nature does. It is like the pollination of the trees and plants or the down-pouring of the fertilizing rains. From the point of view of our conventions and the instincts which they foster, such as shame, modesty, etc., our poet’s course cannot be justified. But if we keep in view the fact that that which lies back of our conventions, back of our literature, back of our civilization, is rude, unsophisticated nature, and that our pressing need in an artificial age is always a readjustment of our relation to these forces and a freer inlet for them, we shall find less grounds for offense.

I see clearly enough that the final effect of this part of Walt Whitman’s work must be toward physiological cleanliness, strength, and gradual severance from all that corrupts and makes morbid and mean.

After Mr. Stedman perhaps no critic has shown a more sincere desire to penetrate Whitman, and get at the secret of the vitality of his fame, than Mr. Edmund Gosse. I think Mr. Gosse, in his analysis, gets nearer the distinctive Whitman quality and essence than does the American critic. He sees that Whitman can be intelligently discussed only upon other grounds than those upon which we discuss the reigning poets. His methods and aims are different. But the critic gets little farther than that. He does not ask what these methods and aims are. He does not ask, “What does the poet intend?” He evidently does not intend the usual literary and artistic effects, as I have just said — the effect of fine chiseling, elaboration, structural completeness, etc., and, therefore, he is no poet. He is only a potential or possible poet, says Mr. Gosse; his work is literature in the condition of protoplasm. He is a maker of poems in solution; the structural change which should have crystalized his fluid and teeming pages into forms of art, never came. Perhaps something like this was the poet’s intuition. Perhaps this is the secret of the vitality of his work, which, as Mr. Gosse says, now, after forty years, shows no sign of declining. Perhaps it was a large, fresh supply of poetic yeast that the poet really sought to bring us. Go, now, ye
professionals, and make us better bread than ever before! Undoubtedly Whitman aimed to give his work just this fluid, generative quality, to put into it the very basic elements of life itself. He feared the “structural change” to which Mr. Gosse refers; he knew it was more or less a change from life to death; the cell and not the crystal; the leaf of grass and not the gem, is the type of his sentences. He sacrificed fixed form, above all did he stop short of that conscious intellectual elaboration so characteristic of later poetry, the better to give the impression and the stimulus of creative elemental power. It is not to the point to urge that this is not the method or aim of other poets; that others have used the fixed forms and found them plastic and vital in their hands. It was Whitman’s aim; these were the effects he sought. I think beyond doubt that he gives us the impression of something dynamic, something akin to the vital forces of the organic world, much more distinctly and fully than any other poet who has lived.

Whitman always aimed to make his reader an active partner with him in his poetic enterprise. “I seek less,” he says, “to state or display any theme or thought, and more to bring you, reader, into the atmosphere of the theme or thought — then to pursue your own flight.” This trait is brought out by Mr. Gosse in a little allegory. “Every reader who comes to Whitman,” he says, “starts upon an expedition to the virgin forest. He must take his conveniences with him. He will make of the excursion what his own spirit dictates. We generally do, in such cases, Mr. Gosse.] There are solitudes, fresh air, rough landscape, and a well of water, but if he wishes to enjoy the latter he must bring his own cup with him.” This phase of Whitman’s work has never been more clearly defined. Mr. Gosse utters it as an adverse criticism. It is true exposition, however we take it. What we get out of Whitman depends so largely upon what we bring to him. Readers will not all get the same. We do not all get the same out of a walk or a mountain climb. We get out of him in proportion to the sympathetic and interpretative power of our own spirits. Have you the brooding, warming, vivifying, mother-mind? That vague, elusive, incommensurable something in the Leaves that led Symonds to say that talking about Whitman was like talking about the universe, that seems to challenge our pursuit and definition, that takes on so many different aspects to so many different minds — it seems to be this that has led Mr. Gosse to persuade himself that there is no real Walt Whitman, no man whom we can take, as we take any other figure in literature, as an “entity of positive value and definite characteristics,” but a mere mass of literary protoplasm that takes the instant impression of whatever mood approaches it. Stevenson finds a Stevenson in it, Mr. Symonds finds a Symonds, Emerson finds an Emerson, etc. Truly may our poet say: “I contain multitudes.” In what other poet do these men or others like them find themselves?
Whitman was a powerful solvent undoubtedly. He never hardens into anything like a system or into mere intellectual propositions. One of his own phrases, “the fluid and swallowing soul,” is descriptive of this trait of him. One source of his charm is that we each see some phase of ourselves in him, as Mr. Gosse suggests. Above all things is he potential and indicative, bard of “flowing mouth and indicative hand.” In his “Inscriptions” he says:

I am a man who, sauntering along without fully stopping, turns a casual look upon you and then averts his face,
Leaving it to you to prove and define it,
Expecting the main things from you.

(Poets to Come)

This withholding and half averted glancing, then, on the part of the poet, is deliberate and enters into the scheme of the work. Mr. Gosse would have shown himself a sounder critic had he penetrated the poet’s purpose in this respect and shown whether or not he had violated the canons he had set up for his own guidance. We do not condemn a creative work when it departs from some rule or precedent, but when it violates its own principle, when it is not consistent with itself when it hath not eyes to see, or ears to hear, or hands to reach what lies within its own sphere. Art, in the plastic realms of written language, may set its mind upon elaboration, upon structural finish and proportion, upon exact forms and compensations, as in architecture, or it may set its mind upon suggestion, indirection and the flowing, changing forms of organic nature. It is as much art in the one case as in the other. To get rid of all visible artifice is, of course, the great thing in both cases. There is so little apparent artifice in Whitman’s case that he has been accused of being entirely without art and of throwing his matter together in a haphazard way — “without thought, without selection,” without “composition, evolution, vertebration of style,” says Mr. Gosse. Yet his work more than holds its own in a field where these things alone are supposed to insure success. Whitman covers up his processes well and knows how to hit his mark without seeming to take aim. The verdicts upon him are mainly contradictory, because each critic only takes in a part of his scheme. Mr. Stedman finds him a formalist. Mr. Gosse finds in him a negation of all form. The London critic says he is without thought. A Boston critic speaks of what he happily calls the “waves of thought” in his work — vast mind impulses that lift and sway great masses of concrete facts and incidents. Whitman knew from the start that he would puzzle and baffle his critics and would escape from them like air when they felt
most sure they had him in their verbal nets. So it has been from the first, and so it continues to be. Without one thing, he says, it is useless to read him; and of what that one thing needful is, he gives only the vaguest hint, only a “significant look.”

{Edmund Clarence Stedman (1833–1908), a Yale-educated banker, was also a leading poet (in the Tennyson vein) and poetry critic of his time. Among his books were *Victorian Poets* (1876), *The Poets of America* (1885), and two collections, *A Victorian Anthology* (1895) and *An American Anthology* (1900). Edmund William Gosse (1849–1928) was an English poet, author, and critic. From 1904, he was librarian of the House of Lords, where he exercised considerable influence. His essay on Whitman appeared in 1893.}

**September 1896 (7:108)**

**Walt Whitman as a Creator of “Trash”**

*Nathalie W. Homans*

From a letter written from Flushing, Long Island, to the *Christian Register*.

In reading the editorial pages of the *Register*, it is not often that I find myself dissenting strongly from the opinions therein expressed; but I cannot forbear a word of protest against the sweeping and uncritical denunciation of Walt Whitman’s work in the *Register* of August 6th, under the title “American Independence.” The assertion that “Whitman succeeded in writing a mass of trash, without form, rhythm, or vitality,” comes as a challenge to one who admires both the form and rhythm of his work, and finds in his spirit a quality as rare as it is beautiful. Mr. John Addington Symonds, in his book entitled *Walt Whitman: A Study*, pledges his reputation as a critic upon his criticism of Whitman’s work. And this is what he finds in “a mass of trash, without form, rhythm, or vitality”:

“The countless clear and perfect phrases he [Whitman] invented, to match most delicate and evanescent modes of sensibility, to picture exquisite and broad effects of natural beauty, to call up poignant or elusive feelings, attest to his artistic faculty of using language as a vehicle for thought. They are hung, like golden medals of consummate workmanship and incised form, in rich clusters over every poem he produces.”
Remembering that Mr. Symonds had been trained in the Greek and Latin classics and in the literatures of the more modern world, and was, as he himself said, “a devotee of what is powerful and beautiful in style,” this criticism is not without weight.

{From the Boston Christian Register} Longfellow, Lowell, Howells, Whittier, Bret Harte, and Mark Twain have made individual contributions to a distinctive American literature; but they have not ignored the universal forms of art which lie at the basis of all truth, beauty, and humor. Walt Whitman, on the other hand, was an illustration of “American independence” in literature; and he succeeded in writing a mass of trash without form, rhythm, or vitality. The only poems which do him any credit, or which are entitled to the name of poems, are those in which he made some effort to conform to the laws of form, beauty, and decency that he persistently violated.

November 1896 (7:138)

Reminiscences of Walt Whitman
By William Sloane Kennedy

Laurens Maynard

It is, I presume, an admitted fact that the time is not yet when the definitive life of Walt Whitman can be written. At present the best service that can be performed to Whitman’s cause must consist in putting on record the knowledge and estimates of those who stood in personal relations or in spiritual rapport with Democracy’s prophet-poet. It is indicative of the breadth of the subject that all the books thus far published are in very little degree repetitions. As almost every original portrait of Whitman differs widely from all others, each emphasizing some special trait or mood, so each writer, while agreeing in general outline, has seemed to catch special elements in the nature of his subject which must all some day be included, toned up or down to their relative values in the perfect biography which as yet we can only anticipate.

Mr. Kennedy’s book must always be valuable as a record by a loyal and enthusiastic friend who was yet able to weigh sanely and temperately the poet’s personality and writings, and also because a great part of the matter therein contained was authenticated and approved by Whitman himself, though these are not its only claims to importance. The very first page convinces us that we
have here the work of one who not only has a rare comprehension of Whitman but who has the faculty of making us sharers in his own intimate mental vision. It is well known that Whitman had a wonderful comprehension of many subjects which he was not supposed to have studied — at least not in the ordinary school sense of the word; but what could better illustrate this idea than Mr. Kennedy’s mention of the conversation on Greek art? How subtly he gives to us its gist, although hardly repeating a word of it!

I never knew any one show profounder insight into the Greek *al fresco* spirit than he in the course of a few broken and hesitating sentences. . . . He said “the Greeks tested everything by the open air.”

I can’t tell how it was, but the large personality of the man so vivified the few words he spoke that all the majesty of Greece — especially her sculpturesque art idea — seemed to loom up before me as never before in my life, although the study of Greek literature had been a specialty of my collegiate and post-collegiate years.

Mr. Kennedy does not, I believe, attempt to explain this inclusiveness of Whitman’s mind. I am of the opinion that to those who have seen one of the poet’s commonplace or notebooks it will be partly accounted for. It was his lifelong custom to jot down the most minute points about the wide range of subjects which excited his interest in all his reading, whether in newspapers or more pretentious print and in his conversations with those whom he met. These notes were carefully preserved in convenient shape for reference, and it will be readily seen that this habit, kept up a number of years, could not but result in a practical education which would far surpass the ordinary school or college training. In other words, Whitman’s knowledge was generally the result of study, and hard study, although pursued by methods of his own.

Mr. Kennedy’s pen is artistic as well as faithful. Where have we ever had a more beautiful picture of Whitman’s old age with the depression of an enfeebled and dying body illuminated by the glow of joyous and unconquerable faith than in this passage?

Only one thing seemed to have the power of forcing from him an occasional lament and that was prolonged stormy weather, when bad health kept him indoors for days or weeks. And it was at such times that he was especially grateful for letters from friends. On these occasions let but the sun shine out for an hour or so, and his blithe canary strikes up a winsome gay song (“flooding the house with trills,” as he wrote), and the heart of the old man was cheered, and ten to one but he would seize the moment to write a card

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to some friend, never forgetting to mention the singing of the bird and the shining of the sun.

It is not the least merit of Mr. Kennedy’s book that he does not allow his admiration for his subject to picture a perfected and immaculate Whitman. The poet’s biographers and friendly critics have in the main dwelt so exclusively upon his noble qualities and loveliness of character that it would seem quite possible that the Whitman of traditional history might come to be a mythical deity for the worship of future generations. Therefore, it is well that in this work there are found many hints which show that the imperturbable serenity of Whitman’s spirit was attained through and in spite of an occasional period of depression and even doubt; that beneath his inclusive charity and abounding good humor was his fair quota of impatience and temper, visible if there was cause for its exhibition but all in perfect control.

The letters from Whitman to Kennedy are all interesting, the one in which he defines the extent of his debt or rather of his lack of debt to Emerson for the inspiration of *Leaves of Grass* being perhaps the most valuable. But I cannot refrain from quoting some lines from one which was written in the dark days of severe bodily sickness and impending death.

Y’rs of the 6th just comes (are you not a little blue? — It’s no use — one has to obey orders and do duty and face the music till he gets formal dismissal — and may as well *come up to the scratch* smiling)—I am still get-ting thro’ the hot season — have things pretty favorable here in my shanty, with ventilation (night and day) frequent bathing, light meals and *laissez faire*, all of which makes it better for me in my utterly helpless condition to tug it out here in Mickle street than transfer myself somewhere to sea shore or mountain. It is not for a long time any how — then Elias Hicks’ saying to my Father “Walter, it is not so much *where* thee lives as *how* thee lives.”

The reminiscences of which the first section of the book (“Memories,” “Letters,” etc.) is composed are told with much simplicity of style — almost without style, just as a gossiping chat with the author might reveal them to us.

In “Drift and Cumulus,” the second division of the book, Mr. Kennedy examines with fine critical acumen and thorough appreciation the plan, scope and details of *Leaves of Grass* and its value as literature, and discusses its
author in comparison with other great poets. It strikes me that seldom has any-
thing finer been said of the poems than this:

I sometimes think of *Leaves of Grass* as a musical symphony or drama of
creation: the leader lifts his wand and the orchestra sweeps the strings in a
grand preluding overture (“Inscriptions”) wherein all the motives of the
succeeding parts are announced — Life and Death, Love and Hatred, the
Body and the Soul. The work is a trilogy, celebrating the Body, Democracy,
and Religion — the mystery of the macrocosm and the nobility of the mi-
crocosm — and the key words to these three groups respectively are Joy,
Love, and Faith (St. Paul’s Faith, Hope and Charity, curious to note).

The discussion of the “Children of Adam” poems is splendidly lucid, sym-
pathetic and satisfying, although Mr. Kennedy frankly admits his early qualms
about them. His interpretations of the utterances on Democracy are likewise
so comprehensive and convincing that when he sums up his studies on this
subject with the announcement that it is “in this man, Walt Whitman, and in him alone as yet, exists the great catholic soul capable of fusing the continental
Republic of States into a compact organic indissoluble nation,” it does not
seem an unreasonable claim.

The third section of the book consists of an essay on the style of *Leaves of
Grass*, in which Mr. Kennedy, with a complete command both of his special
subject and of the general history of English and other poetry, proceeds to jus-
tify the work not only as poetry but poetry of the highest order. “It can be in-
dubitably proved that his poetic art as shown in his most finished production
is profoundly consonant with the laws of nature and symphonic music.”

He also calls attention, and I do not remember that any one else has done
so, to the fact that the irregular length of line, which is a striking peculiarity of
Whitman’s verse, is caused by the fact that Whitman “‘never breaks a verse at
the wheel.’ His work is nearly always blocked out into lines or periods the
length of which corresponds with the natural length of the thoughts.”

If in this article I have perhaps devoted more space to the personal than to
the critical side, it is because I believe that is the most important part of such a
work. Mr. Kennedy’s criticisms are excellent, his opinions always worth hear-
ing and generally correct, but this may be true of a dozen men a hundred years
from now. Mr. Kennedy’s personal experiences with Whitman could never
have been told except by himself. They are now on record, and all who are in-
terested in the Good Gray Poet and his cause will accept them as treasures of
the first importance.
Sursum Corda, Comrades!

{Whitman: A Study, by John Burroughs}

William Sloane Kennedy

Regarding Walt Whitman’s writings, as I do, as a New Protestantism, a Scientific Religion of Joy, destined, as the antagonist of the ascetic and dismal historic Christianity, to sweep over the globe as have the great religious movements of the past, it is with a good deal of pleasure that I note the signs of a true dawn.

In the first place, right in the very heart of Philistia, and run up from the very citadel of cidevant, hide-bound conventionalism and stiff conservatism, waves now the flag of the new gospel! The haughty publishers of the New England Brahmins have “this day published” a book entitled Whitman: A Study, By John Burroughs! Now this firm has always imagined it was some particular “punk-ins,” and aims to be several thousand parasangs in advance of small-potato firms in the scholarship, chic and general dead polish of its work. Your boots have always had to creak loud and your clothes be of the latest fit for you to pass muster here. Old Lady Victoria herself is not a severer formalist as to the outward dress of you. Well, sir, since H. O. Houghton died the firm has had new modern blood let into it, and the slugging and thugging Garrisonians who have been for a quarter of a century in this firm and on the Nation, garroting American literature that did not suit them (as their father did reformers ditto before them), have been apparently asked to step aside. Although, like Bottom, with his bottle of hay, and Apuleius, his donkey-man, they have heretofore found that “good hay, sweet hay hath no fellow;” they are now ordered by the higher powers to partake of these lush-green leaves of grass, that are rich in divine sustenance for their souls, if said souls are not wholly of leather or wood. Burroughs’ Whitman has for frontispiece the photo that faces page 214 of the pocket edition, and also a delicate vignette of Whitman’s birthplace, and is a very pretty book, apart from its meaty thought. At any rate, the book appears, with all the prestige and sanction of this firm. David McKay, of Philadelphia, is about to issue an edition of Leaves of Grass, for colleges, with notes by Professor Oscar L. Triggs, and two other works by or about Whitman are publishing — one a group of his letters to Peter Doyle, a native gentleman who has never proved his nobility by any kind of writing and does not talk about the “humiliation” and “degradation” of bricklaying, as the little literary fool in the
Encyclopaedia Britannica does apropos of Ben Jonson, but in whom Walt Whitman found a kindred soul. The other work is a volume of reminiscences by Thomas Donaldson, of Philadelphia, which contains letters of Tennyson to Whitman, in facsimile, with fine portrait of Whitman and full-page autograph fac-similes of Walt's own manuscripts. Add to all this a steady annual sale of between two and three thousand volumes of Leaves of Grass here and abroad in its various prose and poetical anthologies and complete editions, and that a well-known Boston firm would at the present time be glad to publish Leaves of Grass, and it will be seen, I think, that the true dawn of Whitmanity is visible; that here and there amid the crowded haunts of men wherever the seed of its life-grass has been carried, the line of living green is slowly invading the gray debris of dead systems — sprouting tall and luxuriant far on the prairies, and even beyond the Rockies, and in distant Australia and Europe. And springing from out these leaves of healing for the nations’ passers-by note, amazed, the crimson flowers of a new comrade-love scenting the air, and flowers that breathe the secret of a divine body and pure sex, of magnetism, chastity and dauntless faith.

To return to Burroughs. He and Edmund Clarence Stedman were protagonists who leaped to the side of Whitman from the very start. The significance and bravery of Stedman’s article on Walt Whitman, published in that citadel of orthodoxy, the old Scribner’s, lineal predecessor of the Century, are perhaps not fully weighed by the younger men of to-day. That black-maned athlete, J. G. Holland, was cast in too narrow a mold to appreciate Whitman, and Stedman told me, I remember, that he had a serious time with him, and had to threaten him that he would altogether stop the series he was writing if his article on Whitman was not admitted to the columns of the magazine. The immediate results of that article and its influence from that time on in book form have been great. It required courage to do these things twenty years ago. And with Burroughs’ new book on Whitman {also} put his lecturing last year before the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Yale College as an index of the slow modification of the old prejudice. In the nature of things Whitman must win his way foot by foot and inch by inch, for he has to first renovate the whole inner man who is to accept him.

I received the other day a letter from a Yale professor under whose lectures I sat when a green youth twenty years ago. He described himself as not a thick and thin admirer of Whitman, though liking many things in him. He then astounded me by saying that “the real poet of American democracy is J. W. Riley. He has art, humor, tenderness, a sense for character, lots of things that are not in Leaves of Grass.” I hunted up this poet in a great hurry, for I have deep respect for my friend’s opinion. Well, it’s queer — is people’s tastes, as Mr. Weller might remark.
Now, Riley is all that is claimed for him by my friend. But then he falls as far short of Whitman as Marlowe or Chapman does of Shakspeare. He is a delightful tenderhearted humorist in verse who cultivates the field of folk-pathos and the sentiment of landscape and childhood reminiscence — the heimweh emotion created in us by contemplation of the past when it has become pictorialized by the glamour of distance. It is the feeling enshrined by Whittier in “Snow Bound,” “My Playmate,” “School Days”; by Tennyson in “Ulysses,” “Tears, Idle Tears,” “Locksley Hall”; by Whitman in “Come Up from the Fields, Father.” But these masters do not harp eternally on that one string, as Riley does so felicitously in “The Old Swimmin’ Hole” and scores like it. He has, besides, the dramatic power in some slight degree, as shown in his riant (i.e., laugh) inimitable “A New Year’s Day at Willard’s.” His genre pictures are finished to the life, as I can testify, for I passed fifteen years near his “pastur’” on the earth-rind. And his verse, like Whittier’s, is very close to the heart of the people. He is a true democratic poet, but far, very far, from being a great one in any sense. As if Whitman’s work were not steeped in deepest emotion, especially the war, sea and religious poems! Some of them, like “Vigil Strange,” are little but disembodied emotion and music. And then one soon sickens of Riley’s dialect, funny as it is at first. It is horse poetry. Riley is a sort of Joseph Jefferson in poetry — a comedian, perfect in his genre, but whom one scarcely cares to read more than twice. He tinkles a sweet little guitar in his ingle, and brings tears to the eyes; but the great bards with their stormy passions touch all the chords of humanity — life, death, fate, love, war, and the whole broad stage eterne of the human soul and the macrocosm. The one class amuses and touches, the other inspires and perennially feeds the soul.

Whitman’s lack of a sense of character and dramatic difference, while true, and in so far an abatement that forefends his supreme position by the side of the great dramatists, is yet no justified criticism if set up as a bar to his greatness in the lyric field — the field of the prophet-bard or vates. How often must people be warned not to regard him solely as an artist in judging his greatness? This is what men are continually doing, however, in whom the moral and religious, or philosophical, sentiment is little, if at all, developed. And superb moral endowment is as rare as is superb genius of mind.

I have noted the following classes of men who affirm they have no need of Walt Whitman:

1. Those who are like him temperamentally — have plenty of the manly and athletic quality of their own.

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2. Those hyper-sensitive on the subject of sex, ranging from prurient prudes up to those with no prudery but with extreme sensitiveness.

3. All conservatives — religionists, teachers (many), preachers, librarians, business men (many), and so forth.

4. Those who have no profound determination upon the moral and religious and live only in the artistic.

5. Lovers of formal and established verse structure, ranging from the symmetromaniac lovers of hand organs and country choirs up through those erudite gentlemen (such as my friend at Yale) who have spent their lives in the still air of delightful converse with the classics of the world and dislike the distraction of new poetical doctrines.

Such, *mutatis mutandis*, would usually be found to be admirers of the fixed measures of the Italian opera and haters of Richard Wagner’s tremendous innovations and intellectualizations, which call for athletes to wrestle with them rather than those wanting to be lulled and soothed.

Now, it will never do to quarrel with any of these persons. Let them find in Whitman what they are capable of assimilating. They may grow to like him as they grow. Some of them may not need him as a liberating force at all. The world is wide. Shakspere or Dante or Browning may furnish such their proper nutriment much more than Whitman. But they ought to be rebuked for scoffing. Let them respect the consensus of the competent, as they do in other fields. That consensus has long been settled in Europe (and here) to be this: that the readings of the quadrant held starward on the heaving sea of eternity by this Son of God will furnish for some thousand years to come the truest guide through the living universe that passengers of the old ship Earth will be likely to obtain.

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**JULY 1898 (9:68)**

**A Few Notes on Whitman and the New England Writers**

*Laurens Maynard*

Read at the annual meeting of the Walt Whitman Fellowship International, New York, May 31st.

From New England came the first appreciative recognition of *Leaves of Grass*, and today, after a half century has elapsed, if the sales of the book are taken as evidence, New England furnishes a greater number of Whitman
readers than any other part of the country. But these facts cannot be interpreted as evidence of a continuous appreciation of Whitman on the part of New England during the whole period of intervening years.

When amid the storm of obloquy which greeted the first publication of the “Gospel of Democracy” the voice of Emerson, then the chief literary figure of the United States, was heard acclaiming the book as “the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed,” the people of New England, unable to understand what their literary idol saw in this “strange monster with buffalo strength and terrible eyes” attempted to read in the judgment so deliberately expressed a case of the heart’s triumph over the head. In later years no less a person than Emerson’s own son, with strange ignorance of the recorded facts of his father’s friendship for Whitman, attempted to apologize for this evidence of Emerson’s clear vision by a statement as false as its truth would have been humiliating. In a patronizing tone Edward Emerson admits his father’s kindly interest in the “young workingman” who wrote *Leaves of Grass*, but says that after the unauthorized publication of his letter of congratulation Emerson dropped his acquaintance and had nothing more to do with him. It is not necessary that I should attempt to prove the incorrectness of this statement. It has been sufficiently disproved by published evidence already. But in the history of Whitman’s relations with the New England writers his friendship with Emerson is the most significant episode, and as such it may perhaps be dwelt upon even to the extent of repetition.

New England today is reaching the height of outlook upon which its prophet viewed the literary horizon a half century ago. Today its writers and its readers take pride in the fact that from New England came this magnificent greeting of Whitman:

Concord, Massts., 21 July, 1855.

Dear Sir:

I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of *Leaves of Grass*. I find it the most extra-ordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. I am very happy in reading it, as great power makes us happy. It meets the demand I am always making of what seemed the sterile and stingy nature, as if too much handiwork — too much lymph in the temperament — were making our Western wits fat and mean. I give you joy of your free and brave thought. I have great joy in it. I find incomparable things said incomparably well, as they must be. I find the courage of treatment which so delights us, and which large perception only can inspire. I greet you at the
beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere for such a start. I rubbed my eyes a little to see if this sunbeam were no illusion; but the solid sense of the book is a sober certainty. It has the best merits, namely, of fortifying and encouraging. I did not know until I last night saw the book advertised in a newspaper that I could trust the name as real and available for a postoffice. I wish to see my benefactor, and have felt much like striking my tasks, and visiting New York to pay you my respects.

R. W. Emerson.

And visit New York he did (after, according to Edward Emerson, he had dropped Whitman’s acquaintance), and from that day whenever their paths crossed it was always Emerson who sought out Whitman, and he never missed an opportunity to meet him. Up and down under the elms on Boston Common walked these titans arguing over the “Children of Adam”—not because Emerson did not appreciate their motive and purpose but because he feared that from the bitter opposition which these passages would excite, the whole book, with its salutary lesson of democracy, might be prevented from reaching the hearts of the readers of the world. In Boston twenty years later Whitman wrote:

Up and down this breadth by Beacon street, between these same old elms, I walk’d for two hours, of a bright sharp February mid-day twenty-one years ago, with Emerson, then in his prime, keen, physically and morally magnetic, arm’d at every point, and when he chose, wielding the emotional just as well as the intellectual. During those two hours he was the talker and I the listener. It was an argument-statement, reconnoitring, review, attack, and pressing home (like an army corps in order, artillery, cavalry, infantry), of all that could be said against that part (and a main part) in the construction of my poems, “Children of Adam.” More precious than gold to me that dissertation {sic} — it afforded me, ever after, this strange and paradoxical lesson: each point of E.’s statement was unanswerable, no judge’s charge ever more complete or convincing, I could never hear the points better put — and then I felt down in my soul the clear and unmistakable conviction to disobey all, and pursue my own way. “What have you to say then to such things?” said E., pausing in conclusion. “Only that while I can’t answer them at all, I feel more settled than ever to adhere to my own theory, and exemplify it,” was my candid response. Whereupon we went and had a good dinner at the American House. And thenceforward I never waver’d or was touch’d with qualms, (as I confess I had been two or three times before.)
Later, just before Emerson’s death, quoting again from Whitman’s published writings (which doubtless Edward Emerson has never read):

Several hours at E.’s house, and dinner there. . . . Of course the best of the occasion (Sunday, September 18, ’81) was the sight of E. himself. . . . Besides Emerson himself, Mrs. E., with their daughter Ellen, the son Edward and his wife, with my friend F. S. {Frank Sanborn} and Mrs. S., and others, relatives and intimates.

And lastly these words from a letter written by Whitman to William Sloane Kennedy:

I welcomed him deepest and always — yet it began and continued on his part, quite entirely — He always sought ME. We probably had a dozen (possibly twenty) of these meetings, talks, walks etc. — Some 5 or 6 times (sometimes New York, sometimes Boston). . . . That visit to me at Sanborn’s by E. and his family (see pp. 189–90 Spec. Days.) and the splendid formal informal family dinner to me next day (Sunday, Sept. 18, 81, by E. Mrs. E. and all) I consider not only a victor-event in my life, but it is an after-explanation of so much and offered as an apology, peace offering, justification of much the world knows not of.

This much of Emerson, but what of the other New England writers of that day? Those who stood closest to Emerson accorded with him in tribute to Whitman’s genius. Thoreau, after a visit, in company with A. Bronson Alcott, to Whitman in Brooklyn, says in a letter to H. G. O. Blake:

That Walt Whitman of whom I wrote to you is the most interesting fact to me at present. I have just read his second edition which he gave me, and it has done me more good than any reading for a long time. I have found his poem exhilarating, encouraging. As for its sensuality, and it may turn out to be less sensual than it appears, I do not so much wish that those parts were not written, as that men and women were so pure that they could read them without harm. . . .

On the whole it sounds to me very brave and very American, after whatever deductions. I do not believe that all the sermons, so called, that have been preached in this land put together are equal to it for preaching. We ought to rejoice greatly in him. He occasionally suggests something a little more than human. . . . He is awfully good. Since I have seen him, I find I am not disturbed by any brag or egoism in his book. He may turn out the least of a braggart of all, having a better right to be confident. He is a great fellow.
And again, in another communication, Thoreau summed the poet up in the epigrammatic phrase: “He is Democracy.”

Alcott and Sanborn were also his admirers and friends, the latter writing, in 1889, to Whitman’s birthday:

At no time since Emerson directed my attention to his *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 have I failed to notice what he was saying or doing. . . . The voyage of Whitman has been a bold and forward one, guided by the stars, and not by winds and currents. He has tugged manfully at his oars, and has had his own compass to steer by. I lament that it is now so nearly over, and that my little boat must apparently run on a few years without having his noble barge in hail.

Among the other great names of New England’s older literary men the recognition to Whitman was scanty and unwilling. I have been particularly impressed with the fineness of Whitman’s attitude toward one — James Russell Lowell — who had assumed to consider him as a New York rowdy whom no one in the country took any notice of: Lowell, remarking to a friend as he pointed out a grotesque grocer’s sign with its letters stretched higgledy-piggledy over the side of a store, “That is Whitman’s poetry”; Lowell, urging an English nobleman not to present his letters of introduction to Whitman; Lowell, sinking below a noble opportunity, when entrusted with the task of furnishing the list of names to be inscribed upon the Boston Public Library, and though with room for a handful of minor poets finding none for the great American bard — and then Whitman, great with the magnanimity of the true gentleman, writing to the Boston *Herald* on Lowell’s death: “Let me add my little word to J. R. Lowell’s memory. His was the true American’s and humanity’s heart, in the light of his own convictions, and he wrought it out faithfully.”

Concerning Longfellow’s attitude I have found no record except Whitman’s own testimony to some friendly interchange of greetings in 1881: “A short but pleasant visit to Longfellow. I am not one of the calling kind, but as the author of *Evangeline* kindly took the trouble to come and see me three years ago in Camden, where I was ill, I felt not only the impulse of my own pleasure on that occasion, but a duty. He was the only particular eminence I called on in Boston, and I shall not soon forget his lit-up face and glowing warmth and courtesy, in the modes of what is called the old school.”

Holmes, who, with all reverence for his good qualities and great ability, showed sometimes a trace of what in one less kindly and less able would be designated as snobbishness (and if this phrase seems too severe, read once more in *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table* his comparison of a self-made man with
the old Irishman’s self-built house). Holmes has put his views on Whitman on record in a jocular comparison of the poet with Lord Timothy Dexter, who published his autobiography unpunctuated but with a page of assorted marks at the end, that the reader might “pepper and sotl the book as he choose.”

Whittier, of course, could not comprehend the true meaning of Leaves of Grass, but he could not fail to appreciate the noble heart which made Whitman “the wound dresser.” With relentless hand he is said to have burned the presentation copy sent him of the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass, but with willing hand he contributed to the testimonial to the poet in his declining years and sent messages of good cheer to him “who so faithfully nursed the sick and suffering soldiers during the Civil War.”

To only one New England writer has been vouchsafed the undesirable fame of attacking Whitman’s reputation as a lover of his fellows. Leaves of Grass and Whitman’s so-called eccentricities were for years common property for the railer. But almost without exception the charity and kindliness of Whitman’s heart were regarded with admiration. Strange to say, this man is one who has been noted in the main for the liberality of his views and the gentleness of his disposition. An abolitionist, a supporter of John Brown, a champion of equal rights for women, and of civil and religious liberty, Thomas Wentworth Higginson might stand upon a noble if not lofty pedestal in the pantheon of New England’s worthies. But so intemperate, so unjust, and so disgraceful have been the attacks which (anonymously and over his signature) he has made upon the living and the dead Whitman, that it is quite possible he may some day be remembered as a Whitman assailant after his good has been interred with his bones. A dozen years ago, the late William Douglas O’Connor answered Mr. Higginson’s strictures upon Whitman’s war record in words which pierced like a rapier through the pretensions of the critic or crushed like a bludgeon the attack of this adversary. In view of the petty insinuations in the estimate of Whitman in Mr. Higginson’s autobiographic volume, Cheerful Yesterdays, these words may not be unworthy of repetition, for they apply no less to the present than to the past attack:

Actually now, really, now, Mr. Higginson avers that Walt Whitman ought to become the focal point of million fingered scorn for having served in the hospitals! It appears that the old poet performed a pathetic, a sublime and immortal service. He tended the wounded and dying soldiers throughout the whole war, and for years afterward, until the last hospital disappeared. O, but this was infamous! Shame on such “unmanly manhood”! yells the Rev. Mr. Higginson. He should have personally “followed the drum,”
declares this soldier of the Army of the Lord, himself a volunteer colonel. In
bald words, instead of volunteering for the ghastly, the mournful, the per-
ilous labors of those swarming infernos, the hospitals, Walt Whitman should
have enlisted in the rank and file. From all which I gather that Mr. Higginson
should have cast a stone at Jean Valjean for going down without a musket into
the barricades. I beg leave to tell this Reverend Militair that if Longfellow had
gone from Cambridge to serve in the hospitals, as Walt Whitman served, the
land would have rung from end to end, and there would have been no objur-
gations on his not enlisting in the army, from the pen of the Rev. Thomas
Wentworth Higginson. I also beg leave to tell him, since he brings personali-
ties into fashion, that Walt Whitman's work of comfort and charity beside the
cots of the Union and Rebel soldiers will last as long and stand as fair, as the
military bungling and blundering which distinguished this clergyman
turned colonel and evoked such agonized curses from his commanding
officer at Port Royal. Better be a good nurse like Walt Whitman, than a non-
descript warrior like the Rev. Col. Higginson.

But Mr. O'Connor is dead now, and without fear of another such counter-
attack Mr. Higginson is safe to utter his last strictures upon the subject, which
he does as follows:

The personal impression made on me by the poet was not so much of man-
liness as of Boweriness, if I may coin the phrase. . . . This passing impression
did not hinder me from thinking of Whitman with hope and satisfaction at
a later day when regiments were to be raised for the war, when the Bowery
seemed the very place to enlist them and even Billy Wilson's Zouaves were
hailed with delight. When, however, after waiting a year or more, Whitman
decided that the proper post for him was hospital service, I confess to feel-
ing a reaction, which was rather increased than diminished by his profuse
celebration of his own labors in that direction. Hospital attendance is a fine
thing no doubt, yet if all men, South and North, had taken the same view of
their duty that Whitman held, there would have been no occasion for hos-
pitals on either side.

But no other reply is needed. This is the last dying flame of the old hatred,
and, like Bunyan's Giant Pope, he who once did great damage to the cause can
now only sit at the mouth of his cave and bite his nails at the passer by.
Relying upon the fragmentary suggestion of my title for justification I have
chosen to consider in this paper only a few of the older New England writers.
Of our younger authors much could be written and perhaps at another time
this may be done. I know not of one, however, who represents the old spirit of hostility. Not all accept Whitman’s writings in their entirety, but Whitman himself never asked nor expected this. Many of the younger generation have rendered the truest homage in confessing the influence of the poet in their life and their work, and this influence seems to be steadily increasing while that of some of the former heroes is unquestionably on the wane.

But it has remained for the past year to evidence the crowning triumph of Whitman in Boston. In the city where fifteen years ago *Leaves of Grass* was ignominiously cast out from the book stores; in the same city where a member of a prominent publishing firm once said, “from mere considerations of policy, I wouldn’t put our names to a first edition of Byron or even the Bible. When Walt Whitman has become a standard book like them, as I suppose he will, any firm will be glad to publish him”; and in the very store where years ago Ticknor & Fields, probably at Emerson’s suggestion, considered the publication of *Leaves of Grass* and rejected it, not from a conviction of its lack of merit but as being incompatible with their other publications, for two weeks the main windows on the most traveled corner downtown were filled with a Whitman exhibition comprising every edition of the poet’s works, with portraits, manuscripts, etc., and the crowds that pressed about the windows from morning till night were evidence of the interest of the public in the book once rejected and despised. And it is significant of the development of public opinion that although the same persons who were responsible for its attempted suppression in 1882 were still occupying the same official positions, no word of opposition was heard to these works which are once more published in Boston.

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**JULY 1900 (11:76)**

**Anne Gilchrist and Walt Whitman**

*By Elizabeth Porter Gould*

“T.”

Anne Gilchrist, who has other claims upon reputation than her courageous espousal of Whitman, is not likely to be forgotten as long as the qualities which characterized her personality are themselves regarded as precious and potential. She did a few public things well and then stopped. But in her private career — as woman, friend, mother — she was full of activity and always graciously eminent. It is hardly necessary to insist that such a person is assured of professional immortality or that she stood apart from the crowd as one on whom
was reposed extraordinary responsibilities. The chief thing is that she did what she did with vigor and grace and impressed upon her environment, literary and personal, the never slight beauty of a supremely sympathetic nature. Much as you might like the writings of such a woman you would inevitably like the woman better. She does not enjoy a name crowned by any popular recognition. But a few know her well and the few who know her rate her at no common valuation. She has always been a familiar figure to the friends of Walt Whitman. Her “estimate” of Whitman [i.e., “A Woman’s Estimate of Walt Whitman” (1870)] came to him at a time when friends were few and when his friends avowing him friend took their reputations, if they had any, in their hands. She accepted him in terms and upon grounds which on occasion would have excited interest and joy. But coming when it did, so timed to meet a serious crisis, it stirred up an enthusiasm which had no exact parallel in the personal history of Whitman. Whitman was always a center of conflict. Name your child Whitman and [he] became a challenge. That was more true two decades ago than it is now, though even now we find echoing [saints who look upon Whitman and all that smacks of] him as evil and a power for children especially to be warned against. Whitman made it plain enough in print what he thought of the great woman who so early ranged herself at his side. But it was touching to hear him talk of her, so was his voice tender and even shaken by the inner emotion the reference invited. The large memorial volume of his mother edited by Herbert Gilchrist, the constant appeals to her in lives of Whitman, Whitman’s own mention of her in the text of his work, lead inevitably enough to this present brief history, which will enrich the data of the movement which in literature finds its protagonist in Whitman. Without resort to matter really new this summary of a remarkable friendship nevertheless gives with essential gravity and truth the spiritual situation encountered by Whitman at the initiation of his career.

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**JULY 1901 (12:73)**

**The Whitman Cipher**

*Ernest Crosby*

Read at the evening session of the convention of the Walt Whitman Fellowship International, New York, May 31st.

Eureka! I have discovered it at last — I mean the real author of *Leaves of Grass*. It has always appeared to me impossible that a man whom all respectable people regarded as a Bowery loafer and tramp should have given utterance
to some of the greatest truths of the past century — as impossible in fact as that a drunken poacher should have written *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*. I knew that if clue there was to the secret, it must be found in the last edition of Whitman’s prose-poems — for where else should his antemortem confession be inscribed? — and for years I have thumbed that work until four copies have been worn out and the fifth is about falling to pieces; but at last I succeeded.

One of the first things that struck me in the makeup of this collection of poems was that, literally without rhyme or reason, a piece of prose was dragged into it, instead of being included in the prose works of the poet. This was a significant fact. It said plainly: “Dig here.” Again, on the first phase of this prose excrescence (p. 425) is printed the following enigmatic footnote, which I reproduce in full: “When Champollion, on his death-bed, handed to the printer the revised proof of his Egyptian Gramma, he said, gaily, ‘Be careful of this — it is my *carte de visite* to posterity.’”

What an atmosphere of mystery there is in this note! You can hear the slow music and see the lights turned down. The reference to Champollion and his hieroglyphics, what sense does it make if it does not point to a riddle to be solved? And then the death-bed direction to the printer — the *carte de visite* to posterity: how could Whitman have indicated more clearly his intention of revealing his *alter ego* upon this page, and of then and there acquainting future generations with his name? I determined to be “careful of this,” and set to work to find the *carte de visite*.

The most conspicuous thing about that page is the caption in very large capitals, to wit: a **backward glance o’er travel’d roads**. The backbone of a sentence is to be sought in its consonants, so I entered upon the anatomical study of the line. The first three consonants startled me. “B——ck——”: was not here the familiar outline of one of Whitman’s best known friends, Dr. Bucke? I trembled as I read on for confirmation of my discovery.

*Then felt I as a searcher of the skies*

*When some new planet swims into his ken,*

*Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes*

*He stared at the Pacific, while his men*

*Looked at each other with wild surmise*

*Alone upon a peak in Darien.*

*(Keats, On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer)*

The reader will notice at once the strange fact that the aforesaid line of capitals contains two apostrophes which are quite out of place in a prose
heading. Why did not Whitman say, “over traveled roads”? Evidently because he wished to call attention to the two omitted letters, namely, the v in over and the e in traveled. Let us take these two letters v (or u) and e and combine them with the consonants “b——ck——” already discovered, and we have “bucke”? The sentence then reads: “a buckeward glance o’er travel’d roads,” and our gaze is fixed upon Dr. Bucke as the ruling spirit of Whitman’s past lifework. This is his visiting card to posterity!

The foregoing proof ought to convince the most skeptical, but as I know well the perversity of prejudices, I add another proof. The title of the long poem “Song of Myself” is, to say the least, suggestive. Here, if anywhere, this “self” should be revealed, and sure enough in the very first section I find the following cipher:

I LoafE And inViTE my Soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear OF summer GRASS.
Creeds and schools are in aBeYance,
Retiring back awhile sufficeD at what they aRe, but never forgotten,
I harbor for good or Bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,
NatUre without ChecK with original Energy.

Here we have the hidden message, “Leaves of Grass by Dr. Bucke,” just where we should expect to find it, at the beginning of the “Song of Myself.” If we penetrate to the esoteric meaning of these lines we see an allegory, viz., Whitman, the tramp, loafing on the grass, while Dr. Bucke, personified as “Nature,” is permitted to speak through him “without check with original energy.”

The entire history of Whitman’s life is illuminated by this discovery. We can readily see how Dr. Bucke, when, as a very young man, he found his consciousness opened to the profound truths of Leavess of Grass, saw that for him to impress them in his own person would be to wreck the distinguished professional career which lay before him, a career which would not admit of a free discussion of the wrongs and evils of society. He happened somehow to meet Whitman, who was then penniless, and the latter lent himself willingly to the plan of publishing the book in his name. To avert suspicion Whitman was permitted to interpolate here and there the very slang of the gutter, in the midst of pages of prophetic thought and noblest diction. Whitman had already written a good deal of inferior stuff, and it has often been remarked that there was at this epoch a sudden and inexplicable change in his thought and style. Dr. Bucke

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has seen the necessity of explaining this, and he has made the attempt by presupposing a sort of miraculous transformation in his character at the age of thirty-five, a hypothesis which led him into a far-reaching theory of the development of genius.

As the two men grew older and the poems became famous, Dr. Bucke began to wish that he had not misled the public. He hastened to Walt’s bedside at Camden and they arranged that the key to the secret should be given in the last edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Meanwhile, in order that the mind of the reading world may be prepared for the revelation, the doctor plunges into Baconian controversy. Many of his friends have wondered why he is so deeply interested in this ancient matter, but when we consider that for him “Bacon-Shakespeare” is but a symbol for “Bucke-Whitman,” the question is answered. The roots of the names BaCon and BuCke are of course identical and the one case prefigures the other. In his Shakespearean studies, Dr. Bucke is merely giving us a clue to his own authorship. The true author of the Shakespearean plays was discovered too late for the world to render him the applause which was his due. We are fortunate in establishing the identity of the author of *Leaves of Grass* while he is still among us and can hear our words of grateful admiration and delight.

{The humor of this divertissement lies in the appearance, over several years, of articles broaching the highly vexed question of the identity of the author of the plays by “Shakespeare.” Isaac Hull Platt, in particular, fueled the debate on the anti-Stratfordian side, notably with a two-part article in November–December 1904, “Bacon’s Signatures in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*” (15:135), which begins: “In 1897 I sent a note to the *Conservator* showing that the curious Hog Latin word Honorificabilitudinitatibus in act V scene 1 of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* is an anagram of the Latin sentence, ‘Hi ludi, tuiti sibi Fr. Bacono nati,’ which may be translated, ‘These plays originating with Francis Bacon, are protected for themselves.’” Crosby’s quotation of the Keats sonnet is very faulty — but let that pass. Satire could not squelch the debate. In August 1915 appeared “Was Walt Whitman a Baconian?” by Julius Chambers (26:86). The article, which first appeared in the *Brooklyn Eagle*, begins: “The interesting event of the month is the disclosure, among Horace Traubel’s ‘Memoirs of Walt Whitman,’ in the July Forum, of the ‘good gray poet’s’ view on the Shake-speare–Bacon controversy. One learns for the first time that Whitman was a Baconian!”}
The Whitman Cult

Francis Howard Williams

As a specimen of modern “wit and wisdom” the following clipping* will be found more than commonly diverting:

The Whitman cult today presents an astonishing instance of insanely preposterous pretensions conceded and proclaimed by supposedly sane and intelligent persons. He was the most blatant and bombastic of egotists, Maurice Thompson wrote of him: “No other man ever had such a reservoir of unaltered and altogether amazing egotism on which to draw for floods of resonant and high roiling absurdities.” Dr. Weir Mitchell writes of Whitman, in that charming and wholesome book, *When All the Woods Are Green*: “He was the most entirely vain creature I ever knew. The perfect story of his vanity will never be told. It was past belief.” He was afflicted with what Emerson called the “goitre of egotism”; his disease might be diagnosed as egomania complicated with satyriasis. His pretensions were almost unlimited. He talked like a Messiah and Savior. He summoned men to accept him as a Master, and wrote that his mission was to bestow upon any man or woman the entrance to all the gifts of the universe — that whoever would become his follower would have to give up all else; for he would expect to become for his disciples their sole and exclusive standard; their novitiate would be long and exhausting, the whole past theory of their lives and all conformity to the lives around them would have to be abandoned.

To all who may be unwilling for this severe self-renunciation and all abandoning consecration to him, he says, peremptorily: “Release me now; let go your hand from my shoulder and depart on your way.” He wrote of himself thus: “Divine am I, inside and out: if I worship anything, it shall be the spread of my body — plumb in the uprights, braced in the beams, stout as a horse, haughty, electrical.” Toward all divinities except himself he is scornful, and says that he “takes the dimensions of Jehovah — Him and the other gods — for what they are worth, and not a cent more.” That sounds like the frenzied Mexican Nagualist shouting: “Lo! I, myself, am here! I am most furious! I make the loudest noise! I respect no one! What god or demon dares face me?”

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Is it not extraordinary that people who, like the editor of *The Methodist Review*, found their ethical and religious systems upon metaphor and parable, should so wholly fail to grasp the meaning of Whitman and the purport of his life and work?

The “supposedly sane and intelligent persons” who concede and proclaim his “pretensions” may be a very funny lot, but they are not half so ridiculous as the people who in broad daylight run around with their little theological tallow dips to examine the crannies in a gospel wholly beyond their capacity to understand.

Perhaps one of these days the little fellows who take their periodical fling at the “Whitman cult” will awaken to the fact that the “cult” is a very live organism, and that an organism which lives and grows must contain within itself the vital germ of a great personality.


**March 1902 (13:12)**

**Walt Whitman’s Poetry: A Study and a Selection**

**By Edmond Holmes**

“I.”

Holmes turns a somersault and calls it Walt Whitman. He twists, squirms, jumps, crawls and runs, and holds Whitman responsible for all his transformations. He has discovered that Whitman has doctrines. These doctrines succeed in nullifying a large part of his work. Whitman without doctrine is rather big and imposing. But Whitman with doctrine is impossible. Holmes also confides to us another revelation: Whitman is without reverence. Comradeship without reverence is incredible. Democracy without reverence is equally incredible. Ergo: Whitman’s comradeship and democracy are ciphers if not shams. Whitman is without reverence. Whitman is always declaring that man “has not been devout enough.” But Whitman is without reverence. Whitman’s democracy is so absolute it leaves nothing to be looked up to. Hence, his democracy is superficial and destructive. Whitman should have written in some other way. He should have consulted the oracles and got a few pointers from them as to beauty and artistic form. Whitman is by large odds “rags and
tatters.” And Holmes has a customary shudder over Whitman’s undress. This is the old sick contention for reticence. A man catches a disease. He goes with his disease into a corner. He calls this act one of reticence. Henceforth he is a man of taste. There, too, is Whitman’s adhesion to the States. He found his ideal government and ideal society under American institutions. Holmes says this. Whitman does not. The lash with which Whitman touched up present social sins in *Democratic Vistas*! Whitman endorsed no existing and no historic democracy. He proclaimed a democracy yet to appear. This democracy was not geographical. It was not institutional or constitutional. It was extra national and extra mundane. Holmes is as literal as a laundry check. He disputes Whitman’s most significant terminology by multiplication, subtraction and division. For a poet he is a deserter. He abandons the large manner of the scholar for the small passion of the disputant. Nothing of poetry ever survives the analysis of breakfast. Holmes looks on *Leaves of Grass* as a collection of fragments. He refuses to discuss it as organic and orbic. Hence the false inference, the six by ten interpretations, and finally the selections (which fill the second half of the book) which are set forth to show where Whitman in the opinion of Holmes achieved verbal beauty rather than where the larger spiritual promise of his initiative was fulfilled. The serial lacks that dignity of phrase, that august deportment, which seems to belong to authors of authors. It is even dull and wearisome. Now, I do not say this because I resent Holmes’ book. I welcome it. I do not share the feeling of a number of his English critics, who regard Holmes as an impertinence, a gratuity, a something ungracious forced into expression. I am glad he wrote. But I am disappointed in the emphasis Holmes puts on the old objections. Holmes warns woman off. Whitman did not understand woman. Woman to Whitman was only mother. But Holmes could have known that the sort of mother Whitman would have made woman is a sort of woman whose gifts would shame all precedent. Whitman himself was fond of saying to his friends: “Women well understand me.” The women who did adhere to Whitman were the women of the prophecies. They foreran the sex. They were with the outer guard. I greatly doubt if Holmes has added anything to the stock even of objections to Whitman. He certainly has added nothing otherwise that is in the nature of light and divination. And yet Holmes is right to growl out if he has his growl to make. It is seen to be increasingly unlikely, however, that Whitman will ever be disposed of, for good or ill, on ancient grounds of taste or medieval canons of art. Every time a master critic minces him he is seen to escape into new life. Such a force with perennial power to rehabilitate itself will finally draw even the critical currents to its compass.
Burton seesaws the best he knows how trying to hit a balance for Whitman. He is bothered by art and not-art. Bothered by taste and not-taste. He concedes. He takes back. He concedes again. On the whole he concedes. Concedes much. What is poetry and not poetry? What is style and not style? A man writing a classbook is obliged to answer questions. Much in Whitman is evil. But Whitman for all in all is good. That is where Burton stands. Much in Whitman is not poetry. Much in him is. Whitman for all in all is a poet. Whitman never worried himself asking whether he was a poet. He spoke of his poems. But if you said his poems were not poems he only smiled. Call them anything you choose. Are they of use? Do they stir up the dead waters? I like to see how the schoolbooks handle Whitman. You can discover in that way the average of conventional feeling about him. One thing Burton misses. He swings the book to and fro pendulum-like between yes and no. He misses the fact that *Leaves of Grass* is not a book of poems but one poem. That it is not a poem even. That it is a life. In that life all factors of life belong with all other factors of life. Black and white, weak and strong, opposites, contraries, bad and good, joy and grief. With anything missing all would be missing. *Leaves of Grass* cannot be judged with reference to its qualities but with reference to its quality. The selective *Leaves of Grass* which Burton and others call for is a *Leaves of Grass* with *Leaves of Grass* left out. Burton writes poetry himself. Burton no doubt always knows what is and what is not poetry, as he says Whitman did not. That is the reason Burton’s poems are household words in America. Are not Burton’s poems household words in America?

{The above is a response to one chapter in this study.}
What Walt Whitman Means for Us All

Francis Howard Williams
Speech at the Walt Whitman dinner, Philadelphia, December 19th.

A thing which has always struck me with wonder whenever I have been able to attend the gatherings of the Walt Whitman Fellowship is the extraordinary way in which Whitman has impressed his personality upon different minds.

To the man of strongly social instincts and belief Walt seems primarily the comrade — the lover — extends his hand in fraternal greeting to his brother; to the individualist he seems, first of all and above all, the asserter of individual initiative, the evangelist of the ego as the central factor of the universe. To the radical he is radical; to the conservative often conservative. In the eyes of scientific anarchism he appears as the enemy of institutions, as one who would tear up by the roots those societary organizations which stand in the way of his upward march toward liberty. In the view of others he is the conservator of institutions (as indeed he has more than once announced himself to be) desiring not destruction but reform of traditional method.

Herein is a paradox. The explanation lies in the fact, too seldom recognized, that there is such a thing as absolute truth and such a thing as relative truth, and that it is with relative truth that we have chiefly to do in this world. All systems contain a measure of relative truth, and Walt is inclusive of all systems because he includes, or seeks to include, the whole range of that which is true in the lives of men. He was indeed a man of infinite variety, and in paying tribute to his memory we are helping to keep alive the vital force for which he stands.

A few days ago, in the course of a talk with my good friend Traubel, he reminded me of something I had said at the time of Walt’s death. I had predicted that for a few years Walt’s fame would suffer a temporary eclipse; he would sink out of view for a time, and then after a while there would be a revival — and his reputation would steadily grow, attaining the great height to which it was permanently entitled. My reason for thinking this was that such has been the course of events in the cases of many great men — especially in the world of letters. We let fall into the earth a beautiful flower or a beautiful fruit and soon go our ways forgetful of the perfume and sweetness, till after a while the miracle of growth is accomplished — the little green sprout appears and the upgrowing plant or tree reminds us of a forgotten joy, and we hail it as the renaissance of an earlier beauty. I am bound to say that I was mistaken in my prediction — if it can
be so called. Walt seems to have been an exception to a general rule, and perhaps we are justified in the hope that this Fellowship of ours has been a factor in helping the exception. Of course Whitman needs no extraneous help to enable him to reach his rightful place in the temple of fame; but the fact that a strong body of his disciples and lovers stood ever inflexibly proclaiming their belief in him may have prevented that temporary obscuration to which I have alluded.

Walt means for us all today the embodiment of an ultimate ideal. The preachers say to us: “In the midst of life we are in death.” That is profoundly true. But Walt calls death lovely and soothing and bids her come; and in so doing we learn another truth equally profound: “In the midst of life we are in beauty.” Beauty is everywhere and fades not, being immortal. We gaze upon it—we absorb it in the reaches of the starry skies, in the green sacristies of trees striving towards the sun, in the shadows of the sweet common grass, in these bodies of ours—these unending souls of ours. Beauty is everywhere and is all-sufficient. It is with us now, and will be with us even in that hour when we shall come to a realization of its identity with Ultimate Truth.

JUNE 1906 (17:58)

Johannes Schlaf on Walt Whitman
{Notice of Die Dichtung, vol. 18}

Paul Harboe

The Germans at home are at once the most cosmopolitan and patriotic people in the world. They are magnificently hospitable. Write a good book, publish it anywhere, and go to Berlin some day and you will see it, translated into the majestic tongue of Goethe, in the book shops. Burdened, though it be, with an emperor and his court, with militarism, with priestcraft, and other medieval trumpery, Germany is today that land where mind is free, where the horizon of intelligence embraces the very earth. Say what you will about its program political, you must admit the universality of its culture. In its avid pursuit of knowledge, Germany stands as a nation almost, if not quite, alone. Its one test question to a foreign author is: Can you teach us anything?

These lines of praise to preface a few words about Herr Johannes Schlaf’s monograph on Walt Whitman, recently issued as volume eighteen in the series entitled Die Dichtung, Herausgeben von Paul Remer (Schuster and Loeffler, Berlin). Herr Schlaf is himself a writer of note in Germany, and he has a long list of productions to his credit—dramas, verse, tales and novels. The present
is his second work on Whitman, and altogether it is a delightful little study, warm with admiration, brilliant even, at times, with enthusiasm.

The author complains that Germany was not only behind England and France, but even little Denmark, in discovering the new poetic message of our brave poet. “But the time has now come,” Herr Schlaf pursues, “for a deeper influence of Walt Whitman to be exercised among us. Moreover such an influence, it seems to me, must yield things more triumphant and fruitful than could a dozen new editions of the medieval mystics — no matter how justified a reprint of these works might be at this time. And I think that Walt Whitman will lead us back into the path of a new, great, modern religious sentiment.

The German writer claims the honor of having been the first to introduce Whitman the Spirit to his compatriots, though he acknowledges the casual contributions of F. Freiligrath in 1868 and Edward Bertz in the eighties, both outdating his own by many years. It was in Freien Bühne that Herr Schlaf drew his initial portrait of the author of Leaves of Grass just fourteen years ago. Since then quite a number of translations of Whitman’s works have appeared throughout the Empire, and more are to come, which is a glad sign. The sweeping proof of the inanity of our literature lies in the eloquent fact that other countries will have none of it. Only our dollars are big, only our noise is great, and do we recognize any other law than the law of greed?

After all, like truth, Walt Whitman can never be confirmed enough, though his enemies did ever sleep.

JUNE 1906 (17:59)

A Life of Walt Whitman
By Henry Bryan Binns

“T.”

Binns has not made a long story short. He has made a long story longer. He is statistical rather than pictorial or dramatic. He has got all the facts in his book. But sometimes the fact is absent. Bucke’s Whitman appeared in the early eighties. It was not carried up to Whitman’s death. Platt’s Whitman though complete is only a brief essayistic summary. So that Binns book has the whole field to itself as the first conclusive life of Whitman in the English language. The one section of the book which most hits me is that section which is most objected to on this side of the Atlantic and which Binns himself states was written chiefly with reference to the English reader. I mean
the several early chapters in which Walt’s foregrounds are sketched in the history of the republic. This is ably done and vital. It gets Walt into the right historic perspective and instead of being superfluous is philosophically and psychically indispensable. Binns has got his timber mainly where it belongs. His speculations are sometimes extended without being illuminating. What he says of Walt’s romance is not objectionable for any reason other than that it is all in the air. And while some writers are just as good or better in the air, Binns is too many ounces to the pound for such service. As I said, Binns now has the field. He has got the whole Whitman story together here and it is well told. I wish he had told it in half the space. He is a trifle what the Germans call langweilig. He is very slow getting along. His readers, many of them, stop reading. His readers, many of those of the gayer sort, hurry on and reach the end of his own book before he does. Walt used to dread explications. I am not afraid of them myself. But a biography may be overloaded with the speculations of the biographer. The story should be told without delays like life touched to the quick with unqualified incident. Binns comes on the scene too often with his own explanations. Whitman disappears and Binns performs. A biography does not belong to the biographer but to the subject. The writer wants to appear as little as possible. If I am painting a portrait I have no business to get my phiz so mixed up with the phiz of my sitter that when the job is done nobody can tell whose portrait, his or mine, is on the canvas. Binns has greatly injured the pith and directness of his story by stopping too often to dilate on unimportant details in Whitman’s message. The book needs to be got in light marching order. The superfluous finery should be chucked away. The book should take itself to the road relieved of every article of extraneous baggage. Binns has skillfully massed together about all the significant Whitman testimony that was accessible to him. The importance of his book as the only Whitman biography formally, and in vast detail existing is unquestionable, I am sorry that it comes along so heavy-keeled. It drags itself about as if it was made helpless by its own weight. Sometimes a good ship is in bad luck and we think something is the matter with the ship. There is nothing the matter with Binns’s entirely seaworthy vessel. It is overloaded. Loaded below the water’s edge. That is all.

{In the previous Conservator, Traubel allowed Ellen O’Connor, William O’Connor’s widow, to comment on the “painfully inaccurate” statements Binns made about Whitman’s relations with her husband (82). She praises his careful study of Leaves but takes exception to the chapter on Whitman’s “romance” (“Less might have been better said on that score”) and
offers Traubel the theme for his following review: “Sometimes Mr. Binns has appeared to load the text with rather extreme inferences.” Ten years later, Binns brought out a compact version of his biography. Traubel didn’t greet it kindly either (see 27).

JULY 1906 (17:75)

**Days with Walt Whitman**  
*By Edward Carpenter*

“T.”

Carpenter was an original Whitman man because he was an original Carpenter man. He took Walt in at a glance and without a doubt. His loyalty was first and last. We are seeing a new breed of Whitman people today. The people who tell us how lucky it would have been for Walt if he had had no friends. If he had just waited and frozen and starved to death outside until the college professors got ready to receive him. The man who knew Walt on the jump was extreme. He had no poise. He was without historic perspective. The man who knew at once that Walt was some shakes was blind or a fool. The man who did not need to be told by time or by guardians that Walt had come to stay was a raving enthusiast. Well, Carpenter was one of the ignoramuses. He knew so little that he knew at once that Walt was a kingpin. He was so extreme in his opinions that he talked right out without asking whether it was proper to do so. Some part of Carpenter’s story is set down in this book. It is interesting and valuable both because Whitman was Whitman and because Carpenter is Carpenter. Carpenter writes a preface, follows it with records of two visits paid to Camden, and then adds four chapters of vivid general discussion of Walt’s life and work: Whitman as Prophet, The Poetic Form of *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman’s Children, Whitman and Emerson. There is no halt and no hurry in his narrative. It goes on from start to finish with simplicity and grace. Carpenter makes distinct additions to Whitman history and psychology. Carpenter knew Walt. Knew him in uncommon as well as in common ways. Knew him as many knew him. Knew him as few knew him. Carpenter was familiar with Walt’s spiritual backgrounds. To some of Walt’s adherents Walt was so much beef and bone. He was not without beef and bone. But Carpenter saw farther on. Walt was very physical to neutralize the danger of being very spiritual. Carpenter does not finger Walt one side or the other as if he had any fears. To the man with truth in the beyond no scar in the process involves any despair. When
Carpenter discusses the matter of Walt’s children it never occurs to him that he should first make good with Mrs. Grundy. Carpenter is never brutally hot. Yet he never qualifies. He does not take a little off and put a little on to get himself adjusted to normally alien conditions and persons. He just sets a style for himself and sticks to it. He is calm, firm. He has a placid take-it-for-granted manner which alone settles many a problem though not a word is said. Carpenter’s book is notably a contribution to the increasing mass of permanent Whitmania. It is first-hand. It is not made up of stale repetitions or confusing explications. It is an instant blow at the anvil. You see the sparks fly.

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November 1906 (17:137)

Whitman’s “Sin against Chastity”

Isaac Hull Platt

The matter of Walt Whitman’s domestic relations comes up again in Bliss Perry’s biography of the poet in what seems an unfortunate way. It doubtless would have the matter had been treated by Whitman’s friends with the same reticence that he himself observed, but after Edward Carpenter had made public a portion of Whitman’s letter to Symonds that course ceased to be possible.

Professor Perry’s book, coming as it does reinforced by his well earned prestige as a man of letters, together with his position as the incumbent of the chair of Longfellow and Lowell, will of necessity have a profound influence. This being the case it seems unfortunate that he should see fit to treat this particular incident of Whitman’s career just as he does. He approaches it with the sententious platitude that “sins against chastity commonly bring their own punishment.” They do, they do; and honesty is the best policy and virtue is its own reward. They are obvious maxims; but really this one seems out of place here.

First of all, there is no evidence on record and no knowledge in the possession of his friends that Whitman was guilty of any “sin against chastity.” What we know is that at one period of his life he entered into a relation which resulted in the birth of children and that this relation was without the sanction of the church or of a justice of the peace. But neither the court nor the church makes or unmakes chastity. From what Whitman told his friends during his last illness they learned that the relation — whatever it was in other respects — was no casual liaison but, on the contrary, was felt by him to be of a most earnest and
spiritual nature, affecting him emotionally that he was never able to tell the whole story even to those who were closest to him. How wise or unwise — how reasonable or unreasonable — the relation may have been, in the absence of fuller information, we shall probably never know; but in a relation of this kind, based as it seems to have been on profound spiritual emotion, the use of such a phrase as “sin against chastity” seems strangely foreign to the purpose, and — with all apologies to Professor Perry — verging a little on cant.

It is not my purpose to enter upon a discussion of the ethics of marriage and divorce. Excellent arguments are forthcoming in favor of their regulation, but these are apart from the question of chastity and depend upon the matter of social status — the relation of the individual to the state. There are many who think — and I think with them — that the matter of chastity is not one depending upon church ceremonies or legal enactments, however useful they may be in their way, but one that reaches far deeper into the hearts and souls of men and women.

November 1906 (17:137)

Questions for Bliss Perry

Horace Traubel

On page one hundred twenty-three of his life of Whitman Bliss Perry says: “He persuaded one man of letters, then recently married, to intrust to him the whole of a slender fortune, which was straightway lost in speculation. His friend brought suit to recover, but it was like trying to coin a vacuum.”

Perry, tell us who is your authority for this bit of history. Give us the name of the man of letters. When was the money borrowed and what was the amount?

On page two hundred seventy Perry makes this statement: “Many friends who contributed, out of slender means, to his weekly support — since his brother George proved unwilling to help him — were surprised to find that in 1891 he had spent nearly four thousand dollars upon a massive tomb in Harleigh Cemetery, and that during his last illness, when he was supposed to be penniless, he had several thousand dollars in the bank.”

Perry, where did you get your data? What do you know about the fund that was raised to make Whitman comfortable in his last days? Name a few of the many friends of slender means who contributed. Tell us if any one of them contributed because he was led to suppose that Whitman was penniless. Name somebody in the group who at that time joined in a last act of courtesy.

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to Whitman who is willing to stand as sponsor for your indictment. And while
you are about it, Perry, I ask you to tell us what you call “slender means.”

Perry, the *Conservator* invites you to walk in and make yourself at home and
answer its questions.

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**november 1906 (17:138)**

**Walt Whitman: His Life and Work**

“T.”

I read the last two chapters of Perry’s book first. Then I read the book. When I was through I wondered how he had come to his conclusions. The book did not lead to them. His case did not logically connect with his summing up. He made so many subtractions in the process he seemed to add too much at the end. Still, that’s Perry’s business rather than mine. The book is written in the judicial mood. Biography that starts with being judicial too often finishes with being judicious. I remember that Lowell wrote an essay under this head: On a Certain Condescension in Foreigners. Taking Perry’s and similar books as illustrations and texts we might write a significant essay under a paraphrased head: On a Certain Condescension in Biographers. Some of the reviewers of the *Life* have a notion that Whitman is lucky at last. The hotheads are brushed aside. Here sits judgment with ice on its punkin. The advocate is brushed aside. The prosecution is brushed aside. Justice has come. Justice, which dont care who is innocent or guilty. Well — justice also has ice on its heart. Justice may not care. But love cares. And love, not justice, writes the books which are immortally dear to the heart of man. Whitman in luck? That’s as if you said the sun was in luck because a blind man had opened his eyes. Perry writes rather from up down than face to face. I like many things in the book. But I don’t like the book. It has excellent meanings but lacks a meaning. It adds some fact to Whitman biography — most of it contributed by Ellen O’Connor. It also adds some valuable incidental interpretation. Perry’s point of view is always literary before it is human. He weighs, measures, scans, dissects, argues. He dont flash his way to truth. He dont see all at once. He sees after awhile. Or most likely loses his way. Biographers quite often lose their way in their subjects. Perry becomes amusing when he speaks of Ingersoll as “a one-time well-known skeptic.” He is in a big hurry. He treats oblivion as a piece of private property. I want to say that his reference to Mary Davis, who was Walt’s housekeeper, is ugly and largely untrue. Most of his history is of course straight. But enough of
it is careless enough to make me doubt his biographical methods. A little inquiry addressed to those who might be presumed to know and do know would have spared his biography some of its grave defects. His charge that Whitman deserted his children is utterly gratuitous because it is based only on guesses. Perry knows that his information does not justify any such unqualified verdict. Yet he gives his opinion without a doubt. There are other instances in which he makes hasty deductions. His book thus becomes statistically inaccurate. I ask Perry some questions on another page and he will answer them. Perry says Whitman never knew the difference between the gentleman and the man—that the gentleman was “the superior product.” Then he names some of the gentlemen: George William Curtis, President Eliot, Phillips Brooks. Whitman was only the man. I’ve got no special objection to the gentlemen. Especially Curtis, who deserves to be called a man. But as between the gentlemen named and the man named give me the man. I wonder where God got the sort of stuff that made Whitman a man? I would like to give it to the gentlemen. You can see why Perry satisfies the “safe, sane and conservative” people who after three or four decades of agonized kicking and gagging have felt obliged in some degree to admit the persistency of Whitman’s fame. They have a right and are welcome to a book. I accept Perry’s illustrated distinction between the gentleman and the man. I go on and say that Perry’s book is a gentleman’s book as distinguished from a man’s book. I go still further and say that no profound study of Whitman could ever be written by a gentleman. It is a job for a man. And even to a man it’s not a fat take. The gentleman has the most manners and the man has the most blood. Perry seems puzzled to account for “the mysterious potency of Whitman’s personality over a certain class of minds.” The mystery is not so hard to clear up. The critic gets into trouble by trying to depersonalize Leaves of Grass. The certain class of people are the dead in earnest people. It happens that to them Leaves of Grass is valuable for its religious rather than its esthetic inspiration. They are reformers, rebels, come-outers, of one complexion or another. They take a book into life or they do not take it at all. Whitman naturally attracted the certain class of minds because he had the certain class of mind himself. He always said that his book would live, if it lived at all, by establishing just such an intense personal relation between itself and the reader. Why otherwise should he have so stoutly contended that he had tried to put a man into a book? It would not last because of its pretty phrases. Nor because of its demonstration of any special theory of art, orthodox or revolutionary. It would live by its demonstration of life. Life is always attractive to a certain class of minds. Life looking ahead. Not a class life. The expanding life of the crowd. Life not of literary swelldom but of popular justice and of the struggles that
produce it. Perry has done two good pieces of detective work. First, in unearthing the Samuel Warren bit of free verse, date 1851. It seems as if Whitman must have known the poem. Second, in clearing up the mystery of Whitman’s visit to Dartmouth College, which appears to have originated in a school joke and been consummated in a school ovation. Those who laid out to scoff wound up by praying. Although Perry is familiar with Whitman’s theory concerning the unity of his book, he thinks, apparently, that only pieces of it will live. But no piecemeal explication of the Leaves will suffice. Nor will it enjoy a piecemeal immortality. The whole of it will last or none of it will last. Perry asks himself comparative questions about the art of Keats and Whitman. Why can we say that certain things of Keats are bound to live while we can only say of certain Whitman poems that they deserve to live? Why? Because Keats was the better artist. Perry has got two things mixed. Keats and Whitman will live or die for quite different reasons. It may happen that they will both live. The world may want Whitman for one service and Keats for another. But no critical shake-up of the two men will save or damn either. You might just as well set off Shake-speare against the Bhagavad Gita.

JANUARY 1907 (17:168)

The Code of the Gentleman: Referred to Bliss Perry

“I.”

When I made some playful allusion to it a couple of months ago I had no idea I was so soon to see the code of the gentleman in operation. Perry refuses to answer my questions. The questions were innocent. The answers might have been innocent. But Perry chooses silence. And silence is guilt. In early January I enclosed my questions in a letter to Perry. Some days passed. No reply arrived. I wrote to Perry again reminding him of my questions. This time he responded (January twenty-second). Not to the questions but to my note. He marked his answer “personal.” I did not accept his no as final. Even guilt should have more than one chance. So I held the door open. I wrote Perry a third time (date: January twenty-third), meeting his waiver with a renewal of my summons: “I did not ask or expect you to enter into any controversy. I asked and expected you to make some statements of fact. I thought I had a right to ask the questions. Moreover, I thought you would be glad to answer them. My questions are not speculative but statistical. They can be answered
with perfect ease if, as you say, you ‘had authority’ for making the charges to which they apply. I wish you to accept this letter as a repetition of my questions. I am writing you now, as I did before, in the interest of common truth. I hope you will not insist upon your silence.”

Up to February fifth my letter of the twenty-third was not acknowledged. That day I pushed my inquiries further. I had already received an unpleasant intimation thrown out by the code — the code of the gentleman. But I was anxious for conclusive information. My note of the fifth was only a few sentences: “As you seem determined to maintain your silence I suppose you wish me to submit your letter of January twenty-second to the readers of the Conservator as your only answer to the questions they are so curious to have you meet. Is my surmise correct? I have to make some report and the report fairest to you would be the report found in your own words.”

February seventh Perry wrote me a short note, his note number two, about a hundred words all told, it too marked “personal.” It contained no replies to the questions. It was lots of manners in an empty room. The wheel of the code was turning. I began to understand what the code of the gentleman was like in action. The stovepipe hat of the code. What that stood for. The dress suit of the code. What that stood for. The editorial equivocation and the professorial pomp of the code. What they stood for. Maybe you have gone along knowing as little as I have known of the code. Maybe you, too, never realized the difference between the gentleman and the man? Is that so? Never understood that the gentleman was The Superior Product? Well, here you can see the code of the gentleman face to face with a victim. Here you can see the code of the gentleman in its eclipsing forethought and chivalry. The celestial flower of the gentleman produced by the terrestrial sacrifice of the man. It is not easy to rise to an immediate appreciation of a miracle so astounding. To a plain man on plain ground this unheralded sunburst is more like an omen than an inspiration. I was learning the ABC of a new tongue. I was getting a look in on the best manners of the best people. Yet there still remained some odds and ends of the code to puzzle me. Persevering in my pursuit I addressed Perry again in these words (February tenth: Sunday):

I wish to acknowledge your second letter.

I do not say “excuse me” when I add that I regard your deliberate reticence as parade or confession and your letters as evasions.

You know as well as I know that I did not invite you to enter upon any discussion in the columns of the Conservator. That those readers of your book who have any confidence in your fairness as a biographical writer will

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not feel reassured when they hear that ugly incidents exploited by you to
the detriment of your subject are attacked and you refuse to indicate your
sources of information. That no judicial student will believe that you had
authorities which it would be a violation of confidence for you to cite. That
you are not morally authorized to use statistics which you are not willing
and eager to justify. That you were not asked to reply to any newspaper
comments upon yourself or your book. You know as well as I know that if
you were disposed to name your authorities to me even underground you
would have done so in the letter you marked “personal.” You know as well
as I know that you wrote a letter to Harned in which you refused him a pri-
ivate, as you refused me a public, specification of your evidences. You know
as well as I know that when I asked my questions I believed your charges
could be disproved. You know as well as I know that it is your business as a
historian to welcome every opportunity for the correction of errors. You
know as well as I know that a mistake made in the public eye should be pub-
licly acknowledged. You know as well as I know that Harned and I have a
right to ask you these questions and that you have a duty to answer them.
You know as well as I know that your choice of silence is equally suspicious
whether intended as a shield for a blunder or for a truth.

I have not put you into your dubious position. You have put yourself there.
That is why I can say these things to you without brutality or apology.

Perry immediately retorted. As his missive (February twelfth) was this time
not “personal” I reproduce it here: “It seems to me that the enclosed letter is
one of those which a man usually regrets having written, and I am consequently
returning it to you.”

You see how much quicker Perry is to defend his standing as a gentleman
than to defend his standing as a man. I went Perry one further by redespatch-
ing him my letter with this adaptation of his gesturing epistle: “It seems to me
that the enclosed inquiry is one of those which a man usually regrets refusing
to answer and I am consequently returning it to you.”

In the meantime, in my attempt to penetrate the mystery in which the code
of the gentleman is kept veiled, I asked some perhaps timid and perhaps igno-
rant questions of the publishers of Perry’s book. I seemed to be chasing some-
thing in the dark with somebody dodging. Is that the code of the gentleman?
To stay in the dark and keep on dodging? Anyway I pressed my search. I felt
as if the fight was not fair but I kept on fighting. I reminded myself that a fight
which might not be fair for a man might be fair for a gentleman. It is hard to
keep two codes in sight at the same time. You are liable to get your virtues

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mixed. The business of getting hold {of} the code of the gentleman is a slippery experience for a green hand. This is what I had to say to Houghton, Mifflin and Company (January thirty-first):

In the November issue of the Conservator, over my personal signature, I put some questions to Perry regarding assertions made by him in his book which affect Whitman’s personal honesty. I asked Perry for his authorities, intending either to meet his data with disproofs or to acquiesce in the judgments he expressed. Perry has replied to my questions with a refusal to cite his evidences. I am writing to you only for the purpose of inquiring whether as the publishers of Perry’s book you are aware that statements so grave have been questioned and whether knowing they have been questioned you are willing to sustain him in his silence. I hope I rightly assume concerning you, as I seem to have wrongly assumed concerning Perry, that you are not willing to have any book bearing your imprint wilfully falsify history or to refuse to consider the serious objections of those who have a right to be heard for the defence.

And I must say for Houghton, Mifflin and Company that while their answer did not answer, they did not make me ring the bell a second time but unhesitatingly (February second) talked back, though in a way to leave and with the effect of leaving the confusion just where it was. I did wonder if the letter they wrote me was the letter they would have written me if Whitman had been alive and I had asked legal instead of moral questions. You see, I am not putting a general catechism to Perry. I am only asking by the warrant of what unimpeachable testimony he intimates that Whitman robbed and deceived his friends? And Perry declares: I wont say. And I ask Perry’s publishers: Do you endorse your author when he declares, “I wont say”? And his publishers dance about my egg in this agile manner without touching it:

We have received your letter of January thirty-first calling our attention to the fact that in the Conservator, a newspaper edited by you, you have challenged some statements made in Mr. Bliss Perry’s Walt Whitman, and that Mr. Perry has replied to you to the effect that he did not care to state the sources of his information. You now ask us whether we “are willing to sustain him in his silence.”

We beg to point out in our reply that we have several thousand books upon our list of publications, and that it is manifestly impossible for us to keep in touch with all the criticisms, whether printed or personal, which these books call forth. In the field of history and biography in particular,
where so many questions of fact or of opinion must necessarily be stated without the citation of authorities, we cannot as publishers undertake to enter upon the discussion of the historical or literary justification of every statement made by the authors upon our list. We do endeavor, however, to transmit to our authors all the criticisms that are brought to our notice, provided they are courteously expressed. But we must leave to the authors themselves the responsibility of replying or not replying to such questions.

If we understand your communication, Mr. Perry has already replied to you in a personal letter that he did not wish to print in the Conservator the authorities for certain passages in his book. Under these circumstances, we do not see why the Editor of the Conservator should appeal to us. We have no doubt that Mr. Perry is willing to take the full responsibility for any of his published writings. We are also quite sure that he will be glad to correct in subsequent editions any errors that appear in any of his books. But the question as to whether he ought to reply to any or all newspaper criticisms of his Walt Whitman is one that must in the nature of the case be left to him.

I happened to call on Perry several times within the period during which he was working on his Whitman. Once he said to me that there were a number of dubious details in his narrative which he wanted me to pass upon — which he thought I was the best if not the only man to settle. He was to take a trip to Philadelphia and while there would see me with that end in view. What these items were I never learned for he did not pay me the announced visit. One morning Wiksell and I went together to The Atlantic office on Park Street and talked with him for an hour. He there remarked concerning the matter of Whitman’s children that he would make but little of it, acknowledging that in the absence of all definite pro and con on the subject discussion and judgment were precluded. In fact, he in substance repeats this in one place in the book, and then, later on, outraging his own canon, proceeds to execute sentence by saying Whitman deserted his children. Another point raised that morning had to do with my Higginson incident. I don’t remember definitely what was said on either side as to this affair. I only recall that it came up and that Perry must have realized that Higginson’s story was vigorously challenged.

How do you like the code of the gentleman? Do you not see that it is superior to the code of the man? How do you like the code of the wolf? Do you not see that the bite of the wolf is superior to the caress of the dog? I did not say Whitman was honest. I asked Perry to tell me what figures he had for saying Whitman was not honest. I did not invite him to argue. We have had his argument. I invited him to produce his statistics. I do not say Whitman was faultless.
But I say to Perry: You must not overcharge the account. I do not say that the code of the gentleman seems to prefer the dark. I do say that I feel as if I was menaced by ambushes and shadows. I say to the gentleman: Come out where we can see you. I say to The Superior Product, which is so irresponsibly nocturnal: Be honest — tell us your real name. Perry arraigns Whitman for not paying his money debts. I arraign Perry for not paying more serious debts. The debts of the historian to his student. The debts of the biographer to the truth.

There is a small ugly word that just fits the case. It is a word we use, a hideous word, after all the pretty words have failed. A cruel word never to be used until all the kind words have failed. A resentful word not to be used until all the forgiving words have failed. It is easy for an honest man to make a mistake. Because the honest man is honest he makes mistakes. But the honest man always keeps open house. He will amend himself on call. No critic is so humble his passports can be refused. The honest man will go any distance and spend every cent and suffer sleepless nights to settle his doubts. He never stops to inquire who is looking on or what will occur to his prestige. He never asks whether his interlocutor stands well or better among the few. Never asks: Is my critic my literary or social inferior? If you knock at his door he says at once: Walk in. He says at once: Take a seat. And then he says: I needed just what you bring. And finally with his goodbye he says: This was a dear visit. That’s the big way the big man acts. The little man draws himself up twice his size. He surveys criticism from a pedestal. Why should he be interrogated from the ground? He tells his servants: Don’t admit any callers whose clothes are not made by somebody in particular and whose manners are not polished into mirrors. He puffs himself up into an imposing circumference and announces: I have nothing to say. A mistake persisted in becomes a lie. Even the truth refusing to be questioned becomes a lie. It is possible for the code of the gentleman to become the code — But I will leave it to the gentlemen to say when the one code becomes the other.

Well, what was it that held Perry back? Was it dignity? No amount of dignity can stand in place of the truth. No amount of Harvard College or The Atlantic Monthly can stand in place of the truth. No amount of The Superior Product can stand in place of the truth. No taste, no diplomacy, no reputation, no reserve, no vanity, can stand in place of the truth. No humbug hauteur can stand in place of the truth. The truth has its place and the place of truth cannot be usurped. I do not say that Perry has not told an honest story. I only ask why telling an honest story he should refuse to exhibit its collateral. I do not take a stand against his inferences. I only ask him to throw some light on their origin. I do not say that Perry should not run off. I only say that running off he cannot...
expect us to be impressed with his candor. I do not say that Perry is not the final reservoir, the tribunal beyond all tribunals, of historic verity. I only say that when he makes his trusteeship exclusive he withdraws from the arena of noble disputation. I do not say that Perry’s retirement is cowardice. I only say that it does not look much like bravery. I may quote another case illustrating the code. Higginson originally told the “debts” tale over which Perry now nervously spills his premature righteousness. Told it in one, maybe in several, of his books. I wrote to him about it. Asked him, as I have asked Perry, to give me the one two three of his tale. Offered him room in the Conservator to do so. Offered him my private ear for his evidences. Higginson ignored my two notes. Was that done in conformity to the code of the gentleman? Was that, also, a confirming demonstration of the honor of The Superior Product? Does this ulterior code make free with the helpless dead and play hide and seek with the virile challenges of the living? Is The Superior Product a starchamber autocrat pledged to the rules of the road? It is impossible to feel at home with the armed and elusive virtues of the thicket. There are times when the code of the gentleman becomes the code — But I will leave it to the gentlemen to say when the one code becomes the other.

Perry must have had a father. Suppose I said Perry’s father was a bad one — didn’t pay his debts, deceived his friends, deserted his children. Suppose it was all true. But suppose Perry, who did not believe me, wrote asking for my proofs. Suppose I said: I wont give you my proofs. Suppose I said: I have no proofs for publication. Suppose I said: It would be violating confidences for me to give my proofs. Suppose I said: I never discuss my writings in the papers. Suppose I said: I could not reasonably expect you to like what I have written about your father. Would that be according to the code of the gentleman or according to the code of the man? If Perry’s father was dead according to what code would it be? If Perry’s father was living according to what code would it be? What element would The Superior Product contribute to my retort? At what stage in the chase of the stag does the code of the hounds relent? Daniel Webster in a famous speech long ago said: The murderer has no refuge but in suicide and suicide is confession. This could be paraphrased. We might say: The biographer has no refuge but in silence and silence is confession. I remember that Perry is the editor of a periodical which allowed Burroughs to call Long a fraud and humbug but would not allow Long to make an explanation. Was this according to the code of the gentleman? And was Long satisfied when The Superior Product faced him with this ostracism? Perry is to go to Harvard to teach the young. What will he teach the young? The code of the gentleman? How will he illustrate his code? Suppose some of his students who happen to hear of this
incident choose to illustrate it for themselves? Would such irreverence take a
fall out of the prestige of The Superior Product? Would The Superior Prod-
uct still dominate the culture of the exempt? History written according to the
code of the gentleman needs no verification. Take the unsupported words of
the throne. They are not representative. They furnish no collateral. Let the
slave reader unconditionally surrender himself to the master historian. Yet we
put umpires on the ball field to head off the code of the gentleman. It is not
even for you to have the ball. How did you get the ball? And in the prize ring.
Your man is down. But how did he get down? The code of the gentleman does
not have to tell. But the code of the tough must explain.

Is the code of the gentleman only the code of a caste? Is it operative only be-
tween gentlemen? Does that let the secret out? Whitman was only a man. He
does not come under the august protection of the code. You must meet a
gentleman face to face. But you may shoot a man in the back. You must respect
the memory of a dead gentleman. But the grave of a dead man may be violated
without rebuke. You may succor the gentleman in need. But the man who is
hungry may be left to starve on the road. Phelps of Yale also said Whitman did
not pay his debts. I wondered. Was Phelps another gentleman? Was he, too, a
disciple of the code? I asked Phelps: How do you know? He did not remind
me that he was a professor at Yale. He did not intimate to me that he was the
editor of anything. He did not say he never noticed the criticisms of editors and
reviewers. He never said a word about the gentleman or The Superior Prod-
uct. I asked him in one mail: How do you know? He answered in the next mail:
Perry says so. Evidently Phelps is only a man. Evidently he does not cultivate
The Superior Product. The code of the man seems to work without a jar be-
tween people who have nothing to hide. The presidents of discredited corpo-
rations, the beneficiaries of graft, the lackeys of exploitation, like the code of
the gentleman. When they are subjected to popular scrutiny they have nothing
to say. It is easier for the little man to shut up than to own up. But it never hurts
the big man to confess. The code of the gentleman is not accountable to the
truth. It is accountable only to itself. It is accountable only to salaries and rep-
utations. But the code of the man has to settle its debts in the open. It enjoys
no unearned increments social or professional. The code of the man is kind to
the dead and the living. It draws no line against the grave. It throws no mud at
tombstones. If it has painful things to say about the dead or the living it says
them with pain. And it only says them after all the other things have been said.
And it only says them when the last facts have refuted the last appeal. And al-
ways after having said them it leaves the way free for any one who comes to have
them unsaid. The code of the gentleman admits of no appeal. It sits in secret
session. It comes to secret conclusions. It delivers secret blows. The code of the gentleman executes an unmodifiable decree.

I have known about the Lion’s Mouth and the Bloody Assizes. Now I have learned the difference between the gentleman and the man. I have had it demonstrated to me in what way the gentleman is The Superior Product. I have seen the code of the gentleman in practice.

{The Higginson mentioned is Whitman’s longtime literary antagonist Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who published some attacks on the poet in Harper’s Bazaar.}

February 1907 (17:182)

On the Trail of the Good Gray Poet

William Sloane Kennedy

I have read a good many critiques of the poet of Mannahatta in my time. But when I see still another high-sniiffing little criticaster step forward, take off his dress coat and boiled collar, and button back his ears to polish off Whitman, I groan again. One foresees the result. Now Tom Thumb throws his little bomb — is shattered to atoms, leaving only his suspender metal behind him. When the quaking rabbitkins, their hair brushed by mamma, and tails “extra curled by machinery,” come hopping from their forms to exult over the dead lion, how they scuttle to cover when the monarch’s mate rises from his side with glaring eyes, shaking the dewdrops from her mane and the hills with her roar! And when the occasionally only half-truthful critic of a nation’s minstrel and battle-bard steps forth into the open, how the people roar!

It is because Bliss Perry’s Whitman volume is a great deal better than the average that I am going to speak of it. Perry is a pretty man and a soople; has manly traits, though he is somewhat spoiled by culture and baked beans. He has the canny homely genuine appearance of Abraham Lincoln; looks as if he might have been — well, something “fierce” instead of a very amiable academician. “Allons, allons, sowed cockle reaped no corn.”

Yet Perry’s Whitman is rather a good book — a pretty good resume of its topic; for one thing, a stiff piece of book making; shrewd, the fruit of a good deal of hard work, not hastily sharked up for the market. The great mass of Whitman literature is skillfully condensed (with some big lacunae) and considerable new material interweaved. The ostensible marks of the veteran hand
in the volume have led superficial readers, however, into jumping to the conclusion that Perry’s book is the great book on Whitman. It is nothing of the kind. The author had too many disqualifications for his task. He lives in the stuffy air of libraries and the class room. He is a spokesman of the genteel, conforming, half-baked middle class — the fugleman of cambric tea society, whose mediocrity is always much distressed by the apotheosis of genius. A Greek philosopher once astonished and enraged his time by asserting that the sun was — yes, it was as large as the Peloponnesus. Perry has so little knowledge of the dynamic sunbright intuition of genius that he fancies Whitman incapable of understanding men of mere talent, such as George William Curtis, President Eliot and Phillips Brooks! Says Whitman’s religious philosophy floors him — that he cant understand it; but it is simply Hegelianism, man, as Walt himself says in Specimen Days (“Carlyle from American Points of View”), where he describes it. Perry never “lets himself go” — to use one of Horace Traubel’s favorite phrases. He seems as if he would an if he dared, but keeps a fearful eye ever turned on Mrs. Grundy and the D.D.s. His genial good nature conceals, after all, a decidedly hostile animus. Then he throws hot ashes to windward; writes himself down by insisting at some length that the boy Keats’s spoony poem “To Autumn” (not even his best) is surer of immortality than the virile lyrics and majestic cosmic chants of Whitman! He wavers a little, but his faith in the little bardlings and jews’-harpists of the past is unshaken. So is mine; but I dont make inodorous comparisons. I admit to immortality all genuine poets. “Je boire a les braves de tous les gens” — to the Meissoniers and Patons and Harrison Cadys as well as to the Verestchagins, Mesdags, Turners and Wagners; to the sweet-tinkling little lutist under a girl’s window and the mighty-mouthed inventor of harmonies — the prophetic spokesman of the deep soul of the world dreaming on things to come.

The Boston liberal preacher Mr. Charles G. Ames’s discovery, imparted to Mr. Perry, of a Whitmanesque tinge in a few passages of a deservedly forgotten book — (Austin) Warren’s The Lily and the Bell — is very interesting indeed. But Perry shows his hostile animus here by positive disingenuousness, not only in leading his readers to imagine that the whole tissue of The Lily and the Bell is Whitmanesque, but by unwarrantably printing the lines he quotes in the peculiar hanging indentation used by Whitman, whereas in Warren’s poem all the lines and paragraphs of the so-called poem are in the ordinary prose form, being styled, indeed, by their author, rhythmic prose. Its subject is the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851, and the lines quoted by Perry bear rather marked resemblance to part of Whitman’s weak “Song of the Exposition” (which is itself pure prose, by the way), and to this production alone of Whitman — a “poem,” to tell
the truth, which could be spared from his writings not only without loss but with gain. As for *The Lily and the Bell* — it is a ridiculous sooterkin, the wildest rot and rodomontade, without a ray of merit or one scintilla of genius.

Walt undoubtedly had read Warren's piece and been impressed by its mere format, so to speak — that is all. What of it? There is not a poet since Homer who cannot be convicted of “conveying” from his predecessors more or less. Whitman has been thought to be the most original of them all. And so he is. But you can trace him elsewhere. I have done so before and I am going to do so now. These things are only little curiosities and should not be taken too seriously. Whitman's style is fresh and vital, like his land; but there are, of course, germ-suggestions of minor features of his work to be found elsewhere.

“In Cabin’d Ships at Sea” was apparently suggested by a passage I find in Pindar’s fifth ode which reads as follows (Bohn’s translation, 1851): “Speed thou, my dulcet lay,/ In every bark and pinnace o’er the deep.” So Whitman:

Speed on my book! spread your white sails my little bark athwart the imperious waves,
Chant on, sail on, bear o’er the boundless blue from me to every sea,
The song for mariners and all their ships.

The following stanza in Whitman’s “Europe” —

Yet behind all lowering stealing, lo, a shape,
Vague as the night, draped interminably, head, front and form, in scarlet folds,
Whose face and eyes none may see,
Out of its robes only this, the red robes lifted by the arm,
One finger crook’d pointed high over the top, like the head of a snake appears.

is evidently a reminiscence of lines in Dickens's *Christmas Carol* (1843), in which the Ghost of Christmas to Come “was shrouded in a deep black garment, which concealed its head, its face, its form, and left nothing of it visible save one outstretched hand.” Here the correspondence of Whitman’s “head, front and form” with Dickens's “head, face and form” indisputably settles the question of appropriation by Whitman. In the picture of this phantom by John Leech, in the first edition of the *Carol*, the crooked white finger, down pointing, is very impressive — in fact the central feature.

Another imitation of Dickens appears to reveal itself in the long series of initial whens and wheres etc. For instance, recall the end of “Chants Democratic
3,” edition 1860, beginning, “When the psalm sings instead of the singer,” etc. In Dickens’s Haunted House there are two pages of sentences commencing with “when”—some thirty in all. Walt was an ardent admirer and diligent reader of Dickens.

Whitman’s reading of Plutarch’s *Pelopidas* (the sacred band of Thebans) and of Plato’s *Symposium* is reflected in “What Place is Besieged?” and “I Dream’d in a Dream” (“that I saw a city invincible to the attacks of the whole of the rest of the earth”). Plato says: “If there were only some way of contriving that a state or an army should be made up of lovers and their loves [boy friends], they would be the very best governors of their own city . . . and when fighting at one another’s side . . . they would overcome the world.”

Montaigne strongly influenced Whitman. The student who has read every word of both, as I can say I have, must be impressed by the indebtedness of the Good Gray Poet to this startlingly frank writer—not only because Montaigne, like Walt, chooses himself as the hero of his book, but from the astounding realism of the Frenchman’s talk on sex matters. Curious that Emerson forgave in Montaigne what he refused to do in Whitman. Emerson’s Montaigne is emasculated. It is as if an old maid were writing an essay on him. You could not tell from Emerson that the gay French gentleman of long ago ever mentioned sex.

Rousseau was not much liked by Whitman. He early read the *Confessions*, but calls it “a frivolous, chattering, repulsive book.” Yet it looks as if he might possibly have got from the *Confessions* the idea of limning himself, sins and all, in his own book. “I purpose,” says Jean Jacques, “an undertaking that never has had an example and the execution of which never will have an imitator. I would exhibit to my fellows a man in all the truth of nature, and that man myself. . . . Such as I was I have exhibited myself, despicable and vile when so; virtuous, generous, sublime when so.” Rousseau’s book drew down on his head a tempest of wrath; so did Whitman’s. Future generations will probably never be able to realize the cold horror that came over the minds of the “respectable” contemporaries of Whitman at the bare mention of his name. Even in 1879 it required moral courage for me to get up in Harvard College and confess Whitman before an assembly of professors and fellow students, as well as to lecture about him in 1881 in the Massachusetts Cambridge. Merely to mention the name of the author of *Leaves of Grass*, unless in ridicule, in a mixed social circle in Cambridge or Boston, in those days, was a breach of propriety. Just twenty years after my lecture in Cambridge I noticed that (on Nov. 11, 1898) a
lecture on Walt Whitman as a religious prophet was delivered before the Harvard Religious Union, an audience composed mainly of students.

There are traces of the influence of George Sand upon Whitman. He told me he had read Consuelo a dozen times — which meant, probably, three or four times. I find the hint for the “Song of the Open Road” in a long and eloquent passage in volume one, chapter three, of Consuelo. Consuelo exclaims: “What is there more beautiful than a road? It is the symbol and the image of an active and varied life. . . . And then that road is the passage of Humanity, the route of the universe. . . . So far as the sight can reach, the road is a land of liberty,” for rich and poor alike. That classic phrase — used by Whitman as a title— “O Hymen, O Hymenee;” occurs in the epithalmic song in the sequel to Consuelo, namely in The Countess of Rudolstadt, volume two, chapter forty-one. George Sand, in the latter work, draws a glowing picture of an ideal democratic state, outlined at length in her society The Invisibles, and I feel sure that whoever reads it will agree with me that Whitman was strongly influenced by it in forming his own democratic ideal. The lines in Leaves of Grass, “Long and long has the rain been falling, / Long has the globe been rolling round” (“Song of the Exposition”), are an echo of the Clown’s song in Twelfth Night: “A great while ago the world began, / With hey, ho, the wind and the rain.”

Walt’s beautiful little poem “To the Man-of-War Bird” is not merely suggested but almost plagiarized from the poetic prose of Michelet’s work on The Bird, issued in 1856 in a sumptuous volume (see p. 104 of this).* The passage was perhaps copied out for Whitman. At any rate I found it among some of his manuscripts sent me by the son of Dr. Bucke. The phrases italicized below occur in Whitman’s poem virtually verbatim:

In that blue point, and at an elevation of ten thousand feet royally floats a little bird with enormous pens. . . . It is a little ocean eagle, first and chief of the winged race, the daring navigator who never furls his sails, the lord of the tempest, the scion of all peril — the man-of-war or frigate bird. . . . Here we have a bird which is virtually nothing more than wings, scarcely any body . . . while his prodigious pinions are fifteen feet in span. . . . He sleeps upon the storm.

When he chooses to oar his way seriously, all distance vanishes: he breakfasts at the Senegal, he dines in America . . . reposing himself upon what? On his huge motionless wing . . . or on the Wind his slave which eagerly hastens to cradle him . . .

Why dost thou not take me upon thy pens, O King of the Air, thou fearless unwearied Master of Space?
I have elsewhere (in the *Conservator* {August 1897, 8:88}) given some striking instances of Whitman’s indebtedness to Emerson for phrases and ideas in a few early productions of his, and will here abruptly close.

*When the poem originally appeared in *Progress*, Philadelphia, the Michelet passage accompanied it as a headnote. — H. T.*

**March 1907 (18:7)**

**Perry Didn’t Come In**

Edward Gordon Craig

Written from Florence.

I think Whitman will survive all this tomfoolery of the Perrys, as he survived all the two cent attacks of that queer Mr. James Harlan. For Mr. James Harlan was queer — there is no doubt about it — and Mr. Perry is a bit of a joke after all.

I was looking at Mr. Perry the other day, reading his fun, and I don’t quite see where he comes in in this game. And I was looking towards the army which is gathering behind Whitman day by day and I saw that actually Perry didn’t come in. Why you want to drag him in goodness only knows. It’s hospitable of you, I know, but it’s not kind. Why, you would make him feel ashamed of himself — awkward in a place in which he was not at home.

We sometimes hear reports over here of “battles” which are being fought round the invincible Whitman. To us it all seems a trifle preposterous. We know that there was a bloodless battle fought in 1855 and that it was won. The odds were about ten millions in arms to one man without arms. And the one man won.

What remains to be done, then, except for Mr. Perry and the like to take a leettle more care perhaps? Yes??

{Several years later, in the July 1912 issue, Traubel published a woman’s dim view of Perry: “Bliss Perry’s Walt Whitman,” by Jane Graves Noble (23:70). Her last paragraph: “In Mr. Perry’s book there is no paragraph harder for a lover of Whitman to read than this: ‘He had altogether too many shrines. Monist as he was in philosophy, he was a polytheist in practice: he dropped on his knees everywhere, before stick or stone, flesh or spirit, and swore that it in turn was divine. He would have no hierarchy. The lesson of gradation, taught by the very stars in their courses, he would not learn. The gentleman was no higher than the man, the saint

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no finer product than the sinner. With a soul that instinctively cried
Glory! Glory! He nevertheless did not perceive that the glory of the ter-
restrial was one and the glory of the celestial was another.’ I feel it impos-
sible not to gasp before such opacity and cry: ‘Oh Mr. Perry, cant you
see? Cant you understand? Dont you read your Whitman?’”


DECEMBER 1907 (18:151)

Slanderers of Whitman

Thomas B. Harned

In its issue of Saturday March 2d of last year the Outlook printed the fol-
lowing letter written from Philadelphia and signed by James H. Ecob:

I am ashamed of the Outlook and ashamed of Bliss Perry, whom I have
known for years, to so slur over the foulness of that brute beast Walter
Whitman. Too idle and helpless to earn his own living, consorting with the
toughs and bums of this city and Camden, spending all his last days with a
“buxom widow” as housekeeper, the father of six illegitimate children, the
destroyer of two homes at least, not one honorable sentiment to his credit,
it gives one a moral nausea to hear reputable periodicals and decent people
mention his name with the least degree of allowance. He should have been
shoveled into the earth without ceremony, and all his belongings, personal,
household, and literary, burned over him to clear the earth as far as possible
of his malodorous name. How long, O Lord, before we can hear one word
of sanity and decency from our leading periodicals respecting such brute
beasts who happen to have some little smartness in trick literature!

It seemed to me that this letter called for a reply from some one. I conse-
quently addressed some questions to the Outlook myself (March 7th) in this
form:

Shame upon James H. Ecob for his scurrilous screed about Walt Whit-
man, and much surprise because the Outlook prints letters containing un-
authentic slanders of the defenceless dead! Whitman has been dead for
fifteen years and now comes a Unitarian minister to wantonly defame his
memory.

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Whitman came to Camden in 1873, old, poor and paralyzed, and it was then thought that his end was near. He had given the best years of his life to the sacred duty of nursing the sick and wounded soldiers. With unparalleled devotion, and without reward, he fulfilled this noble duty. He lived in a garret on two meals a day in order that he could utilize the surplus of his slender earnings in this self-imposed ministry. His stalwart and majestic physique succumbed to the terrible strain, and he returned to Camden to die. Rest and the ministrations of loving friends prolonged his life more than fifteen years. During that period I knew him, and, for the last seven years of his life, I knew him intimately. He was a welcome guest at dinner at my home every week for years, and it was the privilege of our family to entertain his friends who came from all quarters of the globe. I became one of his literary executors and I am the sole survivor of the four men who spoke at his funeral. I have in my possession or under my control the authentic records of his life for more than forty years and I think I can speak with some show of authority. The statement that Whitman was “too idle and helpless to earn his own living” is wickedly false. He always earned his own living, and no one at any time ever supported him, and he always remembered in a substantial manner the necessities of his mother and other members of his family. For a man of his slow methods, the volume of work performed by him indicates that his life was one of ceaseless toil. As a writer from his earliest years, as a newspaper editor and correspondent, as a clerk in the departments at Washington, and as a painstaking author of the writings which he desired should be perpetuated, his literary product was prodigious. As Dr. Daniel G. Brinton said at his graveside: “No idler was he, no dallier with the golden hours, but arduous, contentious, undissuadable and infinitely loving.”

The statement that Whitman consorted with “toughs and bums of Philadelphia and Camden” is ludicrous to those who know the facts, but mischievous and misleading to the many readers of your journal. The truth is that Whitman’s home was a shrine. His intimate associates were men of the very highest standing in Philadelphia and its vicinity. To name them would be to mention many names prominent in his own time. He was daily visited by men and women from many countries. True it is that his companions were from every walk of life, and oft times from among the poor and the plain, such as mechanics, deck hands and car drivers. To his infinite credit be it said, he never turned his back upon the criminal, the outcast or the neglected.

Ecob’s innuendo about the “buxom widow” is libelous and defamatory not only to the dead but to the living, because it involves the reputation of
a respectable woman whose character no one has ever impeached. I know that the reverend gentleman’s suggestion is a wicked lie and that the statement that Whitman was “the destroyer of two homes at least” is as infamously false as the other statement that Whitman did not have “one honorable act or sentiment to his credit.” Is it possible that anybody can read such venomous slanders without doubting the sanity of the man who asserts them? Does Ecob not know that on his seventieth birthday Whitman was the honored guest at a dinner given to him by the people of Camden and vicinity? It was a loving tribute of respect and admiration from those who knew him best. He was hailed as the first citizen of his state, and men from many sections, with varied opinions, assembled to do him honor. Letters were sent from nearly every literary person in America and England. The record of this tribute has been permanently preserved in a special volume and is a matter of history. When Whitman died, we did not “shovel him into the earth without ceremony,” nor did we burn his household and all that it contained, as the Christian minister so charitably suggests ought to have been done; quite the contrary. He was one of the most eminent citizens of the Republic, and he had rendered his country lasting service, and his funeral was a splendid tribute to a very great but a very simple man. Twenty of the most distinguished citizens of this country reverently followed him as pallbearers, and thousands of his fellow citizens followed the body to the last resting place. His literary effects have been treasured and have been sought for by some of the leading libraries of the country, because it is believed that in the years to come, they will be of great value to the future student of American literature.

With regard to Whitman’s children, the preachers can make the most of it or the worst of it. Whitman never regarded himself as above criticism. He was at least candid and honest and was willing that the worst about him should be known. He wrote John Addington Symonds in 1890 about his children and his letter has since been printed [in part. — H. T.] by Edward Carpenter. As unexplained about his children to Symonds (who it must be remembered was his devoted disciple and the first scholar of England): “Circumstances (connected with their fortune and benefit) have separated me from intimate relations.” And this explanation, in the absence of contrary proof, ought to have great weight. Sixty years have elapsed, and, so far as known, the children are dead. The absence of a formal marriage rite is the only thing left to criticize. There was no wantonness or “sin against chastity,” and, on the contrary, the whole affair was the tragedy of his life.
In sending my letter to the *Outlook* I added a suggestion to the editors:

I think you ought to print this reply in your column of communications. Ecob knows nothing of his own knowledge. I speak with some claim of authority.

The *Outlook* acknowledged my protest very briefly (March 15): “If you had seen our review of Mr. Bliss Perry’s *Whitman* you would understand that the *Outlook* is an admirer of the fine and noble quality in Whitman and has been often his defender. We printed Mr. Ecob’s letter partially because it was a reply to our review and partly because we thought its violence and unreasonableness were sufficiently indicated in its own lines.”

I did not think the matter insignificant enough to be so casually dropped. I wrote to the *Outlook* again (March 18):

I have your letter of March 10th addressed to my Camden office. I read your review of Perry’s *Whitman* when it came out and I also have been aware for some time that the Editors of the *Outlook* have been admirers of the fine and noble quality in Whitman. The viciousness of Mr. Ecob’s letter lies in the fact that it is not a reply to your review nor to Mr. Perry’s book. He introduces new matter by making certain vile and slanderous statements about Whitman’s personal habits and conduct of life. It is these particular statements that I desire to refute. That is why I wrote my letter, and I think it is your duty to print it and give the denial as wide a circulation as you did the slanders. My own professional and personal character, as well as my being able to speak from personal knowledge, ought to give my letter special significance.

My insistence apparently made it impossible for the *Outlook* to pursue its original notion to do nothing. I heard from the editors again (March 28):

Your letter of March 18th was duly received. We shall, at an early date, print a reply to Mr. Ecob’s letter on Whitman, a reply which seems to us more desirable than yours. As you insist upon our printing your letter we must frankly say that it lays itself open to the same criticism of personal vehemence which you justly make upon Mr. Ecob’s letter. One reply to Mr. Ecob is, it seems to us, sufficient and that will appear from another correspondent.

The next day I sent my final letter to the *Outlook*. I repeat the most of it below:

I have your letter of March 28th. I am glad to know that you intend to print a reply to Mr. Ecob’s letter. I think my letter is very mild compared with the
insane attack upon Whitman contained in Mr. Ecob’s letter. I would gladly modify any parts of my letter which you would not care to print. As a matter of fact, Mr. Ecob cannot speak from any personal knowledge; I can. I trust that the other correspondent will be a person who is able to speak conclusively on the subject from personal knowledge. Mr. Ecob is a well known Unitarian minister in Philadelphia. I have been connected with the Unitarian Church all my life and for many years I was President of the Unitarian Club of Philadelphia and President of the Board of Trustees of the Germantown Church, and I have enjoyed the personal acquaintance and friendship of the leading Unitarians throughout the country, including Dr. Slicer in your city. I lived in Camden all my life and until two years after Whitman’s death. . . . I frequently invited to my house men and women, and more particularly clergymen, ethical teachers and scientists, to meet Whitman, and they always enjoyed this personal association. Since his death there has been altogether too much of this cowardly attack by men who do not take the pains to ascertain the truth. Mr. Perry’s book that you think treats Whitman with so much fairness is open to criticism. He talks about the “buxom widow” and Whitman’s “desertion of his children,” and his dishonesty in financial matters, all of which is unwarranted. I have had some correspondence with Mr. Perry and I hope he will eliminate these statements in a later edition. Whitman was sixty-five years of age when he went to live at the Mickle street house and was prematurely old and badly paralyzed. The “buxom widow” was a middle-aged lady with two grown-up sons who lived with her. I know that the innuendo of Mr. Perry and Mr. Ecob is baseless . . . . You can see how unfair Perry has been because all of our authorized sources of information have been open to him but he did not consult us. I naturally feel badly about these matters, and, as I have such a high regard for Dr. Abbot and Mr. Mabie, I thought I could get a hearing in the Outlook. I am one of Whitman’s literary executors, and I was one of his most intimate personal friends. I would not attempt to cover up any blemish of his character. There is no living relative to resent these attacks, and so long as I live, I propose to defend his memory, always basing my defence upon facts which I can absolutely prove.

Then the Outlook got back in its own way at Ecob. It printed a letter post-marked Butte and signed by the initials of two persons — E. H. and J. A. S.:

We were very much interested in a letter from James H. Ecob published in the Outlook March 2. The writer of the letter attacks Whitman in a most uncompromising manner. He accuses the bard of almost every act of indecency and of immorality in the catalogue. We have been students of Whitman for a
couple of years, and we would be very grateful to Mr. Ecob if he will give us his authority for his assertions.

We have read Whitman’s poems thoughtfully and seriously, and we have been unable to find anything but the loftiest and the purest spirit. We have searched the pages of his biographers, and they are unanimous in declaring that his life was sweet and wholesome. If Mr. Ecob knows of better authority for his accusations than John Addington Symonds, John Burroughs, and R. M. Bucke — Whitman’s friends and biographers — we, as seekers after truth, wish he would enable us to extend our studies.

Mr. Ecob said that Whitman associated with the “toughs and bums” of the city. He associated with the common man — the man who labors from morning until night with his hands. He loved this common man; he understood him; and he wrote about him. Surely that cannot be such a serious crime, for he was following the example of the Great Leader, Christ.

“Not one honorable act or sentiment to his credit” is another statement made by his detractor. During the War Whitman gave his strength and the health of his future years to nursing his wounded brothers, whom he loved most tenderly. If he never did anything else, that one act cannot be wholly ignored. Opening a volume of Whitman at random, we chance to see this line, “There is no trade or employment but the young man following it may become a hero.” Surely there is some good in that sentiment.

During the war Whitman contracted blood-poisoning, and he later suffered a stroke of paralysis. Perhaps these facts explain why he seemed “too idle and helpless to earn his own living.”

John Burroughs, who knew him well, says of him: “That Whitman’s life was a sane, temperate, manly one, free from excesses, free from perversions and morbidities of a mammonish, pampered, over-stimulated age, I do believe. Indeed, I may say I know. The one impression he never failed to make — physically, morally, intellectually — on young and old, women and men, was that of health, sanity, sweetness. He felt the ties of universal brotherhood as few have felt it. It was not a theory with him, but a fact that shaped his life and colored his poems. ‘Whoever degrades another degrades me,’ and the thought fired his imagination.”

Whitman, like other prophets, was misunderstood and scourged by his fellow-men; but he went on giving his message to the world undaunted. Listen to his courageous spirit:

One effort more, my altar this bleak sand;  
That Thou O God my life hast lighted,
With ray of light, steady, ineffable, vouchsafed of Thee,
Light rare untellable, lighting the very light,
Beyond all signs, descriptions, languages;
For that, O God, be it my latest word, here on my knees,
Old, poor, and paralyzed, I thank Thee. . .

My hands, my limbs grow nerveless,
My brain feels rack’d, bewilder’d,
Let the old timbers part, I will not part.
I will cling fast to Thee, O God, though the waves buffet me,
Thee, Thee at least I know.

(Prayer of Columbus)

The Outlook concluded the affair by making this half-apologetic explanation in its own behalf: “Dr. Ecob’s letter was a reply to the opinion of the Outlook expressed in a book review. It seemed to us that it was perfectly apparent that the Outlook entirely disagreed with Dr. Ecob’s position.”

FEBRUARY 1909 (19:188)

Walt Whitman
By George Rice Carpenter

“I.”

“I expect to live to read a dozen books about you,” I once said to Walt. He laughed: “You must expect to last to a ripe old age!” He wondered if any one would ever take up his life story where Bucke left off. Lives of himself seemed unlikely. “I have lived all these years and have barely got a foothold.” But he felt that he had tried to say something. And that something would not go unsaid. Perhaps it was ordained that other poets should succeed where he had failed. Such speculations were indulged in no spirit of criticism or melancholy. Walt was interested in the message. He didn’t care who carried the flag so it was carried to a victory. On one occasion he asked me: “What more can biographers say than has been said?” “They’ll tell only pretty things about you then. The worst has been said.” He smilingly shook his finger at me. “Dont be too too damned sure — some one may surprise you with a new song and dance.” He must have foreseen Bliss Perry. “Did it ever occur to you that my light will probably go out altogether?” “Never. But would it worry you any to think so?” “Not a bit.” That was right. It wouldn’t have worried him a bit. He believed in
himself. But he had no exclusive belief in himself. He was willing to shine with others but not at the expense of others. And he was perfectly satisfied to not shine. That shining business is all elusive anyway. So Walt looked at events and writings that concerned his immortality. Curiously but not anxiously. Well— I have lived to read the six books and more. And I am still expecting. It strikes me that I am delaying Carpenter too long. My preface innocently grew upon me. But what I particularly wished to lead up to was this. That Walt himself would have put his approving forefinger on Carpenter’s book and declared: “Here’s the whole thing in a nutshell without adulation or apology.” (Who knows? Maybe Walt is this minute just behind the veil within touch of us saying this very thing. Maybe. Maybe it’s not me saying it anyway. Maybe he just broke in to say it for himself. Who knows?) That’s exactly what Carpenter’s book is. The whole thing in a nutshell. Never over and never short. Good measure and full weight. Judicial without being judicious. Cool enough for justice and warm enough for love. Carpenter knows how to handle eggs without smashing them and knows how to handle steel without smashing himself. He goes anywhere meeting anything without any sort of intimation that it takes any nerve to do so. People who think it’s easier to sit in Columbia University and write an honest book than to go to Africa and shoot humbug lions should be sentenced to write the book. It’s not hard to write books. Anybody who can write can write books. But to write a book. More than that — to write an honest book. There’s a job not for a soldier or a sportsman but for a hero. Carpenter has got all the big things in this little book. He has consummately arrayed his detail so as to make his narrative most efficient for schools and for answering the first curiosity of newcomers. Nothing biographically so adapted for such use has heretofore been done for Whitman. Perry’s book is vitiated by its malignant falsities and its clownish superciliousness. Carpenter makes no bid either in letter or spirit for institutional or social honors. He keeps his Whitman on the ground. Presents him without glorifications or disguises. The rest can be left to take care of itself. Carpenter is able to do for Walt what naturally Perry could not do and what Woodberry also missed doing for Emerson. I refer to Carpenter’s constant references to Walt’s humanism. He keeps on talking of it because he knows how much it means to any adequate portrait. Walt is a rebel’s man. If you are afraid of rebellion you are afraid of Walt. If you prefer conformity why dally with revolt? Cut out from Waldo and Walt their brazen defiances and you wouldn’t have enough man left to furnish a decent excuse for a funeral. Carpenter puts this fact where it belongs. He also handles “Children of Adam” without reproach. It is unquestionable that Carpenter is mostly on to Walt’s curves. He don’t say yes to all of Walt. Nor do I. Nor do I say yes to all

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of Carpenter. But in the main my replies to Carpenter are hearty amens. I
would have written a different tale myself. So would any other man. That
shows how big Walt is. But Carpenter chose his personal peculiar job and tri-
umphed in executing it. Triumphed as a craftsman and was no less victorious
in the nicer balancing of biographical values. He grasped the Whitman situ-
tion without being distracted by moral ephemera.

JUNE 1913 (24 : 56)

Whitman Needs No Advocate

William H. Smith

Sent to the annual meeting of the Walt Whitman Fellowship International,
New York, May 31st, 1913.

Here’s the time I rail a little because I’m not forehanded enough to make a
trip to New York to attend the Annual Meeting. But I can be with you in spirit,
anyhow, and that’s the main thing. And the best of it all is that the number
of those who are with Walt in spirit is constantly increasing. I am always im-
pressed with this fact. Scarcely a day passes that I do not come across some-
thing to remind me of it. In the press, in the pulpit, among thoughtful men and
women everywhere, this spirit grows, and brings nearer what Walt said he was
willing to wait for, namely, the complete understanding of himself.

And it is such a pleasure to see the work go on, and to help push it along!
Last Sunday I had for a guest a sterling old friend, but a stand-patter from way
back. He told me that he bought a copy of “Blades” of Grass years ago, because
he had heard someone say tough things about the book, and he had a curios-
ity to see it. He said he had read a few lines in it, which he got nothing out of
one way or the other, and threw the book aside, and has not seen it since. But
he is a might good fellow, and the best kind of soil to plant Walt-seed in; so
I put him into an easy chair and gave him a good cigar, and then took down the
old copy of the Complete Works that I got from Walt’s own hand (I have one of
the special edition of six hundred copies), and cut myself loose on my friend
for an hour, reading wherever the book happened to open. That’s as good a
way as any to read Walt. I wish you could have been there to see the result!
I did not say a word in Walt’s defense. There is never any use in doing so. The
old man is always able to plead his own case, before any bar. About the first
place I struck was the address to the flag, near the close of “The Song of the
Exposition.” My friend is a true patriot, of the genuine sort, and he sat up and
took notice before I had read half a dozen lines. When I finished the reading of
the passage he leaned forward and took the book out of my hand and turned it
around so that he could see the text, and then carefully reread what I had just
gone over for him. As he handed the book back to me he said: “Well, may the
Lord forgive me, if he can, for living so long in this world and not knowing that
such a literary gem as that was in existence!” Then I read some more, I kept on
at the same rate for an hour, and when I put the book back on the shelf, my
friend of a few minutes before was another man. He was born again. A new life
was begun for him, right then and there. And what was so begun will go on for-
ever. That’s the way Walt will get in his work, continually, as the years go by.
There is no doubt about it. As the old man said, no one needs to sound his
name, no propaganda needs to be organized to forward his cause. The light he
has brought to the world is like that of the sun. It needs no advocate. Get the
cobwebs out of the way, and it will do its own work in its own way.

Truly, as Walt says: “Logic and argument never convince.” We need not
even try to argue the old man’s cause or try to convince anyone of its truth. Just
get the message to any sensible and thoughtful man or woman and it will do the
rest. The result may not be quickly apparent, for Walt’s ways are evolutionary
and not revolutionary; but it will come, all the same. We need not even try to
spread his teaching. It is so potent that it will diffuse itself of its own initiative.
But it is such a joy to “push on the lines” of his wisdom and his philosophy.
And that is what the Annual Meeting is doing. The cause is bound to win any-
how, but this helps it along, and gets it to some people who might miss it but
for this means of transportation. May it live forever, this yearly meeting of
Comrades and Chums of the dear old man whose name we love.

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APRIL 1914 (25:28)

Walt Whitman: A Critical Study
By Basil De Selincourt

“T.”

Walt Whitman hated explication but knew he’d be explicated. He did all he
could while alive to discourage explicators. But a dead man is helpless. Few
men can survive being explained. Especially when they are interpreted by the
scholar. No man knows so little as the man who knows it all. No man is so little
competent to know books as the man who goes to books from books rather than
from life. They say a cat may look at a king. And I suppose a book may look at a
book. But the book that looks at a book has only borrowed faculties. Nothing so confuses me as to read some hairsplitting argument over texts. I don't read books as a critic but as a man who loves books next to people. But when I read a book in which the people are forgotten I feel as if I had been invited to a feast at which there was no food. I admit much for books. But I admit more for people. I even make claims for some books. But I always make claims for all people. I am willing to concede astonishing technique to books. I go into exhibitions of pictures. Those catacombs of beauty. Most exhibitions. There are exceptions. I go. I'm tired to death. They remind me not of what the painters have but of what they have not put into their work. That is, they remind me of life. But they don't give me life. I feel the same thing about most books. A shelf of books is a vacuum. A library of books is a desert. If you ask me if they don't display great skill I answer you yes. But if you ask me if they add anything to the sum total of my life I say no. They leave me dead. If I am already dead they confirm my death. If I'm asleep they don't wake me up. If I'm alive and hungry they banish and starve me. When somebody gives me Whitman piece by piece I feel as if I was at a clinic. You may learn all about bones and flesh but nothing about life at a clinic. After reading this monograph I had the sense of having wasted some good time. With a dissector. What I derived from it were mere mathematical benefits. I was left absolutely without any moral or spiritual return. To anyone who knows *Leaves of Grass* itself Selincourt might chance to be interesting and is not likely to be wholly useless. But I can see how this polished legerdemain should confuse a man or a woman who had not yet read Whitman at first hand. Selincourt says towards the end: “We must beware of allowing too free a rein to our imaginative demands.” Yes: so we should. Selincourt should have done this from the start. He could then have written a better book. His argument taken along with *Leaves of Grass* might be utilized. But taken as a substitute for the *Leaves* it would be absolutely wicked. Selincourt never will step out of his study into the street. Or out of his isolation into the crowd. His treatment of Whitman has the odor of the cloister. It's all far away. It has no neighborly familiarity. It's friendly. It's a yes. But it has no curbstone vehemence. Some people who don't like the shirtsleeve biographer nevertheless pretend to like Whitman, who was a shirtsleeve poet. Selincourt goes long on phrasing. He's overworded all through. He goes short on emotion. He's underhuman all through. He has free moments in which he lets go and almost escapes his own limitations. He displays an incidental insight which if it was more frequent would almost excuse his apathetic generalizations. Scholarship formally so called has this fatal effect. It pulses a man below normal. It makes
him a creature of manners. If a painter he becomes a brush. If a surgeon he becomes a scalpel. If a writer he becomes a pen. He may grow to be however adept in wielding an instrument, he still remains that instrument instead of a man. Many a decent traveler has paced it down that hill. Many a man of parts has let himself deteriorate into parts of a man. Selincourt is fine and superfine, I wish he was rather rough and over-rough. He so nearly escapes his sophistications that he seems to unconsciously sophisticate against his escape. If he’d take his glasses off and get a simple steel pen and stop carrying a cane when he goes out for a walk and be a little nasty now and then and not make too much of politeness and not be so fussy about saying the right thing maybe he’d not write a new kind of a book at once but he’d surely become a new kind of a man right away. The new kind of a book would come later. Now don’t tell me that you’re already a man who splits wood and fetches up coal for your wife, as another author did to me when I objected to his indoor mind. I’m not talking about the monocle you may not wear on the sidewalk but about the monocle you wear in your mind. I say again as I said to him: Many men who live outdoors have indoor minds and many men who live indoors have outdoor minds. You who have done this last book on Whitman and done it so well taking it as a case for the verbalist may sometime succeed in shaking off your chains. I make no predictions. But I can hear your chains rattle as you talk today. Now don’t point to your feet and ask me: Where are the chains? For if you do I shall be compelled to point to your brain and ask: Where are not your chains?

JULY–AUGUST 1916 (27:70)

Smothering Walt

Michael Monahan

From the Phoenix, June 1916.

Walt Whitman’s fame was of the kind that would have justified and no doubt inspired an attractive “legend,” had it been left to make itself, without meddling of fools or notoriety-hunters, for a decent interval after his death. Unluckily for old Walt, he fell in during his later years with the amiable but lethally industrious Traubel, who in “boswellizing” Whitman has extended the known limits of human stupidity. It is not too much to say that he has almost buried Walt under a mountain of rubbish — and still he keeps everlastingly at it with barrow and shovel and pick!
Terrible has been the result of that misguided industry. Any person of ordinary powers of endurance who sees Traubel first will never survive to reach Whitman. There is something stupefying in the complacency which the Disciple exhibits in turning out his endless volumes of folderol. He has killed off all hope or chance of a fitting legend by his wearisome exposition of Whitman’s vast ignorance, provincial narrowness, amazing lack of taste, puerile prejudices and, finally, his inordinate, even fetid, self-conceit. I know it has been suggested, but I do not believe, that the Disciple in the weird processes of his “art” has transferred these his own personal qualities to the Master; thus, the hybrid changeling he gives us may be one part Whitman to three parts Traubel. The thing is not without precedent, as we know. But I am at least sure of this — he has projected a Whitman who fails utterly to live up to the *Leaves*; an unlovely, repellant, hideously egotistical chatterer (one thinks how awful it must have been to endure all that frouzy gossip!); a pontificating old palaverer, with scarcely a trace of the nobility of letters about him.

How Emerson would have revolted at the frequent, ungraceful lugging in of his name to support the Whitman self-puffery! — there is all too much greasy offense of this sort, which has its natural effect on the sensitive reader. In truth a liberal course of Traubel on W.W. will cure the rawest passion for the Good Gray Poet. Traubel has reversed the achievement of Boswell; instead of making his hero greater than he actually was, he has made him distinctly smaller: the triumph of Traubel in this abortional work would therefore mean the extinction of Whitman — *à dieu ne plaise!* (By the way, Traubel has published a lot more poetry than the Old Man. Some of it quite as good.)

I would not deny that there is something fairly to be admired in the zeal, fidelity, energy, perseverance, which Traubel evinces year after year in bringing forth these Camdenian oracles or attenuated echoes of the Great Yawp; and if he had set a tolerable limit to the work one might allow it a certain value. The mere physical labor, the copying (?) of all this bald and tiresome interlocution with the Buckes, the Harneds, *et al.*, persons who have no warrant to speak to the educated reader, must be pronounced nothing less than wonderful prodigious! But does it not suggest the thought that there should be a Society for the Protection of Dead Authors?
Whitman and Traubel
By William English Walling

Eugene V. Debs

William English Walling appears to splendid advantage as a literary critic in his book on Whitman and Traubel, which I have just finished reading a second time with special interest and appreciation. In this volume, which must appeal to every lover of Old Walt and Horace, his famous disciple, the writer gives abundant evidence that he has studied them both and their respective works thoroughly, and that he has familiarized himself with their points of similarity as well as with the distinguishing differences between their personalities, their philosophies and their performances. Walling begins his inquiry with the following interesting paragraph quoted from his Foreword: “Does the spirit of Walt Whitman live in any of the writers today? Has he a successor? Is that successor his biographer and literary executor, Horace Traubel?” The writer then proceeds to consider Whitman, first, as The Poet of Democracy, and next as The Individualist. He then follows with a review of Traubel, first, as The Forerunner of a New Literature, second, as The Humanist, third, as The Philosopher of Democracy, and, fourth, as The Poet of Socialism. The analysis that follows is critical yet thoroughly sympathetic. Copious extracts are drawn to sustain the writer in his estimates and in his final conclusions. He begins with the statement that “Walt Whitman is now recognized as one of the greatest poets of all time”; that he is “appreciated chiefly as the world’s foremost poet of democracy,” but that of late “his fame as the poet of democracy is in danger of being eclipsed, to some degree, by his fame as a lyric poet.” Walling allows Whitman to speak for himself in all essential particulars, and his interpretation of Old Walt and of his philosophy and outlook furnishes an interesting and valuable addition to Whitman literature. But the greater part of the work, fully two-thirds of its pages, are devoted to Traubel, of whom Walling has formed an opinion that would have flattered Old Walt himself. In introducing Traubel the author very appropriately quotes the words of George D. Herron: “A whole new world has been born since Whitman’s days and Traubel is of this world. Whitman himself would be the first to recognize this. Traubel walks in the light of a social vision which had not broken upon man even when Whitman went out into the larger quest.” It is true, as Walling says, that “Similarities will strike the reader on nearly every page. But the differences are
no less vital.” Traubel admits freely, lovingly, gratefully, all he owes to his revered elder brother, but aside from this and beyond it Traubel has developed his own striking personality, and this is stamped upon his writings so distinctly that it is readily recognized and so indelibly that time can never efface it. Walling is undoubtedly right in declaring socialism to be Traubel’s chief distinguishing feature and his crowning characteristic, and in awarding him the palm as the premier socialist of the day. Traubel’s socialism is not drawn from its written philosophy but from the wellspring of life itself. His socialism is genuine — it is of the head and heart, of the soul and conscience — and he is saturated with it in every fiber of his body and every drop in his veins. Traubel breathes the very life-breath of the crowd, and he loves best of all the lowest stratum in it. He is pre-eminently the voice of Les Miserables. The lower they are, the more completely down and out, the raggeder and hungrier and more shunned and despised, the more certainly do they grip Traubel’s heart-strings and the more freely does he pour out his boundless love to them. They are above all others to him, and because they are at the bottom of this bottom-side-up world he puts them at the top of his own. Traubel a democrat? Yes, a real democrat! A democrat of democrats! Look upon him, take him by the hand, search his soul, and you will realize that he is the very incarnation of democracy and that he is charged to the fingertips with love for his fellow-men. That’s Horace Traubel! A democrat, a man of the people, a brother of the crowd, and withal a passionate lover and servant of his fellow-men! To Horace Traubel the croon of a pauper’s babe, the touch of a beggar’s hand, the tearful face of a sister of the street, is more than all the gold ever mined since the world began. If Horace Traubel’s philosophy prevailed there would be no war and no hate because there would be no ignorance and no superstition. Love and peace would possess the hearts of men, and every race beneath the bending skies, and every mortal soul, would dwell together in the Brotherhood of the World. This book by William English Walling is a masterly review of Walt Whitman and Horace Traubel, and should be read by every friend and admirer of these two eminent lovers of men and servants of humanity.
Visits to Walt Whitman in 1890 and 1891
By John Johnston and J. W. Wallace

“We’ll sometime get over the superstition of the great man. What’ll we substitute for it, if anything? Why, the fact of the great race. I heard an orator the other night who said: “Washington gave us the republic. Lincoln made the republic free. Wilson will make the world safe for democracy.” The orator left the people out. The people are always left out. Even by themselves. Yet the people begin and finish everything. Their labor. Their consecration. The great man is only a voice. He don’t start the new move. He only announces that it’s to be made. That its time has come. That the crowd’s through with its present camping ground and is about to start for somewhere else. Johnston and Wallace may have come to America with whatever notions you please of Whitman. But they went home with other notions. They found him both simpler than they had anticipated and larger than they had anticipated. When Wallace walked into Walt’s room first Walt exclaimed: “Come and be disillusioned.” He wasn’t disillusioned. He was illuminated. He wasn’t upset. He was only revised. He experienced no disappointment. He rather experienced surprise. It didn’t seem possible that so big a man should be so much like everybody else. Nor did it seem possible that a man so wholly like everybody else should still be so big. Walt didn’t receive them on a throne but in a chair. His demonstrativeness was always tempered with reticence. And his reserve was always allowed large liberties. He would describe *Leaves of Grass* as so many pages of let go. But not too much let go. He loosened the reins but didn’t let them fall from his hands. Walt himself as a man was like his books. He was so many pounds of let go. But he didn’t let go too far. He didn’t let go beyond control. His visitors found him out so far at once. These Englishmen were especially prompt in realizing these subtle elements in Walt’s personality. It put them in immediate rapport with him. Strangers who were without this intuition didn’t get on with him. Then they’d go away and describe him as uncommunicative. I remember after Edwin Arnold’s last call how amazed the old man was with the printed description of the incident. Walt said to me about it: “Make it clear that I didn’t slop over, as they say: I didn’t recite from {Arnold’s} *The Light of Asia* to him: he didn’t recite from *Leaves of Grass* to me: that was all nonsense, even though Arnold himself is responsible for the preposterous tale.” In the remarkable
episode which attracted Whitman to these Lancashire men and them to him there was no danger of obsequiousness or pomposity on either side. Walt never displayed any chest. And they never manifested any undue deference. Walt never liked to be called master. He shrank from it instinctively and consciously. Men as distinguished as Symonds addressed him in that dubious style. But he’d say: “I wish they’d not do it.” They’d seemed to forget who he was and failed to remember who they were. Walt’s intimacy with this Bolton group was tenderly sacred in its fraternal beauty. He was always thinking of them. And they were always thinking of him. After Wallace’s return to England neither he nor Johnston ever saw Walt again. But they kept up a constant correspondence in which I participated. Walt never tired of them. He was like a child in looking for letters from them. And like a child again in his disappointment when letters didn’t come. He’d ask: “Havn’t you heard from Wallace?” Or it might be Johnston. And he’d say: “I wonder if anything’s the matter?” And he’d say further: “I hope as you say that no news is good news not bad news!” Herbert Gilchrist said to Walt: “It surprises me a bit that you should be so taken with these Bolton folks — they’re not famous in England at all!” Walt perked up with some fire and retorted: “It surprises you, does it, Herbert? Well: I’ve had my belly full of famous people! Thank God, they’re just nobody at all, like all the people who are worth while!” When Walt was with you he liked to talk about himself. He’s been charged with all the sins of egotism for this. But there’s something else he liked to do when he was with you. He liked to talk of you. And if you’d let him he’d talk more of you than of himself. The conversations here so vividly set down indicate it. I personally never met Johnston. When he came to Camden I was nobody. I suppose I was never mentioned. Not that I’m anybody special even now. But now they at least know my name. I was then the handy man. The message carrier. The unhired hand. But only a hand. I might as well have been a number. I wasn’t so much as that. I was a cipher. By the time it came to be Wallace’s turn to make a pilgrimage to Camden I had been allowed to appear in the modest capacity Wallace describes. I can speak of Wallace. He stopped in our house. We were glad to have him come and sorry to see him go. The more we saw of him the more we wanted to see. He was a gifted man who didn’t care a damn for being known. He was an unmistakable Englishman and an undeniable interhumanist. Walt once said to me of him laughingly: “He’s better than an Englishman: he’s a Lancashireman!” More than once Walt said to me afterwards: “The Bolton crowd is about the best dose in my meal.” I cant say from personal observation how Johnston and Walt got on. But after the first interview or so Walt and Wallace got on like two natural brothers. Anne Montgomery and I and Wallace after a bit entertained for each other the final cher-
ished regard. More than regard, let me say. Love. We named our boy for Wallace. Wallace dedicated this book to us. His child for our child. Our child for his child. Our love for his love. His love for our love. When I finger the pages of this book it’s with more than a reader’s casual absorption, absolute as that may be. The comradery of Johnston and Wallace and of the Bolton group altogether, with their adhesion to Walt, has been one of the romances of the modern world. Especially has this come true of the pair who are associated in the production of the record under review. Old romance is dead. Old chivalry is gone forever. Thank God. But something better has followed it. Something that’ll make wars impossible and even nations absurd in the future of man. Better than marrying a woman to a man is the marrying of a nation to a nation. And the marrying of all nations to all nations. And the marrying of peoples to peoples: yes: the marrying of all people to all people. We’ll even marry all flags to all flags. And ambitions will marry ambitions. It wont be “you first.” Not that. It’ll be “we, us, all together.” The primary power of the Johnston-Wallace story to me is its atmosphere of friendliness. It puts the historic emphasis where it belongs. Not on empires or physical power or culture whether spelled with a “c” or a “k” but on the essential facts of inherent personality whether good or bad, black or white, famous or obscure, big or little, dirty or clean.

{In the September 1917 issue, Traubel gave Visits lavish prepublication attention (28 : 108). In the March 1918 Conservator, he reprinted two appreciative reviews of Visits. That from the London Times ended: “In Whitman the capacity for pleasure seemed never to diminish, and the power to include grew greater and greater; so that although the authors of this book lament that they have only a trivial bunch of sayings to offer us, we are left with a sense of an ‘immense background or vista’ and stars shining more brightly than in our climate” (29 : 8).}

**August 1918 (29 : 89)**

**The Whitman Fellowship Meeting**

{Trenty-fifth anniversary; Traubel’s first absence}

*Fred Hier*

Ninety-nine years after Walt’s birth, the feeling about him and the interest in him are stronger and more significant than ever. At least that was the impression that one got sitting through the two sessions of the twenty-fifth
annual meeting of the Walt Whitman Fellowship International, at the Hotel Brevoort in New York on May thirty-first. For the interpretations were as many as the speakers, and on account of the bow-string tension of war the feeling ran unusually high. Walt’s universality, many-sidedness and timelessness were thus unconsciously demonstrated by each speaker’s insistence on his own essential view.

There were two unique features of this meeting. One had only to put his head in at the door and look around to see that something very essential was lacking. Each person as he came to the door where I was distributing programs cast an anxious glance inside and asked: “Where is Horace?” It was something unheard of for him to be absent. But I think in a strange way his inability to come intensified the love that all have for him, for as many as have been the beautiful things that I have always heard people say about him, I think I never heard so many before as I did last night. And none missed him more than Helen Keller. She told me in her wonderful way that she had waited ten years to meet him and was so terribly disappointed, but she said that she felt very near him in spirit. Horace sent a beautiful special message to her in which he said that although the fates again decreed that he should not “set eyes upon you, nothing could prevent me from setting my heart upon you, as I have in the past years of your wonderful life. Sometimes the heart has better eyes than the head, as you have yourself miraculously proved.” In this communion between these two great spirits we had a particularly poignant illustration of the highest kind of spiritual realization that Whitman stood for.

Probably the most important talk of the meeting was the first one of the afternoon session given by Roy Mitchell. While stating that his point of view was only one of many that might be considered he really dug into Whitman and brought out something very suggestive and illuminating for us to think over. He spoke of Walt’s attitude toward his mission and his place in the world and this country as a teacher and one who has his own message for men. It can only be paralleled in its egoism and authority among the great ancient teachers, Mr. Mitchell pointed out, like Buddha, Krishna and Jesus. Four of Walt’s most essential teachings were emphasized: brotherhood, immutable justice, immortality and personal responsibility. And as there was in Walt’s time only one existing translation of the Bhagavad Gita, most of Walt’s similarity to these great ancient scriptures must have come from the fact that he himself was one of the great illuminati. All through Whitman, concluded Mr. Mitchell, we find traces of a love which is far older than our era and which extends beyond the farthest ranges of history.
Duncan Macdougall examined a phase of Whitman in connection with the theater. He said: “I don’t want to take out a leaf from Whitman in order to flourish a palm branch of my own, but I do want to point out the similarity between the spiritual meaning that lies behind most of Walt’s poetry and that which is inherent in most of the best dramatists.” Duncan thinks that Walt erred when he thought that we should increase in our love and use of great poetry and contended that only through the theater, which reaches the simplest people in the simplest way, can the great spiritual truths be got across to the masses.

Everett Martin considered that Whitman’s humanitarianism was misleading and too bourgeois, and that his humanism, which emphasizes the individual man, and not that colorless entity humanity, was the thing. Radicals are now in a curiously uncertain position. Mr. Martin believes that Walt’s faith in the single individual first, and the “en masse” second, is at this perilous time extremely helpful. We have forgotten, he said, that, as Whitman pointed out, the self is the great end, and that social or economic conditions are only a means to that end. Emerson, Stirner and Nietzsche all appreciated this. “The saying of Protagoras,” said Mr. Martin in finishing, “sums up Walt. ‘Man is the measure of all things.’”

Then Whitman was psychoanalyzed. Thomas Libbin, who has spent years in Europe with Jung and other authorities, got after the Good Gray Poet’s complex and chawed it all to pieces. “From the psychic point of view, life is a continuous series of readjustments, or, as Bill Nye or some one near Bill Nye has put it, life is just one damn thing after another,” began Mr. Libbin. Whitman had a great deal of trouble making these readjustments, and his poems are incidental to his efforts in this direction. Walt was naturally cautious, doubting and uncertain, and his poems were his whistling to keep up his courage. Or, as Jung put it, in their technical jargon, “Whitman was one who extraverted in his poetry to keep his balance.” He did get his balance, and acquired a wonderful serenity, however. And this is the reason that Walt’s poems are so stimulating and reassuring; the reader gets his balance in the same way, vicariously, that Whitman did originally. The real significance of Whitman’s catastrophic change from a personal to a cosmic consciousness has only been adequately understood by the Frenchman, Balzac.

Anna Strunsky Walling spoke very feelingly of Walt’s infinite human sympathy and surpassing kindness. She thought that, though Whitman did insist on the individual, as the individual could not find adequate expression except through a social democracy, that Walt’s faith in the individual was also a great faith in society as a whole. And as Whitman is the greatest poet of democracy,
and the great world change now in process is in the direction of democracy, and will include the rise of a new proletarian culture, that *Leaves of Grass* became, therefore, the great scripture of that movement. Whitman’s faith was in the future and the always greater things to follow.

George Jay Smith, who presided at both sessions, read a poem from the *Leaves* to conclude the afternoon meeting.

In the evening sixty-five people were at the dinner. Mr. Smith began the dinner with a discussion of Whitman’s sex poems and their great and important liberalizing effect. They were one phase, he suggested, of Walt’s enthusiastic sympathy with all nature.

Eliot White’s enthusiasm for Walt had not diminished after twenty-three years. He called attention to Whitman’s passionate love, his feeling of the deliciousness of life, and how Walt gave himself to the world without hesitation or stint.

Elsa Barker read an original poem, “A War Prayer.”

Art Young, ever lovable Art Young, didn’t come to celebrate any dead man, he said, but to see Horace. Everything new is ridiculed, Art said, and he spoke of how, after *Leaves of Grass* came out, Bill Nye followed it with his *Bale of Hay*.

Then the miracle! Helen Keller, sightless and without hearing, spoke like a spirit from another planet about Walt Whitman. On her beautiful face shone out the lights and fires from her hidden world. In this, what seemed like an immediate communion with the great poet, I saw the only visible human immortality that I have ever known. She said: “He opened the windows of my dark house and guided my stumbling footsteps. He was a wonder man, a mountain. All the winds blow about his face. And all about him are the flowers of summer and the winter snows. Us liberals are, many of us, blind to his vision and deaf to his message.” She spoke of the sea, the night, the sky, the stars. And of the war: “We will not be stopped by war, by victories or by defeats, for life rushes on like water in a ravine and will not be stemmed.”

William Norman Guthrie said that most of Whitman was scripture in the best sense. And that, for its noble expression of patriotism at its highest, the Whitman Fellowship ought to print *Democratic Vistas* as a pamphlet and circulate it universally.

The world feeling, the great sympathy and love for universal man, in Walt was what impressed James Waldo Fawcett as his unclouded glory. “Whitman always envisioned the race,” he said.

A bust of Whitman by Derré, the distinguished French sculptor, was presented to the Fellowship, and its making explained by Mr. Macdougall.

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A small replica, presented to Horace Traubel by the artist, was also exhibited, and its beautiful inscription to Horace read. Resolutions were passed to appoint a committee of three to consider the manner and means of having a bust of Walt somewhere appropriate in his beloved Mannahatta.

Ben Legere and John Sloan made remarks. Fred Hier, who was just back from Camden, brought a special greeting from Horace Traubel and read one of Horace’s poems for the occasion: “Take my advice: stop where you are.” Rosalie Goodyear also read a poem of Traubel’s.

Finally, a telegram of love and greeting, signed by forty persons, was sent to Horace Traubel.

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MAY 1918 (29:40)

Whitmania

Horace Traubel

There are some antique Whitmanites who declare that no one thing so discredits Walt’s fame as the work of the crowd of feeble imitators who have followed him. It annoys them. It angers them. And they pass nasty compliments out to the upstart brood. Some men who when he was alive stood very close to Walt have an idea that they possess the old man in trust as an inheritance they must faithfully administer according to an accepted formula. First of all I’ll quote a recent dogmatic say-so from the New York Times to illustrate the sort of literary anathema I have in mind:

Robert M. Wernaer dedicates his book, The Soul of America, to the American people. The publisher says of it: “Here is a voice! A solemn, passionate voice, like John the Baptist, crying in the wilderness: Consecrate yourselves! Consecrate yourselves!” When on the first page we come to the passage, “I am a man — I salute you, brother,” etc., we know the voice is not so much an echo of John the Baptist’s as of Walt Whitman’s, and we soon discover that Whitman wrote in this manner very much better than Robert M. Wernaer does. Whitman is justified, because his was an original inspiration. He was the first to decide that it did not matter how you wrote at all, if only you had something worth while to say. He had an unaffected enthusiasm for democracy, a perfectly genuine passion of sympathy that never tired for all human beings, be they never so unattractive — a real love of liberty. Out of these he made great poetry, even if Swinburne did call it mere

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rhetoric — but Whitman is not a safe model. In the first place, because it is so easy to do Whitmania badly. Indeed, no one has ever done it well but Whitman himself. Mr. Wernær undertakes to write Whitmania, but his matter is trite and has not Whitman’s ear for cadence. He urges ideals upon us, if we are to win this war. The war must be fought in the name of the soul. These poems would furnish Germany with much amusement if Germany could find leisure to read them at the moment.

It’s so easy to do Whitman badly. Yes. And to do Tennyson or Browning badly. Or Emerson or Swinburne. Or anyone. Thousands of writers do others badly. But if just one does Whitman badly — or even goodly — the howl goes up. It’s excusable to imitate the imitators of imitators. But to imitate someone who imitated nobody is a crime. There’s a lot of nonsense talked about Whitman by those tommyrotters who say Walt was influenced by nobody. They’re wrong. He was influenced by everybody. And that’s his glory. And he himself pays tribute to a few by name. No man sets out alone. No one is isolated. We make no voyages from nowhere to noplace. We can’t start all alone nor end all alone. The best we can do is to make departures. That’s the word. Departures. Respecting the sum total so far and adding to that total. Wagner increased the horizon of music in that way. And that’s what Strauss is doing today. And the revolting painters all over the world are following suit.

The fool idea that Walt introduced free verse, discovered it, offered it to us as a revelation, has had too much currency even among Walt’s friends. There was free verse before Walt. And now you see there’s free verse after Walt. The critic says Walt’s not a safe model. When he first appeared the grandfather critics said he wasn’t a safe original. Now that he has won a position they can’t deny him their grudging imbecility again asserts itself against innovation. Before Walt only God. After Walt the deluge.

Even God couldn’t produce something out of nothing. Even Whitman couldn’t produce something out of nothing. I used to get some folks up in the air with a very innocent trick. I copied some free verses of accepted scriptural writings on bits of card and mixed them up with lines from Leaves of Grass and chucked them on the table together. “Now find me the Whitman stuff,” I said. And they couldn’t do it. They made some hits. But they made more misses.

Walt used to say that when once a man knew what “I, Walt Whitman, a cosmos” meant, it’d no longer be “I, Walt Whitman,” but “I, Horace Traubel,” or I anyone else. Antecedent free verse was antecedent free verse. Walt’s free verse was Walt’s free verse. Tagore’s free verse is Tagore’s free verse. Carpenter’s free verse is Carpenter’s free verse. Free verse is the verse not of a vested Whitman
interest but the verse of the man who chooses to use it. Walt didn’t think he was the only cosmos. We’re all cosmoses. If you immure Walt in Walt himself you destroy him. I’m a communist on free verse. Everything belongs to everybody in verse as well as in property. Walt made good. Others may make good. Do make good. I even say Traubel’s free verse is Traubel’s free verse and owes no apologies for itself to the editors of anthologies and the judges of literary courts.

Swinburne may have said that *Leaves of Grass* was mere rhetoric. I’ve heard it charged that Swinburne’s writing was mere words. Emerson was formerly accused of talking mere morality. A woman once said to me of another woman: “She’s a mere—” but she didn’t say more. For I broke in and cried: “No one’s merely anything.”

What is anyone’s place in the world? Any place he can make good in. They say woman’s place is the home. I say woman’s place is any place she can make good in. I’ve been told things about the “nigger’s” place and the “sheeny’s” place and the “dago’s” place and the “wot’s” place and the “chink’s” place by superior persons who are their own self-appointed saviors of society. But I still say anybody’s place is anywhere in which anybody can make good. And so I still say that anybody’s verse is any verse which anybody can do.

Every time a new man shows his head the super-magistracy of art hits it. It seems to be supposed that the sources of inspiration are dried up. A new man comes with a violin. What’s the use? Think of Kreisler. A new man comes playing piano. What’s the use? Think of Rubenstein. A new man paints. What’s the use? Think of Michael Angelo. A new man sings. A new man writes. What’s the use? Think of Caruso. Think of Whitman. This deterrent cynicism would blow out every new light.

A poet and his style are as much a part of evolution and everything as a shoemaker and his style. He’s not catastrophistic. He’s according to law. He comes after all that went before. And his successors are just as much entitled to say they come after all that went before, including him. The origins and obligations of the poet and of the wage-worker are identical. They are rooted in a common soil out of which marvels but not miracles are harvested.

We call our so called great men masters. That makes them a curse. We should call them fathers. That’d make them a blessing.

We can’t have children without parents, of course. And we can’t have parents without children, equally of course.
Walt Whitman after Twenty Years

Eliot White

Speech made at the Walt Whitman dinner, New York, May 31st.

One day in 1894, I think it was? I found a group of my fellow-students clustered about a book which one was reading aloud. The others listened with the eagerness of hungry campers attacking a meal of coffee and crisp bacon. They were more than reading — they were eating — the book!

It was my first meeting with Walt Whitman. “Have you read any of Whitman?” one of the fellows asked. When I answered, “No,” they all insisted that I begin at once. The stuff, they said, was simply indescribable — you had to get into it yourself.

They were right. That introduction, twenty-four years ago, meant the beginning of new life in my world of books. I dared to “invest” in Whitman, and prophesy that he would be recognized as “in a class by himself;” sooner or later. It was like investing in good stock when it was way “below par;” and then watch others coming in for it later. It’s some fun to risk a judgment and a loyalty; better than risking dollars; and the dividends in delight are sure.

As at that meeting, in 1894, Walt Whitman’s poetry is for eating rather than reading. Where others “compose,” this man imparts rations for fighters in moral and spiritual trenches. Where so many “give lectures,” he, as he says, “gives himself.” Such a debt is unpayable by those whom he has so nourished, except in one coin, and that is, to become food-givers themselves, and help feed a world that never realizes how famine hungry it is.

I am going to “tally” a few of the words that stand out for me from the many that convey such fiber and refreshment through these years of fellowship.

“I am he that aches with amorous love.” There’s the meat in the nutshell — this man ached, thrilled, wrestled, with the reality of love of his fellow-men and the visible world, where so many others use the word alone. This is why he remains a magnet. He is drawn resistlessly toward others, and so renews their flagging electricity of soul by whelming currents from his own mighty armature. Magnetism of this sort is an inexplicable fact, but the hope of life is that it fail not. Did not the most magnetic personality in history say: “I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me”?

“Deliciousness” is another outstanding word. Why are the so-called “common” facts, sights, sounds and joys, more overflowing with deliciousness to
this man than to most others? Why, indeed? None can explain. They just are. And so we come back to Walt, year after year, for vital restoration of our own too easily failing sense of the deliciousness of life.

Another word is “latencies.” Some scoff at Whitman’s alleged neglect of rhythm and grace, but where is there a more musical line, speaking now only of sound and syllable, than this from “Shut Not Your Doors to Me, Proud Libraries”: “But you, ye untold latencies, will thrill to every page”? Say that over five times or so, and renew your appreciation of the poet’s sheer melody. And as for the meaning — the “latencies” are there to be thrilled in every fully-endowed personality. If they do not thrill to such pages as these — if they do not exult, revel and veritably riot with impassioned gladness in the sweep of such primal tides of reality as surge through these verbal tokens of the poet’s self-impartation — then so much the worse for the unthrilled! Who has time to bother with their stolidity and petty criticisms? I dont suppose a torn-up tree being swept over Niagara Falls has much to say in praise of the mighty current and its glorious plunge against which it plucks with feeble twigs.

“A kelson of creation is love.” Yes, it comes down to that. Everywhere the undergirding love. It may not be done sermonlike, but if this poetry isn’t a convincing preachment of the stupendous declaration by one of old called “The Beloved Apostle,” that “God is love, and he that dwelleth in love, dwelleth in God, and God in him,” I should like to know where such a declaration can be found.

So I am glad to record twenty-four years of acquaintance with Walt Whitman’s poems as years of grateful delight. I can certainly endorse Pierre de Lanux’s statement that “we are no more the men we were” before we read this wonderful message.

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**SEPTEMBER 1918 (29:104)**

**Vicious Circle Still Bars Whitman**

*Morris Lychenheim*

Written for the *Chicago Examiner* by invitation.

[Editor’s note — Dr. Lychenheim of Chicago knew Walt Whitman well in the final years of the open-road poet’s life and is married to a sister of Horace Traubel, biographer of Whitman.]

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One of the marvels of these days is the widespread ignorance of the American people concerning the writings of Walt Whitman. How can we account for it?

Apparently he is too radical (going to the root of things). The sunlight is too strong. We prefer it shaded. Whitman deals with fundamentals; with principles. Just as life is inexplicable, so Whitman in his work is unfathomable. He does not choose to explain, and he does not ask others to try to explain him; indeed, he specifically denies that anyone can do so.

His sex-poems, I think, are the stumbling block beyond all else. Whitman was urged by Emerson either to eliminate or to tone down some of these poems. Whitman refused, declaring he was the poet of both good and evil.

Toward the end of his life, in his seventieth year, he told Horace Traubel, one of his literary executors, he would stand or fall by what he had written; no change must be made. This proves he intended to give a picture of men and women from birth to the grave with all their imperfections naked and unashamed. Also draw them as perfect, if this were possible.

In his flights of imagination as to the possibilities of men he is perhaps unmatched by any writer. He gives the air of universality to all his poems.

The present war has revealed many hidden facts. The greatest fact revealed is the power of education or miseducation. Let several generations be reared in the atmosphere of privilege, autocracy, caste, prejudice, great inequalities of wealth, and all be educated that “might is right.” Let them be taught that these conditions are unchangeable — always have been and always must be — and as a result we see nations warring for this order of things.

Walt Whitman opposed such an order. He saw only death for a civilization built on such lines. But here again he was thwarted by the power of privilege. He is not known to the masses because the average school teacher is not acquainted with his writings, and therefore does not teach them.

Some may know Whitman, but find it impolitic to teach pupils the dynamic truths found in his poems. In education we have the vicious circle. Commence nowhere and end nowhere. Truths are discovered by accident, not by direction. Of books we have plenty, but, as Emerson states, the majority are but “echoes and weakeners of the best.”

If Whitman is read by an unprejudiced reader, I venture to say a new world will be revealed to such a reader. May the annual celebration of Whitman’s birth (just past) bring his work to many who are unacquainted with it, and increase the enthusiasm of those who belong to the Whitman Fellowship. There are no dues payable in the Fellowship; all those interested in the Good Gray Poet are automatically members.
In his review of a 1910 book on Whitman, Traubel had occasion to make this telling contrast: “(Carleton) Noyes goes to Walt through the great libraries. I go to him through the great streets. . . . Maybe I make more of *Calamus* and *Children of Adam*. Make more of revolt. More of sex, surely” (226). Traubel was being quite accurate: his journal made more of sex than all the mainstream periodicals of America’s Victorian and Edwardian ages.¹

The *Conservator* was not shy about addressing issues of sexual behavior and sex education. Especially in his bold reviews of the sexological books of Edward Carpenter, Traubel expressed steadfastly modernist views on what he termed “sex morality” — views guaranteed to discomfort “bat-eyed and materialistic” preachers and priests, city and state attorneys, and “pruned away” members of the bourgeoisie. Readers steeped in Whitman and familiar with the remarkable bonding between Walt and Horace will find it impossible to avoid concluding that the views on sexual freedom and personal sexual responsibility expressed in the *Conservator* grew organically from the sexual agenda of *Leaves of Grass*.

On the other hand, it must be noted that over the *Conservator*’s thirty-year run, Traubel carefully and effectively distanced Whitman from the specifics of the culture wars that were raging during this period of rapidly increasing sophistication in the science of sex, birth control, family planning, homosexuality, and psychotherapy (notably through the work of Freud). Whitman and the subject of homosexuality — the word itself never appears in the *Conservator*, though “urning” does — are not mentioned in the same breath.² And surely the fact of the existence of homosexuality appears there, too. Traubel clearly assumed the cognoscenti, like himself or Percival Wiksell or Charles Warren Stoddard, would make the appropriate connections easily enough.

To be sure, Traubel could now and then rise to the bait, but only in the most general and discreet terms. Of Roland Sawyer’s *Walt Whitman: The Prophet*...
Poet, he wrote that when Sawyer comes to sex “he is semi-apologetic . . . like a man convinced that Walt was right but afraid to take the ultra stand in the world.” Putting the namby-pamby book down, Traubel vouchsafed his theory of life-writing: “Biography should be brutal. It should be cruel. It should include all the shadow” (24:141). By no stretch of the imagination is all of Whitman’s “shadow” — at least the part that hid his homosexual nature — acknowledged or discussed in the Conservator. Still, by a kind of easy triangulation, one can see in the following reviews and essays that Traubel was, in his careful, oblique way, honoring the spirit of Children of Adam and Calamus.

NOTES

1. An illuminating book on the cultural wars over sex in Whitman’s and Traubel’s day is Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz’s Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in 19th-Century America (Knopf, 2002). “I take Americans quarreling about sex as my subject,” she writes in her introduction (p. 4). Not included because of space, but worth consulting, is a three-installment essay from 1896 by Alice Groff, “Sex Attraction in the Light of Modern Intellectual and Ethical Evolution” (7:67).

2. Instances of suppression on Traubel’s part of debate on the implications of an exclusively “adhesive” Whitman have already been noted (223), and another can be mentioned here: the treatment of Dr. W. C. Rivers’s pamphlet, Walt Whitman’s Anomaly, which appeared in Britain in 1913. Rivers’s purpose was to explain his conclusion that Whitman was homosexual. Among the giveaways: Whitman’s delight in “cooking, not as a sportsman sometimes will, but for its own sake,” his “feminine pity for military suffering,” and his “love letters” to Peter Doyle. Its publisher, George Allen, was also Edward Carpenter’s, so it is hard to imagine the work escaping Traubel’s or the Lancashire fraternity’s attention. And yet there is not a whisper about the study in the Conservator. Perhaps Traubel used the notice on the title page that its sale was restricted to “Members of the Legal and Medical Professions” to justify not introducing this Whitman matter into his pages.

APRIL 1894 (5:29)

Sex-Love: and Its Place in a Free Society
By Edward Carpenter

Isaac Hull Platt

The easiest way to deal with a troublesome subject is to ignore it, but it is not the wisest, the bravest, nor the safest way. The proverbial ostrich
adopts this plan when he buries his head in the sand at the approach of danger.

The conventional method of dealing with the subject of the relation of the sexes resembles the conduct of the ostrich. It is a subject confessedly involving danger, hence society refuses to look it in the face, and seems to imagine that by so doing it is safe. It sets up a fetish which it falsely calls purity, but which really is a combination of prudishness and pruriency. It assumes, or at least acts, as though the human body and sexuality were inherently vile, and a book which, with the best intentions and in the purest spirit treats of these matters frankly and directly, is not only likely to be frowned upon, but is in danger of being suppressed by the district attorney at the instigation of that agent of misdirected energy, the Society for the Suppression of Vice. This would very likely be the fate of Mr. Carpenter’s pamphlet if it had attained any circulation in this country, which, unfortunately, it has not; and yet a cleaner, wholesomer paper it would be hard to find, or one containing a more needed moral lesson.

Do thoughtful people actually believe that the human physiology and the sexual relation are subjects to be ashamed of? Sir Thomas Browne frankly took this ground and lamented that nature had not provided some more decent method for the perpetuation of the race. But as a matter of fact, right-minded people are not, as a rule, ashamed of their mothers, nor of their offspring. Then why be ashamed of the relations which lead to procreation? The fault is mainly one of education. Mr. Carpenter truly says: “Until these subjects are openly put before children and young people, with some degree of intelligent and sympathetic handling, it can scarcely be expected that anything but the utmost confusion, in mind and morals, should reign in matters of sex. That we should leave our children to pick up their information about the most sacred, the most profound and vital of all human functions from the mere gutter, and learn to know it first from the lips of ignorance and vice, seems almost incredible, and certainly indicates the deep-rooted unbelief and uncleanness of our own thoughts. Yet a child at the age of puberty, with the unfolding of its far down emotional and sexual nature, is eminently capable of the most sensitive, affectional and serene appreciation of what sex means (generally more so, as things are today, than his worldling parent or guardian); and can absorb the teaching, if sympathetically given, without any shock or disturbance of its sense of shame — that sense which is so valuable a safeguard of early youth. To teach the child, first, quite openly, its physical relation to its own mother, its long indwelling in her body and the deep and sacred bond of tenderness between mother and child in consequence; then after a time to explain the work

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of fatherhood, and how the love of the parents for each other was the cause of
the child’s own existence; these things are easy and natural — at least they are
in the young mind — and excite no surprise or sense of unfitness, but only grat-
tude and a sense of tender wonderment. Then, later on, as the special needs
and desires develop, to instruct the girl or boy in the further details of the mat-
ter, and the right care and conduct of her or his own sexual nature; on the need
of self-control and the presence of affection in all relations with others, and
(without asceticism) on the possibility of deflecting physical desire, to some
degree, into affectional and emotional channels, and the great gain so resulting;
all these things, which an ordinary youth of either sex will easily understand
and appreciate, and which may be of priceless value, saving such a one from
years of struggle in foul morasses and waste of precious life strength. Finally,
with the maturity of the moral nature, the supremacy of the pure human rela-
tion should be taught — not the extinguishment of desire, but the attainment of
the real kernel of it, its dedication to the well-being of another — the evolution
of the human element in love, balancing the natural — till at last the snatching
of an unglad pleasure, regardless of the other from whom it is snatched, or the
surrender of one’s body to another, for any reason except that of love, become
things impossible.”

If such education as this could become general it would remove from our
society the stigma of inherent indecency, as shown not only in the lewd talk
among men and boys, but in the far more objectionable, because more insidi-
ous, pruriency of the modern novel of the French school.

The conventional prudishness on this subject leads to the vulgarization of
what should be held to be the most sacred of human relations. The physical
passions are not in their nature abhorrent, or anything but admirable and de-
sirable in their place. Asceticism and libertinism are the two sides of the same
shield. So long as the tendency to the latter is uncontrolled, so long the former
must and will assert itself. Asceticism should never be looked upon as an end
in itself, though often necessary as a means.

The thought of sex to-day throughout the domains of civilization is thor-
oughly unclean. It is everywhere too closely associated with the idea of mere
animal pleasure. Sex is the allegory of love in the physical world. Its prime ob-
ject is union, the physical union as the expression of the real union, and gen-
eration is the result of this union.

An idea sometimes expressed is that this matter of sexuality is one which
should be relegated to the medical profession. The present writer, being a
physician, is not likely to take too narrow a view of the privileges of the latter.
In regard to the physiological aspect of the subject, certainly physicians should
be more competent than others to form wise judgment, and should be the
instructors of the people; but on the ethical side it would seem to be the con-
cern of all thinking people and especially of parents, guardians and teachers.
Let the subject be permeated by nature’s antiseptics, daylight and fresh air, and, with right education and the cultivation of a wholesome sentiment, more
will be gained in the direction of the abatement of the social evil and obscenity
than all the societies for the suppression of vice and crime, with the assistance
of the most rigid and Puritanical laws, can ever accomplish.

Mr. Carpenter has handled a difficult subject bravely, wisely and well, and
deserves the thanks of all right-minded people. Nothing could do more to es-
tablish a healthy tone of society than a general acceptance of his views, and a
reconstruction of education on the lines he lays down.

June 1895 (6:52)

On Degeneracy
{On Degeneration, by Max Nordau}

Oscar Lovell Triggs

Max Nordau’s volume seems to require for its reviewing a thorough-going
man of science, and more particularly a specialist in brain diseases, since the
work in question purports to be a scientific criticism of genius from the point
of view of morbid psychology. The unlearned layman, abashed by the facts ar-
rayed in proof of latter-day literary degeneracy — fearful, too, lest the unlovely
epithets of this newest science of imbecility attach to him, an admirer in his
simplicity of the degenerates, and seemingly himself a member of the class —
is simply put to rout. Instinctively, however, the student of art, being accus-
tomed to study the works of genius from other than a pathological standpoint,
protests with increasing emphasis against the conclusions of the book, so far,
at least, as these pertain to artists who represent, in his opinion, world-wide
and in every way exalted and sane artistic tendencies.

This instinctive opposition is supported in reason by several observations.
First. It is very likely that Nordau does not intend himself to be taken very
seriously; for his methods are too plainly sensational, those of an energetic and
time-serving journalist, his temperament is notably unscientific, and, worse
than this, his manners are those of a common scold. To use his own vigorous
vocabulary, he “talks like a tea-pot”— “tall-talk” that rouses laughter and then
contempt.
Second. It is at once evident that however much the author may know about the phenomena of insanity, he is ignorant with respect to the forms and processes of art. What astonishing results are exhibited when the tests of insanity are applied to works of art whose law is beauty! Rossetti is proved an idiot because, forsooth, of the repetition in the ballad “Troy Town” of a psychologically disconnected refrain! The student of literature, who knows the artistic use of the refrain in songs and ballads, is surely justified in hesitating before he abandons the tests of art, which evidence that Rossetti is one of the most successful of balladists, for the tests of Nordau, which make out that this master of his craft is a degenerate and an idiot. But this is the least of the errors which the book contains. Ignorance of art and incompetency of judgment can go further when the declaration is made that Wagner’s *Parsifal* is the work of a “mind in its most nonsensical vagaries.” Others have thought *Parsifal* to be the highest artistic achievement of the century. It is so if judged by artistic standards. Who is right here? On the whole, I fall back on an old theory that “beauty has its own excuse for being.” Who creates beauty elevates the race, leads it forward to right living. “Art still has truth, take refuge there.”

In the next place, it can hardly be possible that the whole world is mad. There have always been abundant reasons to reassure those who cannot bring themselves to believe that civilization is a disease. Nature is not yet bankrupt of its energy and substance. Not all of us have shattered nerves and degenerate souls under the pressure of modern life. The dusk of the gods is a long way off yet. Scientifically considered, life is, and must be, a tension. We seek strenuously for fullness of life, to have in our personality the greatest possible energy of intellect, glow of emotions, freedom in the outgoing of the will. Religion has been defined as the “sum of the unfettered expansive impulses of our being.”

Fulfilling the desires of the intellect, we long for the satisfaction which art in its high emotionalism can give. Through the ministration of modern romantic art, which has specialized, as it were, in the emotions since the period of the Revolution, life has been rounded to a whole. To-day we pursue the “Flying Perfect” on the wings of a complete personality. Never has the earth been inhabited by a more perfect race, by more even-balanced souls, who see life steadily and see it whole. In the completed man the emotional is central, holding in its control the activities of life. It is the distinction of modern art that it has permanently expanded, for us all, the bounds of individuality.

Now Nordau is without discrimination. There are those whom he classes as degenerates who in their very mysticism, egotism and emotionalism, represent tendencies which are world-wide in significance, and whose works are produced by perfect sanity. The pathologist will classify Whitman among the
insane by taking account of a special set of facts—his mysticism, egotism, and emotionalism—which, counted as symptoms, and related to the phenomena of the asylum, seem to indicate degeneracy. But Whitman as a whole personality, judged by data which have historical and evolutionary bearing, culminates thoughts and lives and artistic processes which have their beginnings far back in time. No one is less affected than he by that special malady of the times, which is determined by a shattered nervous system. No one embodies more than he the higher thought and literary movements of the century. He is the type of the completed personality. Wagner, again, when judged by one set of facts—his egotism and emotionalism—may seem to be degenerate, in greater degree, perhaps, “than the whole present generation put together,” but in the final appeal to the world’s consciousness and to historical and evolutionary data he is seen to be one of the supreme artistic products of the ages. Are historical facts to have no force in estimating degeneracy? Is the world’s consciousness of exalted genius wholly at fault? Who is to decide concerning the advancement of the race? Is physiology alone able to govern the conduct of life? There seems to be a question here of what serves man best. The poet who can “turn the golden rhyme,” who, in his “divine power to speak words” is the result of forces working in myriad men, is not to be lightly thrust aside as a curse to the race. Genius is its own justification. The poet may still say with Luria that a mission is reserved for him, a child of the mystical, emotional, poetical East, to bring “new feeling fresh from God,” “fresh instinct to translate into law.” Nordau will hardly expect us to echo his praise of his fellow-psychologist, Professor Lombroso, who is eulogized as “one of the loftiest mental phenomena of the century”—presumably the one other sane man of the times. Beauty, with a sense for which degeneracy is associated, has still its “excuse for being.”

Finally, the facts of evolutionary life justify the query whether the phenomena of “degeneracy” may not indicate in some cases the development among men of spiritual senses of greater refinement. Genius is, of course, a departure from the normal. Who shall decide whether that departure is not toward the best? Mysticism is not necessarily an indication of weakness of will. It may denote an advanced spiritual conception. If life be an involution of spiritual forces, there must always be a realm, circumscribing the known and rationalized world, where feeling alone can operate. Egotism may mean trust in the authority of a divine revelation. Emotionalism may evidence the triumph of a complete personality over the tyranny of a narrow intellectualism. “Men have called me mad,” wrote the author of “Eleanora” {Poe}, “but the question is not yet settled, whether madness is or is not the loftiest intelligence—whether much that is glorious—whether all that is profound—does not spring from

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disease of thought— from moods of mind exalted at the expense of the general intellect. They who dream by day are cognizant of many things which escape those who dream only by night. In their gray visions they obtain glimpses of eternity, and thrill, in waking, to find that they have been upon the verge of the great secret. In snatches, they learn something of the wisdom which is of good and more of the mere knowledge which is of evil. They penetrate, however rudderless or compassless, into the vast ocean of the ‘light ineffable;’ and again, like the adventures of the Nubian geographer [Al-Idrisi], *agressi sunt mare tenebrarum, quid in eo esset exploraturi* [they came to the sea of darkness [i.e., the Atlantic] to explore what was in it].”

To much the same effect Browning, one of the sanest of men who was ever a dreamer, wrote, “A poet never dreams: we prose-folk always do.” And if a witness is wanted to testify to the superiority of the emotional over the intellectual, to the greater authority of “flashes struck from midnight” over the cold prudence of the day, the same author may be quoted in a hundred lines, saying, substantially in each case, that

> Love, hope, fear, faith — these make humanity;  
> These are its sign and note and character.  
>  
> Paracelsus

For my own part, then, I conclude that the question of artistic degeneracy is not to be determined by a man of Nordau’s methods and motives; by one so unable to distinguish between what is due to art and what to insanity; and on the general question raised respecting the meaning of egotism and emotionalism, I conclude that, in an age when the forces of democracy are working to increase individuality on the one hand and the feeling for humanity on the other, these still tend upward. I cannot doubt the course of history or lose faith in the upward movement of the universe. It is easier to question the results of morbid psychology.

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**MAY 1902 (13:42)**

*Ioläus: An Anthology of Friendship*  
*By Edward Carpenter*

“T.”

We are always talking of love and brotherhood but any attempt to add to either in unusual ways is met with persecution. Yet it is obvious that we must
venture in unusual fields. The law or custom permits love. You may love within certain prescribed limits. Any attempt to break out or away is met with a club. If you are in doubt where or how to love ask the next policeman you meet. If you declare that love is worth having on my terms you will be charged with threatening the home. What is love? I do not know. But every politician knows and every priest knows. Hell and the jail stand ready to welcome malefaction. You could not believe of your own excogitation that you could possibly love too much. But you are deceived. Your love belongs to backyards and doorsteps. Your love belongs to a parish, to one house in that parish. To look elsewhere with love is erratic if not wanton. You could not love many persons to the enrichment of all. You can only love one person at the expense of all. It is not safe to love. It is safe not to love, it is safer to be indifferent, it is safest to hate.

Carpenter has gathered from many sources notes of a single song. He has strung them together with comment of a most pertinent character. He takes you from one to another by easy transition. Eloquent things have always been said about love. But love is only sparsely divined. It is wonderful what continuity is exhibited in this collation from Carpenter. It is a tribute at once to the sentiment and to Carpenter’s scholarship. You meet love in the unexpected. Love gains in majesty. You see how men ache for love they dare neither give nor accept. Nor is this the spasmodic love which traverses the surface of feeling. It is fundamental. It acknowledges no absences and no denials. It is a love full of sex yet greater than sex. It is a love as small as an atom and as large as the universe. For when love ascends through temporal and older sex experience to the friend, the comrade, it has left nothing back of it unconquered and sees nothing before it which can resist absorption. Carpenter groups early and late the literature of companionship. He accomplishes immense range. Practically no influence remains unsampled. Under the felicitous arrangement of his text you feel that you travel with him hand in hand across continents acquiring the universal confirmations.

April 1905 (16:29)

**Sex Radicalism**

“T.”

The sex problem will not stay closed. The church has closed it. The state police have closed it. Yet it is still wide open. You think it is an easy question to settle? The law has tried to settle it and always failed. The law settles nothing.
It is only the notification of a majority that the majority has settled it. And after the majority has settled a question another majority comes along and breaks it open again. Do you think freedom in sex would lead to license? It would lead to temperance. But the marriage problem is so tied up with the economic problem that the attempt to handle it alone or primarily must fail. Sex is the abc of life. Corrupt sex and life is rotten at the root. That is why it is of the first importance to know about sex. To try every sex negation by every sex affirmation. To meet all prejudice with all insight of sex. Whatever helps to do that, as Dora Forster helps to do it, is significant. {Moses} Harman has been a martyr to this cause. Has gone jail for it. Has stayed out of jail for it. Always having trouble. Always glad of the trouble. Welcoming trouble. For Harman has always seen that trouble leads to truth.

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**January 1911 (21:168)**

**Music and Sex**

*Horace Traubel*

Sex is not the basis of life. Sex is, as far as it goes, life itself. Emotion is not the basis of morality. Emotion is, as far as it goes, morality itself. Yet sex can defeat life. Yet emotion can corrupt morality. Sex is not to be put only to the uses of sex. Sex is to be put to the uses of life. Emotion is not to be put only to the uses of emotion. Emotion is to be put to the uses of morality.

Now, when I say sex I do not mean puritanism. And when I say emotion I do not mean goodness.

Music takes you into the sensuous. Makes its appeal through tone. Tries to translate experience into melody. Music relates you specifically to sound. Is often lost in sound. Sex is saved by something not sex. Music must be saved by something not music. The creative musicians contain that something. That is why they are as a rule poised and equable. But the interpreting musician often loses himself in the mazes of his sentimental titillations. Gives way to them. Translates all life into rudimentary emotion. Does not hold on to things. That is taking big chances. May carry fatal penalties along with it. Like giving way to sex.

Sex is divine. Sex may be devilish. Music is divine. Music may be devilish. You cannot trust sex alone or music alone. Sex for sex’s sake. Music for music’s sake. They are as bad as art for art’s sake. Music needs the bit in its mouth. Is very apt to shade off into licentiousness.
The man who lives in his emotions alone is always on the brink. He is likely to go over any time. With Niagara back of him is likely to go over. It is dangerous to develop one faculty alone. To build it high either on its own foundations or at the expense of all the rest. It is like developing one arm a mile long and leaving the other arm as it is. You immediately knock a man off his pins. Singing alone has its perils. Playing an instrument alone has its perils. Doing anything alone, not doing anything else with it, has its perils.

This is especially true of any draft made on unmitigated emotion. Any call made upon the sensuous. It exacts a fearful return. It cuts at the root. It wastes the ultimate substance. It may build a man up or wreck him. All depends upon the nature of the partnership. Whether a man or a woman calls in other aids. Whether they temper their emotion. Whether they give it a background. Whether they use it in the raw, in its pure and simple essence, or reinforce it with mental states which may serve to modify its macerating tensions.

We know how menacing the simply good man may be. The good man who is not informed. The good man who has no philosophy. Who is only good. Who is good for the sake of goodness. He is as liable to be wrong as right in what he does. As liable to land on his head as on his heels. We know what will happen to the man with a philosophy. We may not like his philosophy. But we know what he will do. We are not afraid we will meet him in odd hours somewhere off the road.

We know how menacing the simply musical man may be. The musical man who is not informed. Who has no philosophy. Who is only musical. Who is musical for the sake of music. Sex is holy. But there is a sex inebriety. Music is divine. But there is a musical inebriation. Sex, left alone to do as it pleases, defeats its own office. Musical emotion, left alone to do as it pleases, defeats its own office.

Music as well as sex has its Harry Thaws. I do not say sex is the cause of the trouble. I only say that sex gets into that sort of trouble. Sex needs to be saved from itself. Music needs to be saved from itself. Sometimes we need to save the painter from his colors. Sometimes we need to save the writer from his words. We may need to save the musician from his tones.

Musicians, the interpreters, seem to say: “There is no life. There is only music.” So that when it comes to the communal things, to social prophecy, they seem to say: “There is no good and bad. There is only music.”

A musician said to me: “My business has nothing to do with public service. I am a musician. Music absorbs everything. Music is my life.”

But sometimes music may not be a man’s life. It may be his death. Art often gets so that it ceases to be a man’s life and becomes his death. It is not enough
for a man to be about something. It is also necessary for him to know what he
is about. It is not enough for a man to feel. He must also see.

Sex may go without love. Music may go without character. Sex needs vi-
sion. Music needs vision. The more virile the quality of an emotion the more
sternly it needs to be checked. We hear it said: “He is all emotion.” That is like
saying: “He is all fool.”

{This article first appeared in the Boston Globe.}

OCTOBER 1911 (22:122)

Love’s Coming of Age
By Edward Carpenter

“I.”

I was going to say that this was a new edition of an old book. But that would
hardly be true. It is a new edition of a new book. This book struck twelve. And
a book that strikes twelve keeps on striking twelve for a long time. When Car-
penter originally wrote the world was less hospitable to sex discussion. The
book was feared then where it will be welcomed now. I have not verbally com-
pared its different issues. Carpenter adds a brief preface in which he says he
has subjected the book to fresh though not extreme revision. The Kennerley
book contains one chapter not in any other edition. I refer to what Carpenter
writes on “the intermediate sex.” The different chapters of Love’s Coming of Age
first of all appeared as separate pamphlets. At that time “the intermediate
sex” came along in its proper place. If I am not mistaken it then bore another
title. When Carpenter was ready to bring out the book the world was all upset
over Oscar Wilde. Carpenter’s publishers made some kick on the urning essay.
It was not included. To-day Carpenter restores it. There are times when the
world goes stark crazy for things and against things. It gets so it will not even
look. When it refuses to listen even to figures and dates. That outcast chapter
belonged to Carpenter’s book. The book was incomplete without it. The book
was always mutilated with that out. It was like a man with an arm or a leg off.
Love’s Coming of Age is at last whole and symmetrical. We are improving a bit.
We are becoming scientific enough to examine and consider phenomena that
we don’t like. A good deal of Carpenter’s book will offend a reader unaccus-
tomed to its line of talk. But if anybody is offended the fault is not Carpenter’s.
He has said what he thinks he should say with unfailing gentleness and taste.
He has not kept half the story back. He has not weakened before his audience. The fact is average people are moving on fast in sex revolt. They don’t know it themselves. But they are. I meet men and women who confess. Who are willing to acknowledge wonderful things to me on the quiet. “Don’t quote us,” they say. But they say, “between you and me—just between you and me”—and so forth and so forth. Carpenter says “just between you and me,” too, but he don’t add, “don’t quote me.” He quotes himself. His book is not a whisper. It speaks straight out. Not through a megaphone. But in a firm human voice. His book is solemnly just between you and me. Between you, whoever, and me, whoever. He asks the man’s questions of a woman and the woman’s questions of a man and civilization’s questions of both. What have we used sex for? What has sex used us for? Sex has had a past. It tells us the story of its life. Its complex confusing story. Its chaotic story. We must resolve sex order out of sex chaos. That is, love order out of love chaos. Not by imitating the past but by learning from the past. Fathers and mothers will be fathers and mothers again. But they will build upon new foundations—proceed upon new inferences. Love can’t be love till it is free. Or sex sex. Or a man a man. Or a woman a woman. Children can’t be welcome children except under freedom. The body must be taken out of boudoirs. Yes, out of laws. The body must be given to the open air. To the tan of the sun. The spirit must rededicate itself. We have tried what sex can do bound and gagged. It has not done very well. It has done well considering. But it has not done well. The new day is here. We are making the farther tests. What can sex do released? It can’t do worse. It must do better. Carpenter don’t say license. He says law the same as you do. But he says natural law. Not laws of cities and charters and congresses. Natural law. The law violating which you are corrupted. Spiritually, physically soiled. Love has no chance under the conditions that prevail. Our industrial and social slaveries narrow its play on every side. The time has come to let love do what it will with us. With our whole selves. With our sex selves. With our dream selves. What is it that makes love good or bad? Or sex: makes it good or bad? Not a statute. Not the customs or prejudices of a puritan inheritance. No. The glory or the shame of the result it provokes. That thing in love or sex which makes us of more use to ourselves and others is justified. Even if it is unusual and unsanctified, is justified. That thing which makes us worse instead of better, a menace rather than an ally, is condemned. Carpenter refrains from extreme definitions. He indicates the way he thinks we are likely to go. But he does not demand that we acquiesce in his chart. He does no more than make suggestions. He has great faith in average folks. He is not afraid that the common man is so weak as to abuse any privilege he may be strong enough to win. He does
not say men and women will, “if.” He says they will. There is no “if” about it. He helps to clear the way. He, going ahead with others. He, illuminated, resolute, foretelling the issue, abandoning himself to the unseen. Making you hear after you have refused to hear. Making you repeat his yes after your thousand nos. Holding no penalties over your head. Patient with your postponements. Giving you time and more time. Knowing the tangled high road and the jostling crowd traveling it and the distant goal obscured by mists and dust. Carpenter knows what the journey costs. He has paid its price. So he can forgive those who default and those who delay. He looks for you, for us all, to be just before we are obedient. He makes no plea for authority. For legal forms. For customs. His plea is for men and women. For motherhood. For passion. Not for the best that can be done under tradition and degradation. He wants more than that. He wants the more than best that can be done beyond. Carpenter knows that love never hurts. He knows that the things that hinder it hurt. Nothing else. Whether the love of a man for a woman, the love of a man for a man, the love of a woman for a woman, the love of an individual for the race, the love of the crowd for a person. He joyously welcomes whatever this brings. He invites a broader dispensation which fearlessly trusts love to its own ascending levels. He is not a monitor or a guardian. He is a brother. That is Carpenter first and last of all. He is a brother.

JULY 1912 (23:73)

Sex Morality: Past, Present and Future
By William J. Robinson, Leo Jacobi, James Warbasse, Edwin Walker, James Morton, B. S. Talmey, and Maude Glasgow

“T.”

Robinson raises a devil of a fuss wherever he goes and whatever he does. I always feel better after his fusses. His fuss may go against me. But I feel better. He may say the darnedest fool things. But I feel wiser after he has said them. If I was sick I’d want that sort of a doctor if I was ass enough to have any doctor. And I’d throw his medicine into the pot. And I’d take him into my heart. I live in a world of straddlers and fashioners. Robinson straddles nothing and fashions nothing. Most people I know dont want to be themselves. They want to be somebody else. Robinson dont want to be anything. He is a man. I dont know a man who makes me madder. And I dont know a man who makes me
happier. Robinson on sex is like Robinson on anything. He’s Robinson square. He’s Robinson straight. Robinson never has but one kind of retort. The retort direct. Not that he cant be or is not courteous. But courtesy is not his point. Truth is his point. He’s a fierce partisan. So am I. No one ever accused him of sneaking about in the midlands. Robinson is always in front of you. He fights always from the front. He declines all opportunities to flank you. He dont believe all is fair in love and war. He believes only fairness is fair no matter when or where. He never fires on you unawares. He creates no ambushes. He is rather the duelist than the soldier. And though he dont give you the choice of weapons he wants you to have as good a weapon as his own. He is not ambitious for victories he dont deserve. Nor proud of victories over incapables.

Now you will find Robinson Robinson in this sex book: in every word of it with which he has to do. The woman who takes part in the discussion thinks Robinson almost deliberately immoral. But he is neither moral nor immoral. He is embodied science. He wants to know what is. He wants to know what what is came from and is going to. In order to get what he is after he has to accept what he discovers. Robinson could have no motive for wishing the race harm. Robinson is the race. The race is Robinson. Just as you and I are the race and the race is you and me. What Robinson wants to find out is what’s best for the person and for all. What sexual habit reacts both ways with the most efficiency. What we must do to preserve and expand the body. What to maintain and enlarge the spirit. Robinson wants greater freedom if greater freedom has the right result. And less freedom if less freedom would give us nobler benefits. His prejudice is in favor of the open world. So is yours. So is mine. And anybody’s. But we cant do as we please with sex. Nor can sex do as it pleases with us. There’s a beyond that means death instead of life. There’s a here that means life instead of death. Where does that beyond or that here commence? Robinson dont say he knows. None of his debaters say they know. But they’re all trying to find out. All of them but the lady. She has settled it all already. So Robinson {a}cutely says she’s out of the fight. What do you bring to this investigation? A book? Prejudices? The opinions of your grandmother? Traditions? The word of the church or the state? The anathema of the priest or the politician? The warp of the ascetic or the libertine? They’re no use. You might as well not come as bring them. We only want you to bring one thing. Yourself. Yourself with all your doors ajar. Yourself without your shutters closed. Your woman’s body and your man’s body. Your woman’s passion and your man’s passion. Your virgin sex or your motherhood and fatherhood. We want you to bring them. With every experience you have realized. The bad and the good. The tainted and the pure. Without shame or pride. It’s not an easy problem if you’re honest and

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It’s an impossible problem if you’re crooked and prudish. Robinson goes up to you if you come disguised and takes your mask off. A large part of the revolutionary work of history is taking masks off. Showing what people really are. Not even what they seem to be to themselves. What they actually come to in the summing up of their bones and brains. Whether in theology or economics or sex: it’s all the same. Robinson’s one of the mask-tearers. He’s one of the brutal kind thoughtless considerate confessors who force a reluctant world to acknowledge its aliases.

{The lead author, William Josephus Robinson (1867–1936), was a physician who became an important liberal advocate for science-based sex education, sometimes allied in his views with Emma Goldman and Margaret Sanger. Among the numerous titles he published were Sex Knowledge for Women and Girls (1916), Fewer and Better Babies (1916), and Eugenics, Marriage, and Birth Control (1917). Traubel’s reviews of two of Robinson’s books and an essay by Robinson follow.}

**November 1912 (23:139)**

**Sex Problems of To-Day**

*By William J. Robinson*

“IT.”

I have many times heard people say they didn’t like Robinson because he was so bigoted. But bigoted is hardly the word for him. They really mean that he is so strong. He don’t seem to be bigoted. He wants everybody to have a say. He may think the sayer a bore. But he wants him to spout. I agree with Robinson so much I’m not inclined to make much of our differences. I’m one of the asses who dont like vaccination and vivisection. And I’m one of the asses with an awful general prejudice against drugs. And I’m one of the asses who is more apt to say yes to mind than to medicine. No doubt if Robinson and I got together he’d set me down for a nincompoop. But the main thing is not that Robinson wouldn’t like me. The main thing is that I like him. That thing in him which some take for coarse I take for fine. That thing which they take for dogmatism I take for candor. I’m mostly used to meeting doctor men who are afraid to spell sex and body honest. Who go back of screens and draw veils and say things. Who make a state secret of what belongs to the people. Who are as proud as priests of their profession. Whose practical creed has a heaven and a
hell in it. When you meet a man of Robinson’s daring who is not afraid to live out of doors you feel as if you had been taken into his confidence. You say: There may be doctors but here is a doctor. Or, better, you say: There may be doctors but here is a man. Take this book. There’s not much doctor in it. There’s lots of man in it. Robinson's not fussing about drugs here. He's fussing about morals. He wants people to know they have bodies. It sounds crazy to talk as if there was anybody who didn't know that. But do you know it? You who mistreat the body. You who refuse the body tribute. You who waste the body as a puritan or waste the body as a debauchee. You who refuse the body with sex. And you who destroy the body with sex. You don't know you have bodies. You know nothing. You haven’t learned the first thing about yourselves. You who always speak of the body as if it was something low and of the soul as if it was something high. What do you know about either body or soul? Robinson's after you with a big stick. Not with drug bottles or pills. Just with a big stick. How dare you? he asks. And he asks it not only of the patient but of the doctor. He reminds doctors that they know certain things ought to be told to people. Well: why don't they tell certain things to people? Robinson tells them. He don't mince matters. He don't say something else when he wants to say sex. He don't say something else when he wants to say disease. He don't say something else when he wants to talk of your organs as a woman or my organs as a man. He says what he means. He takes a path that you can follow him in. He don't intimate. He don't deal in hints and innuendoes. He don't leave you confused. If you don't understand after he is through then you were probably intended for a wooden Indian rather than a man. Mind you, I don't say Robinson's always right. He couldn't always be right. For sometimes his point of view diverges from mine. So how could he always be right? He never could be right where he don't assent to me. But where we are of one mind there he is always right. And we are of one mind about sex in general. Of one mind about asceticism. Of one mind about the supremacy of sex over all laws having to do with sex. Of one mind about the necessity of starting the first day with every child telling it the truth so that its last day may be blessed in living the truth. We are of one mind in the theory that no matter what becomes of the body in the end while we’re using it here it deserves to be sacredly regarded. Of one mind in the contention that the body must be fed all in all. Its sex as well as its belly. Not overfed. But fed. Robinson hands out no “you may be rights” “you may be wrongs.” He sees only one course open. He says: Take it. He don't point two ways and say: Choose. There are no two ways. You ought to know what it means to outrage the body. By starving it. By gorging it. By treating its disarrangements lightly. You
ought to know what it means. How can you know? By looking and knowing for yourself. By forcing those who do know to talk. By adopting what is known into your practical code of life. You ought to know what the economic maladjustments mean to the body. How much disease is of economic origin. You ought to know that. Robinson covers a broad field. Whether you expect to live again or expect to be dead after you have died. This is worth while taking care of now and here: this thing, your body. This thing which we call body. God knows what it is: it’s so wonderful, I don’t know what it is. It’s entitled to reverence on this spot this year. Robinson’s sex problems are one problem in the end: to have sex and have it clean. Not to not have sex and have it clean. He don’t say you can’t be clean if you don’t have sex. But he does say in effect that you’re not likely to be as clean without sex as with sex. For being clean is not washing your hands so many times a day. It’s being allround. The allround man is the clean man. And the allround woman is the clean woman. For being allround means perfect proportion. For being allround means symmetry. Means living all life enough and not too much. Robinson don’t talk to a sick race hoping to cure it. He addresses a well race hoping to keep it from getting sick.

February 1913 (23:188)

The Intermediate Sex:
A Study of Some Transitional Types of Men and Women
By Edward Carpenter

“I.”

Any man with a personality worth while has a touch of the woman in him. And any woman with a personality worth while has a touch of the man in her. It may be much or little. But it’s there. And when we try to think of the man still unborn we don’t think of him as all man. And when we try to think of the woman still unborn we don’t think of her as all woman. We see the invisible but assumed borderlines violated. We know we can’t draw hard and fast boundaries of sex. We often say a man would be the biggest sort of a man “if.” And we often say a woman would be the biggest sort of a woman “if.” That “if” is vastly important. For it points to the absence of the man in the woman and of the woman in the man. A friend of mine picked Carpenter’s book up off my desk. “He’s a brave man to write on that subject.” He’s neither brave nor cowardly. He’s just honest. He’s not presenting an argument. He’s presenting a situation. He’s scientific. Then
he goes beyond science. It’s a subject about which most everybody refuses to talk decently. It has been so confused with its vulgardest manifestations that the psychology and history back of it have been ignored and rejected. Carpenter comes along insisting that it’s time to rescue it from the limbo of dismissed evils and to understand it for what it really signifies. Anyone who sees sex for what it means far as well as near, for what it takes from and gives to the spirit as well as the flesh, for what it bestows so lavishly sometimes upon the spirit when it gives the flesh nothing, will at once realize how necessary it is for us to face its phenomena without rant or wrath. Carpenter dont dogmatise. He inquires. He calls the urning a transitional type. He’s not sure it has come to stay. He seems to think it perhaps only temporarily incident to a process rather than fixed as a conclusion. There have been different kinds of men and women in the past. One sort has given way to another. And one sort of a man and a woman gave place to us. Who doubts but we are to give place to the next sort, whatever that may be? And who knows but these discredited men and women are intercessional and mediatorial as well as intermediate? Carpenter refuses to let you keep your discussion on the plane to which it is generally condemned. He lifts it way up. And you go up with him. Some people suppose that sex things are always physiological. That when emotional impulse operates in other fields it can never be sexual. But sex is omnipresent and omnipotent. Sex is action. If you lay down and die, then you have ceased to have any relation to sex. But as long as you stand up and live you are sexual and creative. Sex is creation. Creation dont mean babies alone. It means trees. It means the harvest. It means adventure. It means writing books. Invention. Even what we call common labor. Sex accounts for all. When sex is construed in this light you begin to see how impossible it is to cut and dry it into a narrow formula. How impossible it is to wholly dissever the masculine from the feminine order. How normal some things are which we have so far tried to account for as disease. Carpenter is not scared by any of the customary counter-noises. He is direct and ingratiating. He disarms the shouters and swearers. The man who shows he is a man by knocking somebody down. And the woman who shows she is a woman by calling in the police. They are scarcely pertinent to an inquiry which has to go to the sources of life and idealism for its data. If you want to know what sex is to a man you want to know woman. And if you want to know what sex is to a woman you want to know man. And if you want to know what sex is to the man in the woman or the woman in the man you want to know how it manifests itself in men and women of the intermediate classification. We see intermediacy go very low. But we also see the ordinary man go very low. Yes, to the bottom. And also the ordinary woman go very low. Yes, to the bottom. But we have no right to base our estimates of human values upon the failures. Or upon

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the stumblers. Though the failures and the stumblers have to be included. Sex will never be seen for what it is until we consider it divorced from as well as dominating passional expression. Carpenter presents the case of the class that today is of all others the most disgusting to the common intelligence. He says you have so far only listened to what can be said against it. And much may be said against it. He says he wants you to listen to what can be said for it. And much may be said for it. We are passing on to a new stage. You as a male. You as a female. On this new stage men may be a bit more women than now. And women may be a bit more men than now. Dare we say this intervening sex which today is the puzzle of the wise and the horror of the foolish is not performing a vitally inevitable part? If it is then you have no more excuse to call it names than you have to impute corruption to sunlight. Carpenter dont call you names. But he asks you questions. You cant get away from sex except by stepping outside the universe. And you cant draw off sex into mathematical cubes and squares and triangles except by dogma and anathema. And so you are compelled to acknowledge the larger implications of sex. To go with sex away from the usual into the special. To go with sex into all human performance. For sex accounts for all. The impetus back of what you dream and do is sex. It’s strong or weak as you are sexed weak or strong. A man may not marry a woman but he may paint a picture. A woman may not marry a man but she may sing a song. Always sex. God dreamed and a man was born. Man dreamed and God is born. Always sex. We work ourselves to death. We struggle against odds in a great cause. We pursue the impossible. We cry out of our hearts for the unseen until it becomes visible. Always sex. Carpenter rests himself upon this big inference. He trusts you to let this superinference play in and out and across the phenomena which he calls upon you to examine. If you shut the door on this you dont shut the door on him but on yourself. And it’s far worse for you to shut yourself in than to shut him out.

JUNE 1913 (24 : 53)

Walt Whitman and Sex

William J. Robinson
Read at the annual meeting of the Walt Whitman Fellowship,
New York, May 31st.

Some very good people and some people not so very good are intimating, sometimes gently, sometimes superciliously, and sometimes quite violently, that there is entirely too much sex discussion going on. It all depends upon
how you look at the matter. To the prude who has been taught from the earli-
est childhood to regard sex and all its manifestations as something unmen-
tionably filthy and disgusting, to the congenitally or senilely impotent, to the
eunuch and to the professional vice-hunter, certainly too much is being spoken
of and written about sex. All of them, the professional vice-hunter and moral
censor particularly, must feel an extreme pain, they must feel discomfited, cha-
grined and angered, when noticing the kind of subjects that are being dis-
cussed not only in medical and semi-medical but in popular journals; and they
certainly must stand aghast at the plain unvarnished language that is being
used in these discussions. And it is good to stop here for a while and say a
word or two to those of our blase, pessimistic friends who consider all talking
and writing a waste of time, and who in their Nietzschean superiority believe
or claim to believe that advancement is a delusion and progress a figment of
an infantile brain. I well remember how these superior pessimists sneered
and shrugged their shoulders when we started our propaganda for a saner atti-
tude toward sex matters a few years ago. “It is a voice in the wilderness,” they
said: “You will never influence Anglo-Saxon prudery. It is a waste of time and
energy.” Just compare our magazines and even daily papers of today with
those of five years ago and note the change. Ten or five years ago it would have
been absolutely unthinkable that in such a short time such a marvelous meta-
morphosis would take place. Books and articles which would have been de-
cclared unmailable, and for which the authors and publishers would have been
clapped into prison five years ago, are now circulated freely and enjoy an im-
mense vogue. And the discussion of certain phases of the sex question is not
limited to small, sensational or radical publications. Magazines of the highest
standing, such as the Ladies Home Journal, Collier’s, the Survey and Pearson’s,
are devoting considerable space to these topics, and discussing them in lan-
guage which leaves little to be desired. And only within the last month have the
American papers, for the first time in our history, permitted their pages to be
polluted by the awful name syphilis. So you see we are making progress, very
definite and substantial progress, in the discussion of the sex question, as well
as of all other questions affecting the vital interests of the race.

But to return. The prudes, the perverts, and the generally silly may think
that there is too much sex discussion going on; the scientists, those who have
made a study of sex and its manifestations, do not think there is enough study
and discussion going on. They know that a good deal of the discussion is
worthless, but that does not mean that there is too much of it. On the contrary
we need more, very much more, sex discussion, though we need it of a better
quality, of a more unbiased character, of a more scientific caliber, and of a more

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solid foundation. The field of sexology has hardly begun to be tilled. Every
day we who have to deal practically with the problems of sex become more and
more convinced of the tremendous, inestimable importance of the sex instinct
on the totality of human life — not only on the physical side of life, but on the
mental and spiritual as well. Every day we discover that the ramifications of sex
penetrate deeper and deeper into the foundations of human thought and hu-
man action, and often where sex is least suspected it is found on close investi-
gation to have been the real underlying motive of action.

There are but two primal instincts: the instinct of self-preservation and the
instinct of perpetuation of the species; in other words, hunger and sex. The
hunger instinct has never been suppressed; it has always been given full sway.
The fight for its satisfaction has not only been considered justifiable but it has
been encouraged by all possible means, and the more one obtained of material
things, whether honestly or brutally, whether by personal hard labor or by
killing one’s opponents and by cut-throat competition, the higher the respect
that was accorded him. That has been so from the remotest savage times up to
the present day.

Not so with the sex instinct. For several thousand years, particularly since
the advent of Christianity, sex in every one of its manifestations has become
something shameful, something to be suppressed, repressed, masked, hidden,
and never, never to be mentioned. As it is impossible to destroy a fundamen-
tal natural instinct, the result has been that it has been merely distorted and
perverted (though in some cases it has been sublimated to higher uses). Not
only has the taboo which has surrounded any knowledge of sex matters been
responsible for an endless amount of disease, misery and suffering, for vene-
real disease, sexual impotence and sexual neurasthenia, but we are finding out,
what we did not know before, though some of us suspected it, that an endless
variety of phobias, obsessions, neuroses and psychoses are due to a non-
satisfied, ill-satisfied, repressed sexual instinct. And even insomnia, the most
obstinate, rebellious kind of insomnia, the one that resists drugs and massage
and hydro-therapeutics and all other measures, is in a very large percentage of
cases (some say in all cases) due to non-satisfaction or ill satisfaction of the sex
instinct. And a proper sexual life — by which, strange as it may seem, we do
not necessarily mean sexual intercourse, the latter being sometimes unneces-
sary and sometimes not sufficient — is in recalcitrant insomnia often worth
more than all the sedatives, soporifics and hypnotics in and out of the phar-
macopia. Only unfortunately it cannot be purchased at a drug store.

And we have found out something else; that sex, far from showing its first
manifestations at the age of puberty, is present in quite an active form in the
Infant, and the child leads quite an interesting sex life up to the age of four, five and six, when through various factors it becomes dormant and repressed, to reawaken at the age of eleven, twelve or thirteen. As to the important and wonderfully interesting connection between dreams and the sex instinct, you have probably all heard something about it by this time. In short, every day new discoveries are made, new scientific and psychological nuggets are dug up in the neglected and untilled fields of the physiology, psychology and pathology of sex. And sex morality, the relation between the two sexes, is undergoing a mighty change for the better. And we are thankful to say that in discussing sex matters we can now use plain, unvarnished language, and expressions which a few years ago would have been considered nasty and obscene have now received the right of citizenship and are seen to have been perfectly legitimate and harmless. It took a long time to conquer the right to speak in intelligible language of the human body and its most important functions. Many pioneers braved misunderstanding, contumely, slander, ostracism, persecution and imprisonment for the right to discuss sex and its manifestations. And among those pioneers the Good Gray Poet, Walt Whitman, stands preeminent. It required dauntless courage to write the poems embraced within the *Children of Adam* at the time Whitman wrote them. It is due in great part to him that we can now speak as freely as we do. He was among the first in this country to speak frankly and honestly of the human body, to glorify it—clothed or undressed—and its most important function. He was among the first to declare that “the sexual passion in itself, while normal and unperverted, is inherently legitimate, creditable, not necessarily an improper theme for poet, as confessedly not for scientist.” “The same spirit,” he said, “that marks the physiological author and demonstrator on these topics in his important field, I have thought necessary to be exemplified, for once, in another certainly not less important field.” He was among the first to declare that “it is not the picture or nude statue or text, with clear aim, that is indecent; it is the beholder’s own thought, inference, distorted construction.” “True modesty,” he continues, “is one of the most precious of attributes, even virtues, but in nothing is there more pretense, more falsity, than the needless assumption of it.” He well understood that it was “imperative to achieve a shifted attitude toward the thought and fact of sexuality as an element in character, personality, the emotions, and a theme in literature.”

And lest it might be thought that he wrote his *Children of Adam* poems in the exuberance of youthful sex passion when the hot blood was coursing in his veins, he took pains not to renounce or to apologize for but to justify them, in the evening of his days. In his “A Backward Glance o’er Travel’d Roads” he
takes pains to say this: “And in respect to editions of _Leaves of Grass_ in times to come (if there should be such) I take occasion now to confirm those lines with the settled convictions and deliberate renewals of thirty years, and to hereby prohibit, as far as word of mine can do so, any elision of them.” No, Walt Whitman was no deathbed repentant, and in the last hours of his life he did not renounce the best work of his early manhood, as some white-livered reformers have done.

And great as the work of Walt Whitman is as the poet of genuine democracy, his merits in the cause of sex reform, of free independent woman-hood, are just as great. If he had done nothing else but proclaim the sanctity of the human body, the legitimacy of the discussion of the sex function, of the freedom of woman to her body, his claim to immortality would have been undisputed. He dared to say things which, at the time he said them, few people even dared to think.

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**JANUARY 1915 (25:173)**

**Intermediate Types among Primitive Folk: A Study in Social Evolution By Edward Carpenter**

“T.”

The world comes to a conclusion. Then we’ve got to swear to it. We may not understand it. We may even doubt it. But to say yes to it. The usual outlaws the unusual. Dogma battles with science. You’ve heard all the average things about the intermediate sex. All the antecedent things about intermediate types. But have you gone further? Have you asked for and been told the rest of the story? The truth may be agreeable or disagreeable. You’d rather have some things one way than another. But if they’re the other way do you not just as cheerfully welcome them? Sex is the most quarreled over and the least understood of all physiological or spiritual integers of life. You cant escape it. It cant escape you. But most everybody is densely ignorant of sex. They know a man’s a man and a woman’s a woman and a child’s a child. But the interrelations of the man and the woman and the child are not inquired into. When anything is suggested that cant be rounded up in their rudiments their hair stands on end and they think society’s going to the devil. Carpenter’s tonic for such people. He says: “Here’s something more for you to look at.”
I would like Robinson if I never agreed with anything he said. He never teases me with vague phrases which lead God knows where. When I go with Robinson I always know where I’m going. I may not like the place. But it don’t deceive me. This don’t mean that I do always disagree with him. On the contrary I mostly agree with him. Especially when he don’t talk of drugs. But it means that he has a straight-out mind and pen. He’s even charmingly naive about it. As, for instance, when he tells us why he don’t intend to court martyrdom in connection with birth control. “No jail for me!” he exclaims. And then proceeds to tell how much better he likes his home than a jail and how much more useful he’ll always be to any cause out of jail than in jail. This book’s choked with wise counsel. And if anybody misunderstands it it’s not Robinson’s fault. He says the most difficult things without vulgarity or mystery. He tears away all veils. Holmes said Emerson took our idols down off their pedestals with such a gentle hand it seemed almost like an act of worship. That’s the beautiful way Robinson treats the body. He insists upon tearing everything off until it’s naked. But he does it so gently it seems like an act of worship. Robinson announces a noble scripture of the body. I’d be sorry for myself if I was afraid to say to myself that I love my body. It’s only out of a real love for your body that a real body can be achieved. For some people, perhaps a large percentage of people, never achieve real bodies. I think the race of men with real bodies remains yet to be born. Perhaps it’ll never come till our democratic crowds have leisure and money to enfranchise them. We frequently hear a thing like this: “I wouldn’t give a cent for a man who puts his belly before his soul!” But I say: I wouldn’t give a cent for a hungry man who didn’t. And in fact he must and will. Nothing is more blasphemous than to make a fuss over your soul when you neglect the body. And nothing is more reverent after taking care of your body than for you to see that you don’t neglect your soul. Robinson takes the body at its fountain of power. He never gives you advice. He informs you. He’s never a puritan. He encourages neither abstinence nor indulgence. There are some people who’ll never forgive the universe for having made man also sexual. And there are other people who act as if they thought the universe had made man only sexual. But Robinson’s never tossed
about between these two dilemmas. He takes man as he finds him. And he says that man must take sex as he finds it. All that Robinson undertakes to do out of his vast experience and extraordinary ability is to help men and women to find it right. Now, finding it right dont mean according to a set of moralistic inferences or piously ascetic rules but according to its own interior potentialities. Robinson's book would be very useful in Sunday schools. It contains so much essential religion. If it was understood and followed as a digest of conduct it'd save people from many hells. And these are not problem hells. They're not hells that may or may not be. They're the hells that are bound to be. The hells there's no escape from. That cant be dodged or lied away. Robinson takes us to the precipice. He dont say: Dont jump. He says: I've taken you to a place where you can see yourself what'll happen if you do jump. It's not easy to save a man who jumps after he knows. But you may save a man who's going to jump because he dont know. The bother with so much that goes with what's conventionally called the teaching of morals is that it's moral teaching. But Robinson's is never moral teaching. You will never feel in Robinson's manner any assumption of austerity or authority. He's never superior. You see we have all sorts of other bosses besides the industrial boss. And among these other bosses is the moral boss. And the moral boss is if anything the meanest and worst of all bosses. The moral boss is always self-sanctified. And it often happens that after we get rid of many other sorts of boss (except the industrial boss) the moral boss still lords it over us. And it often happens that after we've ceased being willing to be any other sort of a boss we're still ready to be a moral boss. That's not like Robinson. He has no rod in his hand. Better still, he has no rod in his soul. God, as most people speak of God, is nothing but a big boss. The chief of bosses. The Boss Supreme. But even a man good enough to be a boss couldn't be a boss and remain good. And God wouldn't remain God by such a test. Nor could Robinson remain Robinson. But Robinson's got all preaching out of his system. He dont acknowledge that there's anybody so tall he has to be climbed up to. Nor does he assume that he's so tall anybody has to climb up to him. Liebig said that unless a teacher continued to be a student among students in his classes he forfeited his claim to his office. Robinson does so much for me because he never seems to undertake to do anything at all. He proceeds with nonchalance and unconcern. And yet he's not a cold man of science. In the backgrounds of his speculation a paramount humanity prevails. His fundamental inspirations are not scientific but emotional. He reacts on all sides to social and artistic revolt. There may be some Robinson I dont know about. But the Robinson I do know about is the kind of fellow I've tried here to say something of.

346  Sex Morality
In the June 1900 *Conservator* appeared a curious filler, taking up a third of a column, which consisted simply of a short Whitman letter written to Charles Warren Stoddard in San Francisco on April 23, 1870. In it the poet thanks Stoddard for his “affectionate” letter describing apparently homoerotic experiences in the western Pacific, what Whitman calls “your beautiful & soothing South Sea Idyl.” The letter contains the now well-known sentence, “I do not of course object to your emotional & adhesive nature, but warmly approve them.” Traubel titled this item simply “Of America.” What, one wonders, urged Traubel to pull it out of his hoard and lift, however slightly, the veil on a subject famously delicate in the Whitman circle and almost never specifically named in the *Conservator*? Was he perhaps emboldened by the affair he had just begun to pursue with Gustave Wiksell? In any case, from about this time Traubel became ever more emphatic in his attacks on homophobia in his journal — at least when Walt Whitman was not involved in the discussion.

Stoddard’s letter is one of the more tantalizing and puzzling squibs with which Traubel filled up the empty corners of the *Conservator*. It and numerous others — extracts from correspondence, passages from books and other periodicals, anecdotal memoirs, editorial asides, and notices of Whitman Fellowship activities — are gathered here to give a sense of the serendipitous, kaleidoscopic variety of the more ephemeral Whitmaniana that Traubel dispensed for thirty years. For several years these bits and pieces were gathered into a feature called “Recent Study and Criticism of Whitman,” which usually took up a page or so and might contain from two to six items. It first appeared in March 1897, and the last installment, the forty-fifth, appeared in July 1902.

Whitman fillers make fascinating, often entertaining, reading. Traubel, for example, puts in this memory of Joaquin Miller’s “from his new book”: “I reckon Walt Whitman could write anywhere. I once was with him on top of a
Fifth Avenue omnibus, above a sea of people, when he began writing on the edge of a newspaper, and he kept it up for half an hour, although his elbow was almost continually tangled up with that of the driver.” In the same issue is recorded a grumpy item from the New York Independent: “If the unflagging labor of the late Walter Whitman’s friends can avail, Leaves of Grass will some day be forced down the throat of the world, and everybody will be compelled, by a sort of literary inquisition, to accept Whitman as a great poet.” In the September 1898 issue is a pugilistic extract from Brann’s Iconoclast (Waco, Texas) — Traubel cast a wide net — that calls the “good gray nuisance” an “uncouth, obscene old bore” and his verse “merely bloviating rant.”

This was balanced by Henry James’s rather condescending but favorable review of The Wound Dresser: “The good Walt, without unhappy verbiage (this from James!) or luckless barbarism here, sounds a note of native feeling, pity and horror.” The following agreeable opinion, which had appeared in the Saturday Evening Post, Traubel was glad to reprint: “The only Americans who are recognized abroad as having any true value and any actual bearing on the fundamental concerns of life are Whitman and Poe — those daring and passionate reprobates that are still banned by our respectables.” In April 1900 “Recent Study” included a review from the London Standard of a new symphony in C minor by William Henry Bell titled “Walt Whitman” — thus ushering in the century in which the poet would become, by far, the most often musicked author in American history. The impressed reviewer noted, “The finale is gay and vigorous to boisterousness, and may be supposed to represent Whitman’s optimism and joy of life.”

Bouquets are not uncommon in “Recent Study,” but, evidently with just as much pleasure, Traubel often printed the “worst,” knowing his readers would, like Walt himself, get a good laugh. The imagination of the insulters is sometimes truly impressive, as in case of the Homiletic Review: “Leaves of Grass, in many parts, is the most amorphous agglomeration of unpoetic words ever shoveled together. . . . In a few verses there is a swimming majesticalness, as of a walrus sporting, rolling, wallowing in the waves. . . . His unwieldy gracelessness suggests the megalosaurus or the iguanodon; and his species may well become extinct like theirs.”

Other fillers could be touching, like this one of 1895 about the editor’s mother: “Mrs. Katharine Traubel, who was buried in Camden on Monday, was one of Walt Whitman’s closest personal friends. She associated with him at the time the poet first made Camden his home in 1873. . . . The severe weather last week brought about Mrs. Traubel’s death from pneumonia.” In the “Birthday Number” of 1895, Hamlin Garland reports briefly on May 31 celebrations in
Chicago, telling of what is perhaps the very first university Whitman course in history: “We celebrated the day at the Chicago University by inaugurating a three weeks’ course of lectures on Whitman, Professor Triggs being the instructor.” Garland adds, “I felt honored in taking a part in it myself. It seemed to me significant that Professor Triggs should be able to announce such a series of lectures.”

A few months later a collection of items titled “Odd Notes on Whitman” included this small chirp from the Indianapolis News: “Whitman’s ‘barbaric yawp’ was needed, but the continual and, for the most part, feeble echo of that yawp is very wearisome to the ears.” The October 1896 issue, under the title “Walt Whitman as a Creator of ‘Trash,’” contains a paragraph from the Boston Christian Register granting the contributions of Longfellow, Lowell, Howells, Whittier, Harte, and Twain to American literature. But “Walt Whitman, on the other hand . . . succeeded in writing a mass of trash without form, rhythm, or vitality.”

Three years later, another civic initiative, the Hall of Fame for Great Americans in the Bronx, drew this Bronx cheer from Ernest Crosby in a filler titled “A New York Memorial to Walt Whitman”: “Some wiseacres at our University are searching for a hundred great Americans to place in a Hall of Fame; they are scouring the country . . . yet it is moderately certain that they will fail to see that prodigious figure looming up in the foreground.” Crosby goes on to suggest the ideal way to honor Whitman would be to name a ferryboat after him: “It would be a fitter monument to Walt than a cold marble niche in a funeral ‘Hall’ in the midst of a lot of men who are really dead and need tombstones.”

NOTE
Except where indicated, the headlines below have been invented by the present editor, since most all of the items appeared originally with no headline at all or one scarcely descriptive. A roman numeral in the citation indicates that the item appeared in one of the forty-five numbered installments of the “Recent Study and Criticism of Whitman” feature.

**Fellow Democrats Whitman and Tolstoi**

Democracy in literature, as exemplified by the two great modern democrats in letters, Whitman and Tolstoi, means a new and more deeply religious way of looking at mankind, as well as at all the facts and objects of the visible world. It means, furthermore, the finding of new artistic motives and values in the people, in science, and the modern spirit, in liberty, fraternity, equality, in the
materialism and industrialism of man’s life as we know it in our day and land —
the carrying into imaginative fields the quality of common humanity.— John Burroughs, in the Outlook, New York (February 1895, 5:189)

**Emerson and Whitman on Rousseau**

“What is your favorite book?” said Mr. Emerson to Miss Evans, somewhat abruptly. “Rousseau’s Confessions,” said the young woman instantly. “And so it is mine,” answered Mr. Emerson. All of which is related by Moncure D. Conway in a volume entitled Emerson at Home and Abroad. A copy of Conway’s book was sent to Walt Whitman, and when he read the passage to which I have just referred, he remarked, “and so it is mine.” Emerson and Whitman are probably the two strongest names in American letters, and George Eliot stands first among women writers of all time. . . . To secure an endorsement from such minds as those of Emerson, George Eliot, and Walt Whitman the confession must be genuine.— Elbert Hubbard, in the Philistine, East Aurora, New York (May 1895, 6:126)

**Faulty Whitman, Emerson, and Carlyle**

Mr. Burroughs seizes every opportunity to insist on a complete manliness and virility, and a healthy coarseness is by no means unwelcome to him. We are not surprised, therefore, to find him a warm supporter of Walt Whitman. . . . We think he himself would confess to lacking a perfect appreciation of literary art. The matter, not the manner, interests him, and still more the man behind the book. His favorite authors are those whose style is faulty — Whitman, Emerson, and Carlyle.— Atlantic Monthly (February 1896, 6:189)

**Walt’s Mass of Trash**

Longfellow, Lowell, Howells, Whittier, Bret Harte, and Mark Twain have made individual contributions to a distinctive American literature; but they have not ignored the universal forms of art which lie at the basis of all truth, beauty, and humor. Walt Whitman, on the other hand, was an illustration of “American independence” in literature; and he succeeded in writing a mass of trash without form, rhythm, or vitality. The only poems which do him any credit, or which are entitled to the name of poems, are those in which he made some effort to conform to the laws of form, beauty, and decency that he persistently violated.— Christian Register, Boston (September 1896, 7:108)
Sidney Lanier in a Pro-Whitman Mood

A short time ago, while on a visit to New York, I happened one evening to find your *Leaves of Grass* in Mr. Bayard Taylor’s library, and taking it with me to my room at the hotel I spent a night of glory and delight upon it. How it happened that I had never read this book before is a story not worth the telling; but, in sending the enclosed bill to purchase a copy (which please mail to the above address) I cannot resist the temptation to render you also my grateful thanks for such large and substantial thoughts uttered in a time when there are, as you say in another connection, so many “little plentiful mannikins skipping about in collars and tailed coats.” Although I entirely disagree with you in all points connected with artistic form, and in so much of the outcome of your doctrine as is involved in those poetic exposures of the person which your pages so unreservedly make, yet I feel sure that I understand you therein, and my dissent in these particulars becomes a very insignificant consideration in the presence of that unbounded delight which I take in the bigness and bravery of all your ways and thoughts. It is not known to me where I can find another modern song at once so large and so naive; and the time needs to be told few things so much as the absolute personality of the person, the sufficiency of the man’s manhood to the man, which you have propounded in such strong and beautiful rhythms. I beg you to count me among your most earnest lovers, and to believe that it would make me very happy to be of the least humble service to you at any time. — Sidney Lanier

I am asked by a correspondent: “What was Lanier’s opinion of Whitman?” At different periods Lanier had different opinions of Whitman. I reprint from the original Lanier’s letter, written to Whitman in 1878. I refer my correspondent further to the edition of Lanier’s poems printed in 1885 by Charles Scribner’s Sons. This volume contains a “Memorial” written by William Hayes Ward. Ward says in one place: “He [Lanier] was the democrat whom he described in contrast to Whitman’s mere brawny, six-footed, open-shirted hero, whose strength was that only of the biceps.” Ward subsequently quotes Lanier himself: “Whitman is poetry’s butcher. Huge raw callops slashed from the rump of poetry, and never mind gristle—is what Whitman feeds our souls with.” Again from Lanier: “As near as I can make out, Whitman’s argument seems to be that, because a prairie is wide, therefore debauchery is admirable, and because the Mississippi is long, therefore any American is God.” I trust the decision to the judgment of my correspondent.—H.L.T. (October 1896, 7:122)

{Traubel’s original title for this was “Whitman’s Large and Substantial Thoughts: His Beautiful Rhythms.”}
Echoing the Yawp

Whitman’s “barbaric yawp” was needed, but the continual and, for the most part, feeble echo of that yawp is very wearisome to the ears.—Indianapolis News (October 1896, 7:126)

Walt’s Name for New York City

Greater New York having become a reality I am reminded of what Walt Whitman prophesied years ago, when, referring to New York and Brooklyn, he asked: “Will not the time hasten when the two shall be municipally united in one and named Manhattan?” (“Human and Heroic New York,” Specimen Days). Manhattan was the name by which he ever loved to call New Y ork. On his return to the city, after a visit to the “honeysuckle and rose embowered cottage of John Burroughs on the Hudson” (“Happiness and Raspberries”), he saw rising out of the mist the “tall-topt, ship-hemmed, modern, American, yet strangely oriental V-shaped Manhattan, with its compact mass, its spires, its cloud-touching edifices grouped at the center.” As he walked its streets, after his return from the war hospitals, he pictured his love for Manhattan, the “Manhattan island and Brooklyn which the future shall join in one city — city of superb democracy and superb surroundings” (“Manhattan from the Bay”). The union of the cities has come to pass. Should not its name be that fixed upon it by Whitman? In that act common sense and poetic justice would meet.—Elizabeth Porter Gould (February 1898, 8:186)

Walt Forced Down World’s Throat

If the unflagging labor of the late Walter Whitman’s friends can avail, Leaves of Grass will some day be forced down the throat of the world, and everybody will be compelled, by a sort of literary inquisition, to accept Whitman as a great poet. It is a curious incident in literary history — this Whitman delusion. Nothing in nineteenth-century civilization can be compared to it, unless it is the colossal myth of hypnotism, or the absurd claim of the theosophists.—New York Independent (May 1898, 9:43, xiv)

A Parodist Fiddles with Walt

For the benefit of the New Child, M. T. P., whose initials are well known to the University readers of The Isis, has written an excellent parody on “Hey-Diddle-Diddle,” with apologies to Walt Whitman. There is something
worth learning from the verses, for those whose learning is towards rolling periods and rhetoric run riot.

Here is the poem of me, the entertainer of children.
See! a cat is passing through my poem;
See — it plays the fiddle, rapturously:
It plays sonatas, fugues, rigodons, gavottes, gigues, minuets, romances,
    impromptus — it plays the tune that led to the defunction of the aged cow;
But most of all it plays nocturnes, and plays them pyrotechnically as befits the night time
See the moon shining in the pellucid sky;
See! the cow, inspired by the intoxicating strains of the Stradivarius,
    throws off her habitual languor, and leaps over the moon.
O me! O pulse of my life, O amazement of things!
Why so active, thou cow?
Why so passive, thou moon?
See the dog.
He grins and runs through the city,
Seeing humor in his surroundings.
Have all dogs so keen a sense of humor?
See the dish, maliciously meditative.
See, it takes advantage of the general confusion, and absconds with the silver spoon.

— Clarion, London (May 1898, 9:43, xiv)

**Owlish Rambles with Walt in the 1850s**

I knew Walt Whitman as far back as forty years ago, before he was known to fame. We were fellow-townsmen in Brooklyn, and I had many a midnight tramp with him through the streets. We also frequently met on the Fulton Ferry boats; these meetings frequently ended in a ramble. Whitman never wanted to go to bed. He enjoyed, with Olympian relish, an owlish hob-nob over a mug of beer. — Theodore Tilton, in a London interview, World, New York (September 1898, 9:107, xviii)

**Bathing with an Eccentric Newspaperman**

Many editors have been on The Eagle since I have been here, but I well remember Walt Whitman, who always called for me to go and take a bath with
him. He used to go to Graves’ Bath, where the Fulton Ferry now is. Every day we went there together. He was a very methodical man and could not be hurried in anything he set out to do. He would come in early in the morning, write an editorial and put in every dot he wanted in it. When he had finished with his editorial he would take a walk while it was being set up. He had a marvelous memory, and when he returned and looked over his copy, if any man had put one single dot where he had not placed it, or left one out, he would hunt the man out and make him change it as it had been given to him. He was very eccentric, but interesting, and a good friend.—W. H. Hutton, in a speech, Brooklyn Eagle (September 1898, 9:107, xviii)

**A Dim View from Waco, Texas**

Edgar Fawcett recently declared that, as a poet, Walt Whitman was “a cumbersome, lumbering absurdity,” and Fawcett was eminently correct; but they are still holding dinners in memory of the good gray nuisance in New York just the same and mouthing his balderdash until the lights flicker. Whitman was an uncouth, obscene old bore, and all of the faddists between here and kingdom come can never make him anything else, but they are willing to die trying:

Of the interminable sisters,

Of the ceaseless cotillons of sisters,

Of the centripetal and centrifugal sisters, the elder and younger sisters,

The beautiful sister we know dances on with the rest.

(Song of the Rolling Earth 1)

There’s poetry for you, and also for the New Yorkers, in whose city any fool who jingles his bells long and loud can command a following. Most of this moldering fraud’s stanzas, or lines, are merely bloviating rant, with not anything of good about them, but, as he wrote steadily for years, he sometimes said things worth a busy man’s memory. There are some words of his that have come to me often in the past month. They are so fitting that they seem to have been written in memory of the dead Brann:

I’d rear a laurel-cover’d monument,

High, high above the rest — To all cut off before their time,
Possess’d by some strange spirit of lire,
Quench’d by an early death.

(To Those Who’ve Fail’d)

_Brann’s Iconoclast_ (September 1898, 9:107, xviii)
The sudden state of war confounds larger calculations than those I am here concerned with; I need, therefore, I suppose, not be ashamed to show my small scheme as instantly affected. Whether or no there be a prospect of a commensurate outburst — after time given — of war literature, it is interesting to recognize today on the printed page the impulse felt during the long pressure of the early sixties, especially in a case of which the echo reaches us for the first time. I had been meaning to keep for some congruous association my allusion to the small volume of letters addressed between the end of ’62 and the summer of ’64 by Walt Whitman to his mother, and lately published by Dr. R. M. Bucke, to whom the writer’s reputation has already been happily indebted. But I yield on the spot to the occasion — this interesting and touching collection is so relevant to the sound of cannon. It is at the same time — thus resembling, or rather, for the finer air of truth, exceeding, La Débâcle of Zola — not such a document as the recruiting officer, at the beginning of a campaign, would rejoice to see in many hands.

Walt Whitman, then occupying at Washington an obscure administrative post, became, under strong, simple pressure of personal charity, a constant, a permitted and encouraged familiar of the great hospitals rapidly instituted, profusely, and in some cases erratically, extemporized, as the whole scale of ministration widened, and the pages published by Dr. Bucke give out to such readers as can bear it the very breath of the terrible conditions. I know not what is most vivid, the dreadful back of the tapestry, the price paid on the spot, the immediate heritage of woe, or Whitman’s own admirable, original gift of sympathy, his homely, racy, yet extraordinarily delicate personal devotion, exercised wholly at his own cost and risk. He affects us all the more that these pages, quite woefully, almost abjectly familiar and undressed, contain not a single bid for publicity. His correspondent, his obscure, laborious mother, was indeed, it is easy to see, a bountiful, worthy recipient, but the letters were meant for humble hands, hands quite unconscious of the light thus thrown, as it happened, on the interesting question of the heredity of strong originals. It had plainly taken a solid stock, a family circle, to produce Walt Whitman, and The Wound Dresser, “documentary” in so many ways, is — like Calamus, of which I lately spoke — particularly so on the general democratic head. It holds up, for us, today, its jagged morsel of spotted looking glass to the innumerable nameless of the troubulous years, the poor and obscure, the suffering and sacrifice of the American people. The good Walt, without unhappy verbiage or luckless barbarism here, sounds a note of native feeling, pity and horror and
helplessness, that is like the wail of a mother for her mangled young; and in so far the little volume may doubtless take its place on the much-mixed shelf of the literature of patriotism. But let it, none the less, not be too much presumed upon to fire the blood; it will live its life not unworthily, too, in failing to assume that extreme responsibility. — Henry James, in Literature (September 1898, 9:108, xviii)

**Respect the Immense-Souled Heathen**

Even for those who can stomach neither the form nor the spirit of Whitman’s poetry as a whole, there exist many short extracts that cannot fail to prove suggestive and stirring. His verse is no more formless to the eye than Hebrew poetry; and, heathen as he may seem to many, he should at least be paid the respect due to a heathen. To a growing audience at home, and particularly abroad, he is accepted as by far the greatest of American poets and one of the immensest souls of all time. — Current Literature, New York (November 1898, 9:137, xx)

**A Backhanded Greeting for a “Selected”**

The Selections from the Prose and Poetry of Walt Whitman, made by Oscar Lovell Triggs of the University of Chicago, are fairly representative of the “good gray poet.” We might have done without the rhapsodical and badly punctuated preface to the first edition of Leaves of Grass, which is nothing more than a curiosity as here printed “verbatim et literatum” from the 1855 edition; but there is little else that might be spared, and the general reader will find in this one volume perhaps as much as he can assimilate of the great exponent of Americanism. — Critic, New York (November 1898, 9:137, xx)

**A Laurel Wreath of Imitators**

War Echoes, by Ernest Howard Crosby, is mainly concerned in inculcating in a time of war exultation the lessons of peace and forbearance, the lesson of an un-military civilization. Most of what is written is written in an imitation of Walt Whitman. That is to say, the form is there; we have the irregular line, the grammatical inconsequence, a marked effort at Whitmanian contrast, an attempt at the simple, almost weak and inadequate summing up, which relies upon suggestion rather than statement. In the main the stuff reads platitudinously, for strip Whitman of his superb eloquence and his wonderful penetrating
phrasing and you have but world-old doctrine. Still, there are good things in
the booklet; and it has the further interest attaching to the proof it adds of Whit-
man’s real greatness. Whitman wrote in what looks like a facile form, and, lo, of
all his imitators, none has come near to his throne. “Whit-maniacs” should col-
lect these imitators; they are laurel wreaths to bind round the brow of the Mas-
ter. — Criterion, New York (November 1898, 9:138, xx)

**A Book to Purge the Soul of Nonsense**

These letters may, we think it possible, prove salutary to every person who
reads them: to us in England as reminding us that beneath the bunkum of Con-
gress and the roar of the “yellow press” there is a vast residuum of patience and
courage in America; to Americans still more as recalling to them, in their pres-
ent exultant state, the horrors and anxieties of real warfare, and the faults
through which, thirty-five years ago, they struggled into positive success. The
Wound Dresser is a book full of curious interest of many kinds, psychological
and intellectual, but its central quality the fascinating directness with which it
appeals to our sense of duty. Those who are not deeply stirred to admiring
envy by this humble record of devotion to the suffering would remain callous
although an angel called to them out of heaven. We can give no idea of the pa-
thos and the touching ache of sympathy which run through this beautiful,
melancholy little book from end to end. There is here not one touch of affec-
tation, of false sentiment, of parade, or artificiality of any kind; but a very
strong and tender nature, face to face with an awful visitation of national suf-
fering, quietly sets to work to do as much as in it lies to alleviate its fiercest
pangs. A book more directly calculated to purge the soul of nonsense we never

**Sidney Lanier on Walt’s Rude Salt Spray**

Upon a sober comparison I think Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass worth at
least a million of {Lowell’s} Among My Books and {Swinburne’s} Atalanta in Calydon. In the two latter I could not find anything which has not been much
better said before; but Leaves of Grass was a real refreshment to me — like rude
salt spray in your face — in spite of its enormous fundamental error that a thing
is good because it is natural, and in spite of the world-wide difference between
my own conceptions of art and its author’s. — Sidney Lanier, in a letter to Bay-
ard Taylor, 1878 (July 1899, 10:73, xxvii)

Fillers and Squibs: A Whitman & Traubel Potpourri 357
**Appalled by “Selected” Trash**

What it is that makes Whitman popular we have never been able to discover. Popular in a sense, he must be, judging by the amount of talk about him, and the fact that his writings have been published in a very handsome edition. This volume of selections is doubtless intended for those who do not care for his complete works and are satisfied with a taste of his quality. Both prose and poetry are included. We cannot think of a single respect in which such trash is useful. Whitman was a dirty and sensual person, who loved big words, but had neither intellectual ability nor any gifts of style. He is alternately silly and disgusting. To account for his acceptance by certain critics is beyond us. We can only record the melancholy fact. — *Providence Journal* (July 1899, 10:73, xxvii)

**A Duel in the Sun over the Conservator**

(1) “Walt Whitman on the Situation”

A weekly journal called the *Conservator* is published, most appropriately, in Philadelphia. Why published, it might be considering too curiously to inquire. Probably to give various amiable men and women the happiness of seeing their names in italics at the end of their poems, essays, compositions and themes.

It would be a waste of time to look for originality in such a journal. We are not surprised to find in Samuel Williams Cooper an echo of General Sambo Bowles and Professor J. Laurence Laughlin. According to Samuel Williams, “our government is engaged in a war of pillage and extermination against a people who owe us no allegiance and to whom we promised freedom.” Evidently Samuel Williams needs a conservator.

But the most remarkable burst of anti-imperialism in the *Conservator* comes from Mr. Horace L. Traubel, one of the editors, although it seems to have been written by the spirit of Walt Whitman:

With the uncertain crowd commingled,
With the dazed America still struggling to adjust its senses to a hard equipment,
With the brute voice of the irrational cannon and the usurping ambitions of satrapies,
With the ideals of Democracy defaulting in full day,
With the lost cries of children dead and of fathers of children, in the land of the relentless sun and the blackskin,
With domestic broil and pirate taxation, with the robber purse exacting penalties of innocent industry,
With fratricidal mobs arbitrating against justice,
Do you wonder, O my land, O my heart,
That I, standing storm-pressed, am also blind and dumb,
Reaching out unguided hands?

This commingling of the Chicago platform, Jim Ham Lewis on satraps, and the Camden scheme of poetry in unassorted lengths, is impressive. Mr. Traubel is certainly not dumb. That is a poetic fiction. He had no umbrella or he would not be storm-pressed; but a man who is bent on drawing his cutlass against pirate taxation cannot conveniently manage an umbrella. He should wear a mackintosh nor heed the storm that howls along the sky.

On the whole, the Camden spirit might just as well have dictated through Mr. Traubel something like this:

With the Aguinaldo gang commingled,
With thrice-sodden sumphs howling and cheering for the Tagal Patrick Henry,
With the loud voice of the irrational Atkinson, and the gab and gibbering of the anti-imperialists,
With Carl Schurz’s and J. Laurence Laughlin’s lachrymal ducts in full play,
With the wild wail of Gamaliel Bradford and the adipose lament of Billy Mason, and Mr. Boutwell showing up the Orientals,
With Colonel Bryan full of voices, hallooing and hullabalooing tremendous at the Octopus,
With Democratic platforms smashing militarism,
Do you wonder, O my land, my gracious,
That I, after many Dollar Dinners, disgusted and dyspeptic,
Don’t know where I’m at?

We shall read the Conservator carefully for future communications from Mr. Whitman to Mr. Traubel as to anti-imperialism and the state of the country in general.—New York Sun

(2) A Pained Response

I was equally surprised and pained to read an editorial in your columns of Monday, Sept. 11, entitled “Walt Whitman on the Situation,” in which you virtually lampoon that great bard and American by making him the sponsor of certain anti-imperialistic utterances of the Philadelphia Conservator. I also read the Conservator, but I do not regard it either a safe or fair exponent of Walt Whitman, nor should it be received as such by the public.
Walt Whitman was never an infidel, as a reader of the Conservator might think, the Bible being his close companion, and read by him and valued by him in the highest degree. Neither would he be an anti-imperialist. He was an expansionist long before any man in public life today, and agreed with that greatest of American Secretaries of State, William H. Seward, that the islands of the Pacific must eventually pass under our control.

In your own columns not long since you published his lines in proof of this position, which were copied widely and read with delight by hundreds of his countrymen. And yet you say editorially that Horace L. Traubel, whose anti-imperialistic sentiments you copy from the Conservator, was inspired by Walt Whitman to their production.

You have no right to make such a slander against the name and character of Whitman. You also close your editorial by saying, “We shall read the Conservator carefully for future communications from Mr. Whitman to Mr. Traubel as to anti-imperialism and the state of the country in general”—a bit of commonplace irony unworthy of the Sun and the intelligence of its editorial staff.

Where can the Sun find any evidence that Walt Whitman ever could be quoted as suggesting Mr. Traubel and his misled ilk in their attitude on expansion? What right “have you to leave the impression in this generation that such an American as he, who nursed over one hundred thousand soldiers in the hospitals in Washington, whose poems on the war are without exception the best picture of that conflict penned, and whose whole volume is a pioneer to a wider appreciation of the American Democracy, and its world-wide mission, than ever any other penned—such a man and mind is responsible for what Mr. Traubel thinks, or is in any sympathy with his grossly narrow and un-American views?

You owe Whitman and his friends an apology for such an affront. He was an original thinker of the deepest and broadest stamp, and was among the first to see that our mission could not be stopped by the shores of the sea, but must pass on and over into Asia. And so he wrote:

I chant the world on my Western sea,
I chant copious the islands beyond, thick as stars in the sky,
I chant the new empire grander than any before, as in a vision it comes to me,
I chant America the mistress, I chant a greater supremacy,
I chant projected a thousand blooming cities yet in time on those groups of sea-islands,
My sail-ships and steam-ships threading the archipelagoes,
My stars and stripes fluttering in the wind.
Commerce opening, the sleep of ages having done its work, races reborn, refresh’d,
Lives, works resumed — the object I know not — but the old, the Asiatic renew’d as it must be,
Commencing from this day surrounded by the world.

(A Broadway Pageant 2)

Whitman was always the chanter of enlargement. His life and thought were both of the expansion type. He has interpreted America and its future as no other writer in its midst; and as his admirer I protest that it is the greatest injustice to link the Bard of the Grand Army with that little company of palsied and atrophied minds who would have us believe that we are both insane and impotent at this hour of splendid and providential possibilities. — Arthur Copeland, in {the} New York Sun

(3) A Brief Riposte

We fear that our esteemed correspondent’s passionate loyalty to his favorite poet has momentarily obscured his sense of humor. We are free to say, however, that the Sun, and, we think, nearly everybody else, is perfectly well aware of the soundness of Walt Whitman’s sentiments concerning national expansion; and we record our firm belief that such inspiration as Mr. Horace L. Traubel has derived from Whitman relates exclusively to superficial features of versification. — New York Sun (all three parts, September 1899, 10:105)

An Old Adhesive Letter Reprinted

I received some days since your affectionate letter, & presently came your beautiful & soothing South Sea Idyl, which I read at once.

Now, as I write, I sit by a large open window, looking south and west down the Potomac and across to the Virginia heights. It is a bright, warm spring-like afternoon. I have just re-read the sweet story all over, & find it indeed soothing & nourishing after its kind, like the atmosphere. As to you, I do not of course object to your emotional & adhesive nature but warmly approve them — but do you know (perhaps you do) how the hard, pungent, gritty, worldly experiences & qualities in American practical life, also serve? How they prevent extravagant sentimentalism? & how they are not without their own great value and even joy? — It arises in my mind, as I write, to say something of that kind to you — I am not a little comforted when I learn that the
young men dwell in thought upon me & my utterances — as you do— &
I frankly send you my love — & I hope we shall one day meet — I wish to hear
from you always. — Walt Whitman. Copy of a letter written by Walt Whitman,
in Washington, to Charles Warren Stoddard, in San Francisco, April 23d,
1870. Produced here by permission. (June 1900, 11:53)

{This filler was titled by Traubel “Of America.” The Stoddard letter,
which begins “In the name of Calamus listen to me!” was eventually re-
produced in full in WWC (W3:444–445). There Traubel records that
Whitman called it “a rather beautiful letter: startling, too, I should say:
ot offensively so, however.”}

A Whitman Article is Declined

Years ago I met Rev. Dr. Barrows, editor of the Christian Register, and after-
wards member of Congress. The doctor invited me to submit some ms. for pub-
lication in his paper. A few weeks afterward I called on him, and entering the ed-
itorial sanctum said, with a graceful wave of the hand, “I have here” — “What is
it about?” asked the great editor. “An Essay on Walt Whitman,” I replied. The
editor scowled, snorted, gasped for breath, turned purple, and finally managed
to hiss, “Keep your miserable old ms. — I will not touch it with tongs — an Es-
say on Whitman — Huh!” I sat down and demanded reasons, since I had been
asked for contributions, why my manuscript should not even be read. And the
Rev. Dr. Barrows then explained to me that Whitman was neither a philosopher
nor a poet — he had neither form nor thought; he was obscure, infidelic and im-
moral. To mention Whitman in print branded any man as a fool. I arose to go.
“The poorest editorial I ever wrote is better than the best thing Whitman ever
did! Ten years from now Whitman will be absolutely forgotten by everybody,”
was the editor’s parting shot, as I slid down the stairs. The ten years have
passed — they are counted with the eternity that lies behind — and Whitman is
more alive to-day than he ever was. And Barrows — where is Barrows? — Elbert
Hubbard, in the Philistine (July 1900, 11:75, xxxv)

Who is Degenerate—Whitman or Nordau?

Gratifying as was Dr. Max Nordau’s critical approval of Edwin Markham’s
work, for one must recognize the Semitic publicist and author as a capable
critic, I, for one, would have been better pleased if he had not used the name of
Walt Whitman for the purpose of comparison. Whitman stands on his own
great merits. But my objection to Nordau’s use of the “Good Gray Poet’s” name lies in the fact that the Parisian has never retracted in the slightest degree, so far as I can learn, the gross misrepresentation of Walt Whitman’s personal life with which he so ignorantly defiled the laborious pages of Degeneration. It is Nordau’s right to decry Leaves of Grass and other works of the poet, but when he wrote and published of him as unclean of life, person and habits, he not only illustrated his want of knowledge, but showed that in the degenerate desire to “make points” he was only showing himself fit to be put in the category of characters over the denunciation of which he has wasted so much knowledge and scholarship. M. Nordau’s attacks on Whitman as a person show him to be fast ripening for classification as a degenerate. — Richard J. Hinton, in the New York Times (July 1900, 11:75, xxxv)

An Inspiration to Rebel Composers

Ingersoll said to me in one of our talks: “The great literature of the world is to be tested by its readiness for vocalization. The immortal song, the immortal prose, lends itself to the lips. Tried by this test, Whitman is supremely great.” Whitman’s sonorous lines are indeed impressive, whether utilized in the exigencies of oratory or music. Bell, one of the younger English composers, has written a symphony, calling it Walt Whitman, which has received the honor of distinguished performance and is admiringly accepted by the more eminent musical writers who were present at its initial presentation. Whitman would often remind me in a half-humorous way that “Leaves of Grass was intended as much for the musicians as anyone, and, if not defeated of its purpose, would perhaps inspire them to some noble, contemporaneous utterance.” This was a true prophecy.

A simply conventional musician would find Whitman too drastic and elementary for inspiration. But the musicians who are willing to make departures in their trade, throwing aside a trammeling tradition, discover in Whitman a major source of artistic representation. Bell has shown this in a symphony which it took an orchestra the best part of an hour to play. Villiers Stanford many years ago utilized the Lincoln Ode for a stately sensuous composition. Artists everywhere have drifted towards Whitman for the modern theme. I am told that Grieg has always read Whitman, and regards him as essentially musical and a mine of vitalizing and germinal treasure to composers who rebel against established musical creeds.

These prior reflections bring us easily to the present moment and to Philadelphia, and invite some direct reference to the already large share of attention
given by Philadelphia musicians to Whitman. Four local singers of note have signally written to Whitman — Weda Cook, Frank G. Cauffman, Nicolas Douty, and Philip Dalmas. At the convention of the Whitman Fellowship, in this city, on the 31st of May, the songs of two of these composers — Dalmas and Cauffman — were sung to an audience, not all of it by any means Whitmanic, to whom the result seemed electric and powerful. Dalmas sang his own songs, eight in number, and displayed such daring in method as seemed somehow to give his work remarkable and exceptional identity. Dalmas’ innovations excite extreme opinion either to applaud or condemn. Dalmas proposes to publish a volume of these songs. He is of Philadelphia parentage, and has spent years both abroad and at home in severe training. He is a man of ripe ideas, gravely interested in the social movement in England spending several years as the guest of Edward Carpenter, at Holmesfield.

The theme chosen by Cauffman in the song sung for him at the Whitman convention was the “Lincoln Death Carol.” Dalmas sung “Aboard at a Ship’s Helm,” “Portals,” “Reconciliation,” “Night on the Prairies,” “Look Down Fair Moon,” “Twilight,” “A Clear Midnight,” “As I Watch’d the Ploughman Plowing.” Weda Cook has written “O Captain, My Captain!” and “O Tan-Faced Prairie-Boy!” She expected to sing these on the occasion mentioned, but was too ill to appear. Douty has written to a number of shorter poems. None of these songs have been published.

To the critics who have always declaimed against Whitman on the ground that he lacks lyrical quality, the very evident and growing warmth of musicians in their regard for him, and the practical use they make of his poetic output, must come with a certain shock. When Whitman walked these streets he was in effect our greatest literary craftsman and supreme musician, though his individuality imparted to his heart and his lyricism the properties of a fresh procedure. Whitman rebelled against old artistic forms, not because he was averse to form, but because he desired free volition and plenty of room. As to form in the abstract, his was most unmistakable and inexorable. — Horace L. Traubel, in {the} Philadelphia North American (August 1900, 11: 93, xxxvi)

Not Mortgaged to the Home Country

The case is different when one comes to the nineteenth century; and in its essential books Professor {Barrett} Wendell’s history has plenty of material. As might have been expected in a professor, this writer is less than just to Walt Whitman. Thus disappointing the expectations raised by the volume’s frontispiece, a portrait of the old poet of Manhattan, who was, after all, the most characteristic and independent, and is likely to prove not the least enduring, product of the United States in pure literature. All the other great estates of American literature are more or less mortgaged to the home country; and throughout this history the writer seems to feel the strain of keeping his own country upsides with England. — Scotsman, Edinburgh (December 1900, 11:156, xxxvii)

Poet of the Generations

It is not surprising that Whitman — though it was from Emerson he learned to follow his own genius — so often expressed himself as in sympathy with Bryant, above other American poets, on the imaginative side. The elemental quality of the two is what makes them akin; what differentiates them is not alone their styles, but the advance of Whitman’s generation from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous. The younger minstrel, to use his own phrase, also saw things en masse; but in his day and vision the synthesis of the new world was that of populous hordes surging here and there in the currents of democracy. Bryant is the poet of the age, Whitman of the generations. — Edmund Clarence Stedman, in An American Anthology (December 1900, 11:156, xxxvii)

Whitman and Poe, Makers

Edgar Poe and Walt Whitman are conspicuous among American poets for their striking originality and intensive force. They belong to the order of Makers: each created a distinctive style; each contributed something precious that had not been in the world before; each gave evidence of unique experiences and new heights of vision; each has had a world wide influence inspiring other poets and becoming the founder of a school — the one of Symbolism the other of Democratism. . . . It is not unlikely that the nineteenth century will come to be divided by the future historian of our literature into the Age of Poe and the Age of Whitman. — Oscar Lovell Triggs, in the Forum (December 1900, 11:156, xxxvii)
**Walt Whitman, the Ferry**

I regret that I cannot meet with the chosen in the Pennsylvania suburb of Camden. You deserve congratulations for your more vivid remembrance of Walt Whitman in that latitude. But then you had him last and with you he is more recent. But after all it was here in Manhattan that Walt passed his greatest years. We have no occasion to envy Washington its *Drum-Taps* nor Camden its *Old Age Echoes*. Fulton Ferry, Broadway and the outlying wilds of Long Island form the fairy realm of Whitman-land, and all that he wrote that was essential is bound up in this region. And how we New Yorkers ignore this preeminent fact in our history! Some wiseacres at our University are searching for a hundred great Americans to place in a Hall of Fame; they are scouring the country with the help of college presidents, judges and philosophers; and yet it is moderately certain that they will fail to see that prodigious figure looming up in the foreground. Good American tourists search out Dr. Johnson's tavern in Fleet Street and sit in his very chair; they go to his church in the Strand and find his pew in the gallery; they hunt up every relic of the London of Pickwick and Barnaby Rudge; yet they fail to see that Broadway is haunted by a figure more picturesque and far more significant than the old lexicographer with all the characters of Dickens thrown in in the bargain. Walt still rides up and down Broadway on top of invisible busses; he still hails the passersby with jovial greeting; he still goes back and forth between New York and Brooklyn when the ferryboat is at its fullest, and extends his arms to the hurrying crowd — and yet among them all where is there one to remember him and guess his presence? I should like particularly to have something at the ferry to remind the people of Walt Whitman. Why should we not have a ferryboat named after him? Then occasionally little children might ask their fathers who he was, and the fathers, if they did not know, might take the trouble to find out. It would be a fitter monument to Walt than a cold marble niche in a funeral “Hall” in the midst of a lot of men who are really dead and need tombstones. He would feel ill at ease with most of our average “great men,” our money-making captains of industry, our privilege-making statesmen, our widow-making generals. But on the ferryboat, rising and falling with the tide of the bay, looking down on the mass of heads which he loved so well, the name of “Walt Whitman” would stand out as a suitable memorial to one whose life is only just beginning. — *Ernest Crosby* (April 1900, 12:21)

(This letter was sent in advance for a meeting of the Walt Whitman Fellowship International in Philadelphia, May 31, 1900. The Hall of Fame)
was dedicated in May 1901 and is located on what is now the campus of Bronx Community College, the City University of New York.}

A Salute from Hamlin Garland

Your letter finds me in the Southwest, but I take time even in transit to send greeting to all the Whitman brotherhood. The value of the message he uttered is increasingly admitted. It is hard to find these days a thoughtful man who does not have at least a dim notion that Whitman was a sort of prophet. His influence radiates like sunshine and the blooming of his philosophy in unexpected places and in curious forms can after all be traced to his influence. I find myself quoting his thought if not his words many times, and I know very well that he has been to me a great force in ways difficult to trace. I wish I might meet with you, but I am of the West and the trail is long between my tepee and your council chamber. Lift your palms my way and my thought will be with you. Keep the peace. Be brave.—Hamlin Garland (July 1901, 12:72)

{The prolific writer (1860–1940) sent this letter from Oklahoma City to the Whitman Fellowship International meeting in New York on May 31, 1901.}

Enough of Horace Traubel?

From Philadelphia there comes to me monthly a literary publication called the Conservator. Its leading spirit and editor is Horace Traubel. He is a follower of Walt Whitman and an exponent of the mystical. Much that he utters is common sense, something is rhapsody, and something more is the merest verbiage. Listen to the first few sentences of his latest opening article [i.e., Collect]: “What shall we who are reputed to be the quarrellers and brawlers of gravitation do with the universe? Fence it in? Warn the trespassers? Demand that its critics keep off the grass? Shall we demand that the dimensions and properties we allot to it shall be neither enlarged nor diminished? What shall we do with the universe? How shall we act in its presence? Shall we approach it with hats doffed? Shall we abase ourselves before its august might? Shall we go to it asking for fetters? Shall we put it up high on some pedestal? We lack in cosmic manners. We carouse in the temple. It is not enough to say that if the universe needs to be protected from its own erraticisms it is too frail to furnish a pretext for reverence.”

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And so on. Have my readers had enough of Horace Traubel? — E. F. E., in {the} *Boston Evening Transcript* (August 1901, 12:93)

{This was Traubel’s title.}

**A Thumbnail Sketch of the Conservator at Ten**

There is a periodical published in Philadelphia, not of popular character and hence not generally well known, which for those at all interested in ethical movements and who desire to keep in touch with the progress of liberal ideas, is singularly interesting. It is a very unique and extraordinary publication, in the fact of its remarkable candor and generosity. It is hospitable to all ideas, but always preserves that “exquisite balance of intellectual sanity” which saves it from dogma. Its appeal is particularly to that intellectual class who are not steeped in conventionalism. It is by no means of recent origin, but has been conducted for many years without variation from its original plan and without any effort to reach a larger audience. In that only is it consistent and conservative. Its editor is Horace Traubel. Its contributors include such as John Burroughs, Wm. Sloane Kennedy, Bliss Carman, Julian Hawthorne, Hamlin Garland, etc., besides many eminent Englishmen. It has no counterpart here or elsewhere; in a sense it is radical, but not to be classed with the innumerable publications that spring up here and there in advocacy of various ephemeral theories.

The *Conservator* advocates no theory or doctrine. It is bound to no single phase or conception of life and is dominated by no particular sentiment save that embodied in the quotation from Whitman which stands at the head of the title page: “Moral conscientiousness, crystalline, without flaw, not godlike only, entirely human, awes and enchants forever.” It is sometimes audacious, even startling, as all untrammeled thought which reaches to legitimate conclusions must be, and brings the reader up, sometimes, with a sharp breath. But it is never wantonly iconoclastic. It is the voice of intellectual radicalism. — Walter Young, in {the} *Knoxville Journal and Tribune* (October 1901, 12:125)

**Whitman and Boston’s Gentle Ladies**

Horace Traubel of Camden, N.J., editor of the *Conservator*, Philadelphia, and one of the literary executors of Walt Whitman, has been in Boston for a few days. He is the guest of Dr. G. P. Wiksell. Mr. Traubel makes an annual visit to these acres, where the Good Gray Poet was so appreciated (save the mark)
during his life. Whitman has not yet fully made his way as a great poet, too
great to be downed, among that class of Bostonians who always strive against
the survival of any piece of literature which they consider unfit. I am seriously
told, however, that there is a class, preponderantly ladies, who are coming
around to him. My informant, a surviving Massachusetts poet, says that the
phenomenon may be compared with that when a person who dines daintily
most of the time has an occasional irresistible craving for corned beef and cab-
bage. “I find,” said he, “that it is among the most delicate and gently bred
women of our most exclusive families that this infatuation for Whitman
thrives, and it is specifically for the coarser passages that they have the greatest
admiration. In Kipling they select The Seven Seas.” — Boston Post (October
1901, 12:125)

{At about this time, it appears, Traubel was involved in a passionate affair
with Gustave Wiksell, a Boston dentist and longtime active member of
the Whitman Fellowship; see Intimate with Walt, xxix–xxx.}


That Whitman was a “rough” in literature all the axioms and standards
which he shattered declare. He is the apostle of the uncouth and the bar-
baric — a destructive bovine intruder in the artistic china shop. One of his
Georgia admirers says that he “galloped through our literature like an untamed
stallion.” Defiant of the laws of literary form, he “exhausted the resources of
formlessness”; and, as W. D. Howells says: “In formlessness, everything spills
and wastes away: this is the defect of Walt Whitman, whose way is where ar-
tistic madness lies.” Leaves of Grass, in many parts, is the most amorphous
agglomeration of unpoetic words ever shoveled together; and much of Whit-
man’s work is really monstrous in form. In a few verses there is a swimming ma-
jesticalness, as of a walrus sporting, rolling, wallowing in the waves; but, for
the most part, his movement is as ungainly as that same sea beast flopping and
bumping and thumping about on the shore. His unwieldy gracelessness sug-
gests the megalosaurus or the iguanodon; and his species may well become ex-
tinct like theirs. As for rhythm, his thought was seldom rocked in that cradle
of the deep: some of his so-called poetry is described by Professor Barrett
Wendell, of Harvard, as a “mad kind of rhythm which sounds as if hexameters
were trying to bubble through sewage”; and his verses, mostly, a jangle — not
jingle — with about as much meter and music as cowbells beat out in fly time. —
William V. Kelly, in the Homiletic Review (November 1901, 12:138, xlii)

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Rabelaisian

When a hirsute and Rabelaisian person like Walt Whitman passes a shudder runs through organized society, so monstrous he seems and gross. — Vance Thompson, in the Philistine (November 1901, 12:138, xlii)

Best Loved and Hated Poet

Whenever I find an imaginative writer is either idolized or derided, I always assume before I begin to study him that he has a very strong personality and that the right attitude toward him is (in all probability) one neither of blind enthusiasm nor of angry ridicule, but of warm admiration, tempered by intermittent antipathy. It was under the influence of this condition that I began to study Walt Whitman — the best loved and best hated of modern poets. . . . And I think I can honestly say in this particular case my experience fully verified my assumptions. — Edmond Holmes, in Walt Whitman's Poetry: A Study and a Selection (November 1901, 12:138, xlii)

A Nebular or Stellar Rebel?

In American Authors and Their Homes, by Francis Whitney Halsey, William Dean Howells is reported as saying this of Walt Whitman: “He was like Columbus. He discovered an island instead of the continent. He knew the slavery of the poetic form, but he made his work formless. Form is indispensable to poetry. I think it should not be everything, but the true art is in a middle ground. At a sublime height in his work Whitman had form. Then he ceased to be nebular and become stellar.”

William Bell Scott wrote to William Michael Rossetti (May 22, 1856): “Browning’s volumes are all you say of them. . . . Since reading these volumes I have got an American book called Leaves of Grass, equally extraordinary, if not so perfect art. It is written in long, unrestricted, lanky lines, or rather measured prose sentences, instead of hexameters, and on the whole is somewhat like a revolution, although an ungainly and not a little repulsive one.”

Six months later, December 22, 1856, Scott is sending by Woolner to Mr. Rossetti a copy of the book which had so stirred him: “Pray accept it as a Christmas box. It is the queerest, the most startling, and in some senses, the most catholic of new oracles. I hope the author will shut up and write no more. If he does try again, most likely he will produce some rubbish (ten times worse than the author of Festus publishing the Angel and World) proving that the one idea had inspired him, and at first sight invalidating what he has already done.”
February 14, 1857, he writes Rossetti again: “It struck me you were the man to like the *Leaves of Grass*. Obliterate utterly with the blackest ink half a dozen lines and half a dozen words, ignore the author altogether, and read as one does the books that express human life like the Bible — books that have aggregated rather than been written — and one finds these *Leaves of Grass* grow up in a wonderful manner. The book is very like an opening into a quite new poetic condition.”

I find these things from Scott in William M. Rossetti’s book on Ruskin, Rossetti, Pre-Raphaelitism. — *E. P. G.* (January 1903, 13:173)

### The Germ Idea of “A Noiseless Patient Spider”

Again I find trace of Walt Whitman’s reading in William Rounseville Alger’s works. Following is the passage from near the close of Alger’s great work on immortality (*The Doctrine of a Future Life*) on which Whitman clearly built up his extremely beautiful poem:

> If every effort to fasten a definite theory on some solid support on the other side of the gulf [of death] fails, venture forth on the naked line of limitless desire, as the spider escapes from an unwelcome position by flinging out an exceedingly long and fine thread and going forth upon it sustained by the air.

Alger himself cites the idea from Greenough’s *An Artist’s Creed*. — *William Sloane Kennedy* (January 1904, 14:123)

{This is Traubel’s title. Alger (1822–1905) was a noted Unitarian minister and an early exponent of comparative theology, as well as an active abolitionist; *The Doctrine* appeared in 1860.}

### A Swipe at the Anti-Walt Poet

Bayard Taylor has got his growth. No increase of biographical fervor can push up his temperature. I have been reading Smyth’s *Life of Taylor*. It might better have been called Smyth’s *Death of Taylor*. The most of Taylor died when Taylor died. The most of the rest of him is dying. And in a little while the little of him that remains above ground will be in the anthologies. Some of it is fine stuff — a flame off the torch: a delicate film of fire. But there’s not enough of fine to make a torch for itself. I heard Taylor read his ode in Independence Square in 1876. But the ode was an ode. Only an ode. That is why it was not alive when it...
was born and could not live beyond its death. There was only one man in America at that time who could have written a song equal to the backgrounds and foregrounds and prophecy of the hour. But he was not invited to write it. There was no man in America in official place who knew the one man who could have written the song. So America went formally without its song. But its song was written. But the song did not come from any desk in the office of the New York Tribune or from Kennett Square. I think Taylor knew he had not written the poem. — “T.” (April 1904, 15:29)

{Bayard Taylor (1825–1878) was a poet and noted travel writer; he was born, lived for many years, and is buried in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania; its public library is named after him.}

**Warned Off Whitman**

With this last corner left over to fill, Bazalgette’s *Life* of Walt comes opportunely from Paris. When I was a small boy — and that wasn’t fifty years ago — and had to run to keep up with Walt’s slow big strolling gait, most everybody most everywhere made fun of or denounced him or his book. Maybe both. I used to wonder in my boy way why a man so handsome and so altogether attractive should have to endure this ill repute. I was not then wise to the habits of the world. People in Camden went to my mother and father to tell them Walt was not quite a safe man for me to go round with. (People in Camden are still of the same eclipse of mind. They took Walt’s name off the original designs of their Public Library — or didn’t even have it on. Walt in the opinion of Camden is still not quite safe for Camden to go round with. The world has found him extra safe to go round with. But that dont matter to Camden. Camden aint goin to take no moral chances on gambles of that sort.) Now we receive such replies as this master tribute from a great Frenchman. — “T.” (February 1908, 18:189)

**On Reading Traubel’s Walt Whitman**

In marble, by the cunning chisel wrought,  
On canvas painted, or with style portrayed,  
His subject’s image with the artist’s thought  
Is blended, and a dual mind displayed.  
But here in Traubel’s book behold the man  
Whose counterfeit such arts could never take:  
These volumes may the generations scan

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To know our Walt e’en as he lived and spake!
— John Herbert Clifford (May 1908, 19:41)

{The reference is to the appearance of the second volume of WWC.}

On the Press Agency for Whitman

A few days ago there was consigned to rest in the cemetery near Camden the last surviving member of the family of Walt Whitman {Hannah Whitman Heyde, 1823–1908}. It is a little surprising that the event should have caused so much comment in all parts of the country except in this neighborhood, where the death of the aged woman who had lived a blameless life was taken as a matter of course. But the event has been made the inspiration of a whole flood of Whitman reminiscence and exploitation in a way that bewilders the ordinary man. We are suddenly asked to believe that in the few years since Whitman died he has grown to be the greatest of the world’s apostles and is now accepted as the high priest of ethics the world over. This is a fine exhibition of what a finely conducted press agency can accomplish. The things which ordinarily seem to make a pseudo-prophet famous are poverty, atheism, criticism and, most of all, inscrutable and utterly unreadable writings. We do not in this respect refer to the alleged fact that Whitman’s works have an immoral tendency. All we have to say is that they are not poetry, as we understand the term. They may be philosophy and they may have some meaning, but it takes more time than most men have at their command to find out what it is all about. Mystery appeals to many, but to some persons it is a drawback. We read in the Conservator, the organ of the Whitmanites, the following from the greatest apostle of Whitman {i.e., Traubel}:

This is a sacred hour. I feel the solemn glad impetus of the spirit invading me. Possessing me with abundant joy. Transfusing me with a-bounding conviction. You fragments, you pieces of God, you, my comrades, my brothers, here, now, on this spot, I submit you to your heritage. You are the beneficiaries of the earth and of more than the earth. You are the inheritors of yourselves. Take what belongs to you. Take yourselves. You have long wandered dispossessed. Now I declare you full owners. Owners of your bodies. Owners of your souls. You have denied yourself life. You have sat upon a throne and refused your own appeals. You have turned deaf ears to your own voices. Blind eyes to your own visions. You have rejected your own dreams. Now I am going to see for you. Yes: hear for you. Yes: talk for
you. I am going to dive deeper into you than you yourselves have fathomed
and bring up treasure which you yourselves have not foretold. I am going
to get at you in the root. I am going to render an unequivocal account.

This is pure Whitmanism. It may mean something to those who have reached
the inner circles of the cult, but to the normal mind it is balderdash. What is
this interpreter talking about? We dont know after reading four columns of the
same sort of “chant communal” that is involved in the above. There is no
doubt that Walt Whitman had the poetic instinct, although he could not often
write poetry. He was a pagan philosopher, born either two thousand years too
late or much too soon. Whitman was better than his alleged prophets make
him, in spite of his theatrical word-slinging. He had good in him, but he loved
to pose in a way that ought to make George Bernard Shaw chirk up a bit and
do better. — Philadelphia Inquirer (December 1908, 19:157)

**Traubel: Whitman without the Light Inside**

Boswell was not a wise man, but he knew enough to stop when he had com-
pleted his great portrait of Dr. Johnson — he did not proceed to write a new
dictionary. And Mr. Horace Traubel may be a very wise man; but his wisdom
has not availed to keep him from publishing a thick volume of poems called
Optimos (Huebsch, $1.50), in open imitation of his friend and idol, Walt Whit-
man, whom, incidentally, he classes in true Whitman-esque manner with
Christ, Buddha and the man in the street. It would be fatally easy to ridicule
Mr. Traubel’s Optimos — its very sincerity leaves it defenseless; but it has a pe-
culiar claim to consideration because of the sidelight it throws on Whitman’s
own work.

Even today there are men who deny that Whitman was a poet. We would
advise such to read Optimos first and then Leaves of Grass. Optimos is as much
Walt Whitman as is Leaves of Grass, but with a difference; it is good Socialism,
good heresy, often good sense and good reading, but it is not poetry, while
Leaves of Grass is that first and the other things afterward or not at all. Mr.
Traubel is Whitman without the light inside. A few lines from Optimos will
illustrate:

There is a fate worse than falls to the man nailed to a cross:
It is the fate of the man who has no cross. . . .
Once you thought love was only safe with the police at the door:
Now you know that love is only safe when love is, not guarded. . . .
Are you brave with love in print and cowardly with love in your blood?
Do you keep love for special hours and places and only love when you think nobody is looking?
—*New York Times* (July 1911, 22:72)

**Not Walt**

Dear Traubel, from the “critics” I have learn’d
That in poetics you should make a halt.
In truth, the argument appears well turn’d,
The reason mainly being: *You’re not Walt!*

But somehow yet methinks I do recall
That he himself was damn’d for greater fault.
Did not the “critics” erstwhile, one and all,
Belabor him because he just *was* Walt?
—*John Herbert Clifford* (July 1911, 22:73)

**A Nietzschean View of Militarism**

No Government will nowadays admit that it maintains an army in order to satisfy occasionally a passion for conquest. The army is said to serve only defensive purposes. This morality, which justifies self-defense, is called in as the Government’s advocate. This means, however, reserving morality for ourselves and immorality for our neighbor, because he must be thought eager for attack and conquest if our State is forced to consider means of self-defense. At the same time by our explanation of our need of an army (because he denies lust of attack just as our State does, and ostensibly also maintains his army for defensive purposes), we proclaim him a hypocrite and a cunning criminal, who would fain seize by surprise, without any fighting, a harmless and unwary victim. In this attitude all States face each other today. They presuppose evil intentions on their neighbor’s part and good intentions on their own. This hypothesis, however, is an *inhuman* notion, as bad as, and worse than, war. Nay, at bottom it is a challenge and motive to war, foisting as it does upon the neighboring State the charge of immorality, and thus provoking hostile intentions and acts. The doctrine of the army as a means of self-defense must be abjured as completely as the lust of conquest. Perhaps a memorable day will come when a nation renowned in wars and victories, distinguished by the highest development of military order and intelligence, and accustomed to make the heaviest sacrifice to these objects, will voluntarily exclaim, “We will
break our swords,” and will destroy its whole military system, lock, stock and barrel. Making ourselves defenseless (after having been the most strongly defended) from a loftiness of sentiment — that is the means towards genuine peace, which must always rest upon a pacific disposition. — Friedrich Nietzsche (July 1915, 26:71)

{Countless extracts from notable authors appeared in the “As to Books and Writers” section of the Conservator. The above stands for many that alluded to the waging of World War I, most all of them in Whitman’s “God damn ’em” view of wars. The passage is from The Wanderer and His Shadow (1879), section 284, “The Means to Real Peace.”}

**But It’s Unthinkable, Horace**

*Suppose I had not been born. Suppose something had sidetracked me. What would have happened to eternity?*

— Horace Traubel, in the Glebe

Suppose eternity had said, in the winsome manner of the drug clerk: “We haven’t any Horace Traubel — but here’s Something Equally as Good”?

We would have looked Eternity sternly in the eye, and we would have said:

“We haven’t any Horace Traubel — but here’s Something Equally as Good!”

And Eternity would have been out of a job right there and then — That’s what would have happened to Eternity!

— Don Marquis, from the New York Evening Sun (January 1916, 26:167)

{This was Traubel’s title.}

**Traubel on War, Whitman Style**

The pen of Horace Traubel, editor of the Conservator, published at Philadelphia, and literary executor of Walt Whitman, is one the most vigorous and incisive ever wielded against war and in favor of peace and good will among nations and men.

Horace Traubel’s instinct against war and bloodshed is as deeply rooted and all-pervading as is his passion for love and service to his fellow-men.

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The series of brilliant articles recently written by Traubel in the Conservator and in other papers and periodicals ought to be read by all the millions of misguided people who are still crying for preparedness, and who in spite of all history, still cherish the vicious delusion that war is the way to peace.

Traubel writes in a telling, epigrammatic fashion all his own. His short sentences are all charged with lightning. To him war is a monstrous and unmitigated crime without an extenuating circumstance in its favor. It is simply murder in its most vicious, abhorrent and inexcusable extremity.

When Traubel read an editorial in a Canadian paper declaring that only when a nation knew how to fight did it become a nation, he answered in a terrific broadside that blew that editor to atoms.

Said he: “If you prove yourself a nation by war, you prove yourself a better nation by more war and a best nation by entire devotion to war. . . . The fact is we long ago proved we can fight. But we never yet proved our ability not to fight. To know how to fight is still at the best only barbarism. To know how not to fight is at the worst still civilization.”

Horace Traubel is one of the supreme liberators and humanitarians of this age. It is a thousand pities that so few of the common people he is giving his life to actually know him. It is the tragic fate of such men to die before they begin to live. Traubel is not only the pupil of old Walt Whitman but the master democrat of his time and the genius incarnate of human brotherhood. — Eugene Debs (October 1916, 27:103)

{This was reprinted from the September issue of the St. Louis National Rip-Saw.}

A Puff for a Fount of “Fillers”

There is at least one literary journal in America which has maintained its intellectual equilibrium on the question of the war while most of its contemporaries are busily apologizing for one or the other of the belligerents. That journal is the Conservator, ably written and published by Horace Traubel in Philadelphia. The other day a well-known editor of one of the sanest Sunday newspaper magazines in the country said to me: “I watch for the Conservator every month, because there is so much stuff in it that I can use for ‘filler.’” Do you know what “filler” is? “Filler” is the cream of every newspaper and magazine that is clipped by wise editors to fill up holes in their journals. Peter Burrowes said of the Conservator that it contains more quotable matter than any publication in America. Debs told Traubel a little while ago that the Conservator should
have a circulation of ten thousand copies. But its circulation is nowhere near that figure. The *Conservator* since its birth has stood out heroically for the rights of the workers. It has an artistic and esthetic value that is unparalleled. Its flavor is sweet and optimistic and reflects the love and moral courage of its great editor, Horace Traubel. Every Socialist, every radical, every man and woman who thinks, should read this journal, which stands out today like a beacon light in the printerial fog. Traubel’s friends learned with great alarm that the war may even yet swamp his quaint old printing shop and still the pen of the brave journalist, merely for lack of subscriptions.—*David Fulton Karsner* (September 1917, 28:105)

**A Puff from Jewish Missouri**

Almost from its inception has the editor of this paper been an ardent reader and admirer of the *Conservator*, the monthly upon whose forehead is inscribed Whitman’s simple but sublime sentence: “Moral conscientiousness, crystalline, without flaw, not God-like only, entirely human, awes and enchants forever.” We love to read the outpourings of Horace Traubel (the editor) even to this very day. True, he is radical, but whatever he writes is done with tolerance, nay, even with respect to others’ opinions.—*St. Louis Jewish Voice* (October 1917, 28:121)

**Carlyle and Whitman**

Men differ enormously in the frequency and intensity of their instinctive likings, and the same men will differ greatly at different times. One may take Carlyle and Walt Whitman as opposite poles in this respect. To Carlyle, at any rate in later life, most men and women were repulsive; they inspired an instinctive aversion which made him find pleasure in imagining them under the guillotine or perishing in battle. This led him to belittle most men, finding satisfaction only in those who had been notably destructive of human life — Frederick the Great, Dr. Francia, and Governor Eyre. It led him to love war and violence, and to despise the weak and the oppressed — for example, the “thirty thousand distressed needlewomen,” on whom he was never weary of venting his scorn. His morals and his politics, in later life, were inspired through and through by repugnance to almost the whole human race.

Walt Whitman, on the contrary, had a warm expansive feeling towards the vast majority of men and women. His queer catalogues seemed to him interesting because each item came before his imagination as an object of delight.
The sort of joy which most people feel only in those who are exceptionally beautiful or splendid Walt Whitman felt in almost everybody. Out of this universal liking grew optimism, a belief in democracy, and a conviction that it is easy for men to live together in peace and amity. His philosophy and politics, like Carlyle’s, were based upon his instinctive attitude towards ordinary men and women.

There is no objective reason to be given to show that one of these attitudes is essentially more rational than the other. If a man finds people repulsive, no argument can prove to him that they are not so. But both his own desires and other people’s are much more likely to find satisfaction if he resembles Walt Whitman than if he resembles Carlyle. A world of Walt Whitmans would be happier and more capable of realizing its purposes than a world of Carlyles. For this reason, we shall desire, if we can, to increase the amount of instinctive liking in the world and diminish the amount of instinctive aversion. This is perhaps the most important of all the effects by which political institutions ought to be judged.—Bertrand Russell, in Why Men Fight (December 1917, 28:152)
I know you can tell me how old Walt Whitman is this year. But how old are you? That’s more important. How many years old or young are you? How many years sensible or senseless? How many years merciful or malignant? How many years illuminated or blind? It don’t matter so much whether he served or not. Have you served? Are you serving? Can you really tell your own age? You think you’ve done enough when you’ve told about him. But you haven’t. Not till you’ve told about yourself. You speak of honoring him with celebrations. You dont, you cant, honor him. You honor yourselves. His account is closed. Yours is still open. Tell your own story. Not mostly of what you’ve done. Chiefly of what you are. How old were you on your first birthday? Are you any older now? I hear the sayers say they’ve lived through so many noble years. How many noble years have the sayers lived through? He wasn’t perfect. Nor are you or we. We’d be afraid of each other if we were. We dont have to romance about him or ourselves. The truth’s good enough. Light enough and shadow enough. It’s too late to pace him. Now we must pace ourselves. It’s all right to indicate his loyalties. But what of our own? I’ve said at Whitman meetings: “We’ll never have a real Whitman day till we come together to celebrate ourselves not him.” I hear wonderful things said about him today by people who when he was alive greeted him with derision and deliberate venom. I dont say it’s too late for them to see. It’s never too late, of course. But it’s some late, quite some. He toed the mark fairly well. Do we? None of us are any too remarkable at the best. Nor are any of us any too contemptible at the worst. We admit Walt. Do we admit ourselves? We can make this a year of years. A year for you and me as well as for Whitman. Our year as well as his year or anybody’s year. Whitman’s a hundred years born this year. Well, I’m sixty. And you: what
are you? They’re just as significant in all cases if we’ve made them so. What have you made of your years? What have I made of mine? I’ve won my way to sixty years by an untraveled route and I’ve not had a free pass, either. You’ve made your years also suggestive. Suggestive of what? That’s the test of it all. Not what Whitman was but what you are and what I am. One of us may precede the others for a while but all arrive just the same. Jesuses and Judases. We’re always tempted to glorify big men when they reach to big names. But when they’re just as big with little names we refuse to speak, except, perhaps, in scorn or skepticism. We say: “God, the father.” And yet we rob the man next door. We say: “Whitman, the universal comrade.” And yet we hate the alien. One of our most eloquent orators at the Brevoort Whitman meetings used to be continually talking of “the God damned Jews.” Is your sense of fraternity parochial or international? Is it white or yellow or black or all three or none of them? Everything we say of Walt comes back to us. Good and bad. Wise and foolish. To paraphrase Walt himself: “Idolatry’s to the idolater and comes back most to him.” The initiatory lesson from Walt is to be stuck on yourself. Then there’s another to go with it. That is, to let every other fellow be stuck on himself. Just as though all the stars were made for him, whoever he is. As though everybody was just for him and he was for everybody. The preacher priest class as a class (there were always exceptions) reprobated the theory of evolution till all culture and science as a class accepted it. Then they claimed it as their own. And when the time comes for the succeeding hypothesis they’ll stand by evolution with their usual vehement anathema till the next step is safe. Then they’ll take the next step. And say they always knew it was in order. And claim the new ground as they did the old. The literary class as a class (there were always exceptions) derided Whitman till Whitman became inevitable. There are a few feeble echoes of that derision yet. Now they’re acclaiming him and possessing him. It’s the same old story. When we pass to the next man they’ll caustically and brutally defend Whitman against our new adventure. Walt said: “Greater than me will follow.” What is the antecedent of life? Death. What is the antecedent of death? Life. Always and always. Walt Whitman’s a hundred years old this year. How old are you? A hundred years international. How many years international are you? am I? He’s a hundred years democratic. How many years democratic are we? He’s been a crowd man for a hundred years. A woman’s man. A criminal’s man. How long have you been that kind of people? He’s a hundred years confirmed this year. How many years are we confirmed? I’m more curious to know how many years old and young you are, especially young, than how many years old and young he is. I know you can tell me how old Walt Whitman is this year.
Walt was ushered into heaven with the ribald noise of brass bands. Yes. Especially brass. As long as he could be denied he remained an outlaw. Schools, customs, rejected him. Scholarship, fashion, professionalism and professorialism, church and state, in the dubious measures of their silences and laughers, treated him as a negligible claimant. But he stayed round till they melted. He wasn’t scared off by bad weather. He wore out the patience of thousands of hells. They gave in. He didn’t. Of course he had only the usual steering chart to go by. Every man, derelict or divine, has this and no more. He took his medicine as they take theirs. With mingled emotions of gladness and sorrow. He was as capable of being way down as of being way up. He didn’t like being cursed and denounced any more than you or I do. You see, Jesus needed his Judas. Whitman needed his persecutors. We all need something. Our poverty. Our misfortune. Even our ignominy. Malignity plays its part with mercy. I never complain for Whitman. I rather complain for his traducers. He didn’t lose. They lost. They paid for all postponements and delays. Just as in our average life the system pays for all the sufferings of its victims. Who paid the cost of hanging John Brown? Tradition says Brown did. But we know that America, civilization, did. The shadow of affliction gives the proper accent to every portrait. I never resent the interrogation. For that’s what it is. Make good, we’re told. Our claims are all met with that “why.” We can’t escape with the goods unquestioned. After all the questions are answered there are more questions. There seems to be no end to the historic questionings. You can’t be so little as to be missed. Nor can you be big enough to be feared. There’s a no for every yes. A black for every white. A discord for every harmony. Walt was called out in the usual way. He told us who he was. Where he came from. Where he was going. The world questioned all. It permitted no angle to go unexamined. Dagger thrusts. Thwartings of will. Confessions of dereliction. Erratic crimes of intention. Nothing avoided its vigilant eyes. That was the proof of the pudding. Natural, inevitable and welcome. He emerged from the great darkness. The tests are universal. They compass the range of all benevolence and malevolence. They subject us to all the pettiscisms of intrigue and pettifoggery. Things are flung in the road to trip us up at every step. Friends go back on us. Promises are broken. Notes defaulted. Death, even with murder, complicates the issue. Fifty hold back for one who rushes on. Chaos. Bedlam. Hoots and howls. Warnings. Threatenings. There are no two ways. There’s truly only one way. For bootblack and bard. The other day Gompers was thrown out of an auto. The chauffer was also chucked on his head. The chauffer was dismissed with a line. Gompers got a column. No one seemed to care what happened to the chauffer. Whether he lived or died. But Gompers?
the perspective of eternity one was as important as the other. There’s no big or little in the final analysis. No Whitmans and the men who can’t read and write. No saviors and no lost. That’s the reason Walt to his very last day was concerned lest he hadn’t made, as he said, his fellowship for the criminals, outcasts, unpopulums, unmentionables, sufficiently unmistakable. He craved no isolated eminence. He in fact craved no eminence. He was a real crowd man though he didn’t call himself such in my terms. He recognized his intimacy with those social classes who are not qualified on the lists. With the forgotten. With those who if they’re ever named at all are only included apologetically. The and-so-forths. The oh-yeses that we never invite in unless someone shames us into hospitality. He knew the situation. The pro and con of the divine economy. He was near the farthest off. He descended below the lowest. He passed over the heads of the Christs. Not because he was better than anybody. Rather because he was the neighbor of everybody. He went fearlessly into the jungled wilderness. He shrank from no encounter with the mysterious. Just as anybody does. Just as anybody must. With everybody. Admitting no inferiority or supremacy. The law of one is the law of all. He objected to being denounced. But not because he wanted to be lauded. He didn’t want anybody denounced. He intrepidly accepted the decrees of fate. They were not exceptional for him at the worst. Others had worse. Worse than the worst. He declined to believe himself one exceptional for blessedness or punishment. Dark as the darkest night was it wasn’t too dark for him to endure. Or light as the lightest day was it wasn’t too light for him to enjoy. He often told that story of the old woman who comforted herself in the midst of her physical miseries by the exclamation: “And to think! there are some who suffer more than I do!” He much preferred to be the nearest of men than to be the only man. “It’s deadly black today,” he said to me once, “but I guess the shadow’s proper for my light.” So you see the brass bands won’t hurt his feelings now. Not even the brass. The most tragic of the experiences he was subjected to were the vital accompaniments of his exaltation. As they also are of yours and mine. With the after brass and all.

Well, boys, girls, everybody, we can tell each other how old old Walt was when he died and how old he’d be if he was still with us in the flesh. We all know all about that. But let’s take a more immediate account. How old or dear are you to me and us? How many years to the good or how many years to the bad? Walt did his stunt. And on the whole did it handsomely. Have you done your stunt? Have I done mine? Let’s see. I don’t ask you to limit yourselves in talking of Walt or to withdraw anything you’ve said. But what of yourselves? Where have you stood? Where have I stood and where do I stand?
Have we been faithful or have we defaulted? Has the present crisis found us contemporary? Or are we, have we been, laggards? We, some of us, cry, Whitman, Whitman, just as some pious people cry, God, God, or Jesus, Jesus. It means nothing because it never gets beyond God, Jesus and Whitman. Never circulates as the current coin of immediate performance. Every big man is useful if he makes us better acquainted with ourselves. But the big names are useless, even in the way, if they only take us back to their dead pastures. Big men die in themselves and live in their successors. They are kept momentous rather than ominous only in their power to stir the race to constantly expanding influences. This is a good time for Whitmanites to confess. Not to the authority of a priest. Not even to the authority of Walt. But to the impressive authority of the self. Every one of us. Have we gone to jail with the innocent? Or have we backed water at the jail door? Whittier once wrote to a young man: “Ally yourself with some unpopular cause.” Have we done that? Hugo said: “Fear the popular high roads. Take to the wilderness.” Have we taken to the wilderness? Zola warned authors: “The way of the academy is the way of death.” Have we avoided the way of the academy? When we play with the game the game plays us. Walt one day said to me when his enemies were particularly active: “Let them howl: we’ll outdo them with silence.” Have we proved capable of meeting public clamor in that spirit? “Let’s listen to all they have to say: every word: let’s not refuse to hear the worst with the best: then let’s go on doing our own job in our own way.” Have we always been openeared for the people who said things we didn’t like? And have we stuck to our own convictions through thick and thin? Especially thick? Honest, now: have we? If we have, all right. But if we haven’t, all wrong. Let’s admit it. Have we been afraid of the fellow or the thing around the corner? Or haven’t we cared who or what was around the corner? We unite in calling Walt great now after the tests of wear and tear. But are we equal to knowing the greatness of still obscured men and women? After people tell us Walt is great we assent in an echoing chorus. But what capacity have we for discovering a great man for ourselves? We agree in lauding established reputations. But how many of us are brave enough to undergo the ridicule that attends a contemporary decision? Are we ready and willing to pick a man out of the gutter and set him on a throne? All comes at last to that. All Whitmanism as all Christianism. All Tolstoyism as all any-ism. How many years old are we? In adventure and daring? In independence and joy? In all the things we greet in another as evidences of nobility? How old are we in timorous social assent or brave social rebellion? How old in insight or opacity? How old in service or selfishness? It all comes to that. That’s our Whitman in figures as well as in rhetoric. It’s just as well our
Leninism or anything else we celebrate in round numbers. Have we put Walt into a cabinet for observation or into the flesh and blood of our virile living activity? Is he an oil painting on a wall? Or is he the outcast of some slandered password of revolution? Is he a volume of poem words or the flaming tissue of a challenging reform? Has he become a book of reference or a way of life? He has said to himself that he don't teach a lesson but rather takes down the bars to a lesson. He takes down the bars. We are the lesson. He says again that he's best understood in the lesson by which he's himself destroyed. He don't take us as a possession. He leaves us to our own ownerships. We’re to find out how many years worth while we are not how many years illustrious he is. He used to say that when you got his meaning Leaves of Grass was no longer “I, Walt Whitman, of Manhattan the son,” but just as much “I, Horace Traubel, of Camden the son,” or I, anybody, man or woman, of anywhere, the son or daughter.

A Lighthouse by the Sea

Mildred Bain

Dear Walt, you have been called by many names
Comrades know you as intimate friend and counsellor,
Strangers ignore or dismiss you with a word,
And although you are above and beyond all definition,
I want just now to call you by name.

For as I sat here musing about you and your approaching birthday,
A picture was suddenly projected on my vision.
I saw a lofty storm-swept lighthouse,
I heard the waves thundering against its base,
And it was to me a flashing, unmistakable symbol,
It was you, dear Walt. You are a mighty lighthouse by the sea.
You stand immovable, like a signal beacon,
Steady, oblivious to changes of time or tide,
You stream through the darkness in our being,
Penetrating, warning, shining unfailingly.
Your flame is tended by increasing numberless hands:
Hands that are white and yellow and black.
Saving, cheering, rescuing, there you stand;
Illuminating the shadowed course of brotherhood,
You are a mighty lighthouse by the sea.

From the Sunset of Bon Echo (Ontario, Canada)
As I sit at Karsners’ Front Window

Horace Traubel

As I sit at Karsners’ front window,
Dear Walt, with the ruffled East River passing below:
And Brooklyn opposite, and the bridge at the north,
And the interminable majestic boats going up and down stream—
The tugs, lighters, barges, and the huge dignified steamers crowded
with people—
And over it all always the shifting panorama of the ductile skies—
I think myself back to my young days with you:
I’m overwhelmed by memories of an unforgettable past:
And nothing can persuade me from it:
It fixes me to a moment of inexpugnable time:
I seem to look beyond the life before me to the antecedent life
of older years;
And I contemplate it with a joy I can’t express.

I’ll tell you what it is, Walt:
Wherever else you are, you’re also certainly here:
Your spirit fills the present scene, people, phantasms:
Although it was a long while ago we were together, I still hold
your hand:
There’s been many a break in time but there’s never been a break
between us in the intervening silences:
You’re just as present now as ever: I hear your voice, see your face:
And feel you as near to me as I am to myself.

You remember, Walt,
How you used to send me to New York on missions for you.
How I came and was here for a day or several days:
Coming on some purpose or other to see Ingersoll, or Johnston, or
Gilder, or someone else, for you:
Proud of my job: as I walked the streets, sort of as if I was walking
for you:
Up and down Broadway, Fifth Avenue, but feeling more natural down
on the Bowery, on the East Side:
How after I was through I’d hurry back to Camden and to you:
To Mickle Street and the little room:
How you welcomed me: how happy I was to be there again:

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How you exclaimed: “Sit down! sit down! and tell me all about it: who you met: what you saw: yes, sit right there!”
And while you settled yourself in your big chair I’d make myself easy on your strong bed:
And I’d answer your endless questions:
Oh, I say, Walt, the revival of those little nothings is the bitter-sweet of my body and soul.

Walt, they’re all talking windy frothings about you now.
Even the solons and the priests, who used to call me insane for liking you:
Even the fellows who’d tell me I might be about better business than making you an object of worship (as I never did, you know and I know):
The literary sheriffs, police, hangmen, marshals, who tried to get you where they thought you’d do no harm to their sophistries and prettinesses:
You see, Walt, you’ve become almost fashionable now, and they’ve all pushed in and taken the first seats:
They always left you: but they don’t want to be left:
Look at the array of bigwigs: there they are, all fussily telling how they’ve always stood by you:
Dont it rather make you laugh, Walt? yes: your quiet little chuckle is quite audible now.

I hear the noise of the vast city, Walt, just as you described it:
Every minute as I lift my eyes from my paper I see the East River in some new formation:
It’s just as you said, Walt: unceasing, crowded, triumphant in dramatic effect:
The spires of Brooklyn in the distance: the bridge to the north: and you over all:
You, dear Walt: for you and the thought of you penetrate it with rare meaning:
You: your faith and desire: your struggles: your final victory:
And me, as a boy, by your side.

As I sit at Karsners’ front window:
Here in New York, this sunny May day, nineteen hundred nineteen, dear Walt:
Twenty-seven years after we buried you at Harleigh: taking account of the returns:

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Seeing that in spite of those who shook their heads, in spite of those who
poisoned the spring,
Here you remain in our bigger world bigger than ever:
I’m carried away in a flood of reassurances, past the East River, past all
seas and hills:
Yes, dear Walt, with you still sowing seed: sowing, sowing.

Walt, there’s no end to the life before me:
And, Walt, there’s no end to your life:
You’d say: “Tell me about the East River: tell me about Brooklyn”:
And I’d do my best: but you knew all about it before:
But you said: “It’s like being told somebody loves you: you never get
tired of it”:
That gave me wings: and I’d do your simple errands and make my report,
the niftiest youngster in Camden:
And I’m that youngster still: they can’t rob me of my past: it’s mine: all mine.

As I sit at Karsners’ front window,
Dear Walt, that’s what I’m thinking:
Being the boy still: looking out on the scenes you as a boy loved and felt
immersed in:
Having nothing particular to say: only these sacred little things:
Knowing how much you always wanted me to be just myself, without any
fancy touches:
That gives the hour, the place, the circumstance, almost an aureole: Yes it
does, Walt: enshrines it: invites me to the tenderest reflection.
As I sit at Karsners’ front window.

The Walt Whitman Birthday Centennial
J. W. Wallace

The 31st of May is the hundredth anniversary of Walt Whitman’s birth. Though
a century has elapsed since then his fame and influence are as yet little more than
at the beginning of their growth, and it will take a much longer period in the fu-
ture to fully realize the significance of his advent and the importance of his
influence in relation to the new era yet to dawn upon the world. We live at the be-
inning of vast changes in the history of humanity. The form of civilization
which has been gradually developing in western Europe for several centuries
past, extending itself to America and in various degrees affecting every country,
is now obviously passing into its final stages of disintegration and dissolution. Based on the idea of private property and monopoly, manifesting itself more and more in the exploitation of the masses by a privileged few, in competitive commerce and business, and in the gigantic growth of modern industrialism and capitalism, it has fostered and developed in all classes and in ever-increasing prevalence a selfish and ruthless greed, low aims and a brutalizing and soulless materialism. A civilization of this character is doomed from the beginning, and now we see its fruits in the devastation caused by a world-wide war, in the famine and misery of vast populations, in the increasing disorganization and unrest of nations, in statesmanship entirely devoid of insight and honesty and only eager to maintain the old injustices, and in vain cries of “peace, peace” where there is no peace.

The old order must go, and the sooner the better. Within it a new order has long been preparing, towards the growth of which many diverse elements have contributed, and which will yet cast off the strangling sheaths which now envelop it, and unfold into freedom and beauty of flower and fruit.

Of this new order — of the era of true democracy — Whitman is so far the greatest pioneer and exemplar. Its many characteristics have their fullest synthesis in him, and he is likely to remain the chief influence in its development.

When he was about thirty-four or thirty-five years of age, something hitherto latent in him, some concealed growth, emerged more or less suddenly — as a flower appears in spring — into full consciousness, accompanied by an immense accession of vision and power, and bringing every element of his nature into harmonious subordination to the central self. He knew that the same thing is latent in all men and women, constituting their true nature, and that in it all are forever equal, and each one with all the rest. He saw in himself a type and forerunner of generations as yet unborn, a beginner of new eras, and devoted himself thenceforward to the task of evoking in others the latencies which had become manifest in himself. It set him apart from those around him, and at odds with all the conventions, ideas and institutions of his time. For the sake of the future he had to isolate himself in the present, and to face the angry misrepresentations, obloquy and scorn which are the lot of all the great redeemers of men. But his early short poem, “Beginners,” shows that he had counted the cost beforehand.

How they are provided for upon the earth (appearing at intervals),
How dear and dreadful they are to the earth,
How they inure to themselves as much as to any — what a paradox
appears their age,
How people respond to them, yet know them not,
How there is something relentless in their fate all times,
How all times mischoose the objects of their adulation and reward,
And how the same inexorable price must still be paid for the same great purchase.

Whitman’s initial experience determined the character of the book, *Leaves of Grass*, to which he devoted his life. In the first place, its message could only be expressed in poetical form. As Carlyle says: “All deep things are Song. It seems somehow the very central essence of us, Song; as if all the rest were but wrappages and hulls! The primal element of us; of us, and of all things. . . . It is a man’s sincerity and depth of vision that make him a Poet. See deep enough, and you see musically; the heart of Nature being everywhere music, if you could but reach it.” But the inner music and volume of Whitman’s message could not be confined within the conventional shackles of the current poetical forms, and demanded freer and more flexible modes of expression, depending on its own interior rhythm alone. And so he reverted to the free utterance of the ancient prophets and bards. It was equally inevitable that Whitman himself should be the theme of his book, and that it should be a full expression and radiation of his own personality. He saw in himself the model of the democracy it was his task to inaugurate and project in the future. He would attract his readers only through their latent affinities with himself, so that in the mirror of his book they should see themselves as they are in the inner nature he shared with them and with all. In this way he would reveal them to themselves. For all men are rooted in the Divine Life, and are united in their essential being. When therefore he spoke of himself it was only of himself typically, as one in whom was unfolded much that is still latent in others. “What I assume you shall assume, for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.” “I know perfectly well my own egotism, and would fetch you whoever you are flush with myself.”

It is impossible within the limits of this paper to give the reader, even in outline, an idea of the composite character and profound significance and value of this book. It ranks with the loftiest sacred scriptures of the race, yet it contains no preaching or moralizing, formulates no creed or philosophy, and is as much at home in the actual material world as the grass which gives it its title. It is the most revolutionary of modern books, and aims at the most drastic changes in every department of our social and private life— in politics, the institutions of society, arts, manners, customs, religion, and the conduct of life. Yet it never engages in attack, but relies only on the attraction of superior models presented.
in the author himself. “Produce great Persons, the rest follows.” And it accepts
the world as it is, and all events, circumstances and persons, with absolute faith
in the divine governance, and with a joyousness which illumines every page
like sunshine. It is universal in its sympathies and appeal, yet it accommodates
itself to the capacities of every reader, providing something in which each may
take interest, and addressing each with the personal affection of an intimate
comrade. “O you and me at last, and us two only.” It is predominantly spiritual,
the soul its constant theme whether implicit or avowed, yet it is nobly carnal
and material, and celebrates the body equally with the soul. For to Whitman
the body is the soul made visible.

Symonds has said that “speaking about Whitman has always seemed to me
like speaking about the universe.” The theme is inexhaustible, and it will en-
gage the study and increasingly influence the civilization of many generations
to come.

**Walt Whitman’s Mystic Catalogues**

*Fred Hier*

Whitman was a profound mystic. Listening to many people talk about him,
one might suppose that he was some kind of a gross materialist or nineteenth
century hedonist without the first conception of spiritual values. It is true that
the lords god put a pagan and a vagabond in Whitman; it is true that he talked
plainly about things which are usually euphemistically innuendoed out of ex-
istence, but the seer and the mystic and the prophet ruled the rest of him with
a high hand. I, myself, dont understand how anyone can read Whitman and
not appreciate the prevailing spiritual elements.

Most of the derogation, I know, comes from those who never really have
read *Leaves of Grass*. For instance, a certain Presbyterian minister recently
said to a friend of mine, in discussing Walt, that some of his poems would seem
to indicate a personal experience with women. Whether the parson had any
further thoughts on the subject I dont know, but this was the thought that
stood out in his mind. I know that he hasn’t read Whitman.

But another minister, who is the president of a theological seminary, has
written a book on the religion of the American poets. Whitman gets the last
chapter, and the author makes it clear what a painful and difficult task it was to
sneak him in. A book had been written before on the religion of the English po-
ets, and nine names had been selected. To make the new book harmonious,
the author wanted nine Americans. The first eight were evidently a good deal
of fun. But I’m afraid Walt was elected only after nights of wrestling and prayer.
And after he got in, and the writer had to read him to talk about him, his essential mysticism is missed entirely. Thus do two divines, who are supposed to emphasize and cultivate the spiritual, evade the greatest spiritual figure created out of America.

Mysticism is everywhere in Whitman. And not even his sympathetic readers know this. The old Whitmanites need no arguments on Walt’s general spirituality (though the ministers most certainly do), but they even make excuses for what are called the “catalogues” in *Leaves of Grass*. These lists or collections of the names of things are found throughout Whitman’s work, and are usually considered as so much background or padding, and are tolerated or passed over like the “begat” parts of the Bible. Even such a transcendentalist as Emerson suggested to Carlyle that the latter might feel *Leaves of Grass* to be “only an auctioneer’s inventory of a warehouse.”

Now, I am not going to argue that everything in Whitman is the best, or that I don’t like some parts better than others, or that the most disconnected collection of words is pure poetry only the rest of the world can’t see it. Nothing of the kind! What I do want to show is that even in his “cataloguing” Whitman is deeply mystical, and that behind and hovering over and running through his apparently most unconnected tabulations there is a prevailing mood or mystic conception or spiritual emotion. I don’t care whether you call it poetry or what you call it, it’s there.

These catalogues are a strange and wonderful combination of the working of natural fancy and the working out of Whitman’s scheme and theory in *Leaves of Grass*. And I believe, for Whitman was much more careful and analytical in his poetical theories than most people imagine, that he knew his method was the fulfilment of natural psychological law and that fancy fashioned his poems as the sun draws out a flower.

How does the natural fancy work? We all know or have heard how, in great emotional crises, a whole series of images or thoughts will go through the mind like a flash. It is said that drowning men while struggling often have a panorama of their lives flit through their minds. A girl told me who had been in a motor accident that during the turning over of the machine all the things passed through her mind that required fifteen minutes or more to repeat to me. Some of the images were seemingly without the smallest connection, but they were all on examination seen to be related to a fear that her mother might get a bad fright. It is common knowledge that in dreams a complete novel will be born or a brainstorm blow over between the ringing of an alarm clock and its shutting off a few seconds later. In all of these emotional dramas there is a dominant mood, a ruling passion. Most poetry is born of such intense experiences,
when the consciousness seems to be dynamited, for what is poetry after all but an emotional crisis in affectionate or beautiful language?

There are other situations in which the mind does much the same thing, only in a calmer way. It can best be described as a kind of waywardness of the fancy, a vagabond flight that the mind takes when it is free and untrammeled except for a watching concept or swaying emotion. It is something like a daydream, only more thrilling and poignant. Terror and stress are not so often present as they are nearly always in a critical emergency, though there may be a suffusing glow which is so acute that it becomes an agony — an agony of the realization of beauty. But always the fancy skips about; here, there, around the world, everywhere, with what seems like an abandoned perversity. That fancy is cute, though. It is having its fun. It has a sure knowledge of the oneness in all things, the unity in all the colors of the rainbow, and plays its mystic game.

Whitman’s fancy always roamed the earth in this occult way. The least suggestion evidently set him off. We all do very much the same thing, I believe, when we are off guard. But Whitman, even when he was so much on guard as to write his fancies down, had the power to capture the image without confining the imagination. Nothing seems more natural to me than the way in which the things on Whitman’s lists get together as if by some strange mystic law. I have often thought that Walt could be called, with very exact definition, the poet of natural fancy. This designation is perhaps not at once obvious. But when we look over a few of the mooted catalogues the full force of the mystic penetration becomes plain.

This quality of the mind to hover lovingly over all things and make unconscious poetry was developed in Whitman into a conscious theory and is an indispensable part of his scheme for *Leaves of Grass*. He himself says of his intention: “The word I myself put primarily for the description of them (the *Leaves*), as they stand at last, is the word Suggestiveness.” And: “The words of my book nothing, the drift of it everything.” It is exactly this suggestiveness and drift that Whitman accomplishes as it has never been done before. Take such poems as “The City Head House” and the “Dirge for Two Veterans.” Neither one has a single unusual word, and in both there is a total lack of the stock mellifluous trickeries. Yet there is such a piling up of emotion by simple suggestion and direct words, and such a soft wash of agony over both of them, that almost nobody can resist weeping when they are read. You may search in vain for the word that does it: there is a general drift, elusive, yet all-pervasive, and the total effect is irresistible. So it is with the catalogues. They suggest, hint at, allude to, insinuate, propose, recommend; they set the boundaries of
horizons, or reveal there are no boundaries; they indicate some life dynamic; they seduce one's attention, break all his barriers down in preparation for the whisper of the melting idea or the bang of the knockout blow.

The mistake has been made, as mentioned before, of thinking that these catalogues are mere bulk, put in as though with a big brush and plenty of paint to give a generous background. They are not. They are part of the author’s suggestiveness; the places where his love landed. For it is one of Whitman’s peculiar glories and distinctions that he perceived where the common thread of life ran, however deeply hidden, and that he could pick out the most abstruse affinities. The induction that Mill and Spencer made for logic and science, Whitman made for the moods and emotions and passions of life through poetry.

As Walt says suggesting this induction: “. . . becoming already a creator, Putting myself here and now to the ambushed womb of the shadows.” And that is what he was always doing even in the catalogues, ambushing the “womb of the shadows.” And the “O” you find so often beginning these lists is simply the cry of surprise on discovery, when something is brought into the light.

One gets a hint of the altitude of Walt’s spiritual elevation from the sweep of some of the lists. And because he did have such a sweep and saw men everywhere in their terrific sweating struggles, one can understand the mood his fancy brought him to, when he said in the “Song of Myself”: “Agonies are one of my changes of garments.”

All of Walt must be read looking for a garment of agony or ecstasy. You will get clearly his power of mystic suggestion if you will read the lines in “To Think of Time,” at the end of the third section: “Slow-moving and black lines creep over the whole earth . . . they never cease . . . they are the burial lines.” The conception is perfectly clear, but if you will run over this line for a minute you will get a feeling of the attitude in which most of Whitman has to be approached, a feeling without which the catalogues are meaningless.

The lists themselves discover two very interesting things besides their mysticism and suggestiveness. There is over all these lists one flooding, tingeing, brooding spirit, like the color or tint the sun will sometimes throw over a whole scene, earth and sky. But there is something more.

In the first place the objects listed are never in repose. They are always doing something or going somewhere. Whitman was dynamic rather than static; more akin to Rodin than to the Greeks. This sense of movement is very evident in the catalogues of physical things like: “The Yankee clipper . . . The boatman and clam diggers . . . The trapper in the open air . . . The runaway slave.” But there are other lists of spiritual concepts like: “Victory, union, faith,
identity, time.” Here the movement is spiritual, showing an evolution or unfolding from the specific to the general, from the immediate to the infinite, from the present accomplishment of “victory” to the ultimate encloser of everything, “time.”

Perhaps it is in section two of “I Sing the Body Electric” that the wonderful feeling of physical beauty and power in motion is best hinted at. The key to the section, though the line itself is not the most beautiful, is that simple quickening sentence: “the sleigh-driver driving his six horses through the crowd.” Leave out the words “six” or “crowd” and see what becomes of the picture. With them one can see the tight muscles of the driver, the many reins never getting tangled, the six restive animals, and the people plunging aside out of the way. There is white beauty, there is pounding blood, there is danger, there is magnificence!

Consider the magic of the movement in a line like this: “I hear bravuras of birds, bustle of growing wheat, gossip of flames, clack of sticks cooking my meals.” And this one with the spiritual explosion on the end: “Stars, rain, snow, my amaze.”

A warning must be given here which goes to the root of Leaves of Grass. The full force of none of these lists can be had if they are taken away from the poems of which they are apart. No matter how they move, to be effective they must march with the other words they are shouldering. For instance, people might smile if I said that there is any special mystical spirit in the following line: “The sharp-hoofed moose of the north, the cat on the sill, the chickadee, the prairie-dog.” But there is, and it is perfectly revealed when we read the lines which go before the above:

The wild gander leads his flock through the cool night,
Ya-honk he says, and sounds it down to me like an invitation.
The pert may find it meaningless, but I listening close,
Find its purpose and place up there toward the wintry sky.

And the lines which follow:

The litter of the grunting sow as they tug at her teats,
The brood of the turkey-hen and she with her half-spread wings,
I see in them and myself the same old law.

(Song of Myself 14)

Each catalogue must be thrown against something larger, the background of the whole poem, just as each poem must be looked at against the perspective of all the Leaves.
Another important thing the lists discover is that Whitman practically catalogues in all his poetry, using three different methods. In fact, it might be said that all he does is to list life and the universe. The first method is the simplest—that of simply stringing names together, as in: “Stars, rain, snow, my amaze.” This is what is ordinarily meant by a Whitman catalogue.

In the second method, that used in the bulk of his poems, Whitman uses a name and then goes on to say something about it in two or more lines. This method is well illustrated by the poem in *Sands at Seventy*, entitled “Out of May’s Shows Selected”:

Apple orchards, the trees all cover’d with blossoms;
Wheat fields carpeted far and near in vital emerald green;
The eternal, exhaustless freshness of each spring morning;
The yellow, golden, transparent haze of the warm afternoon sun;
The aspiring lilac bushes with profuse purple or white flowers.

This is nothing more than a catalogue with descriptions tacked on, as becomes rather startlingly apparent if we take the subjects of each line and put them together: “Apple orchards,” “wheat fields,” “afternoon sun,” “lilac bushes.”

A third method, and that upon which Whitman wrote his greatest poems, is a continuation of the second; that is, two or three dominant ideas or objects were taken and elaborated and approached from different angles as in the great Lincoln dirge, which is woven around three objects, all of sad and wistful and yet penetrating beauty; the lilac, the evening star and the hermit thrush.

A beautiful short example of a part use of this third method is found in the seventh section of “Salut au Monde”((7)):

I see the places of the sagas,
I see pine-trees and fir-trees torn by northern blasts,
I see granite bowlders and cliffs, I see green meadows and lakes,
I see the burial-cairns of Scandinavian warriors,
I see them raised high with stones by the marge of restless oceans, that the dead men’s spirits when they wearied of their quiet graves might rise up through the mounds and gaze on the tossing billows, and be refresh’d by storms, immensity, liberty, action.

All of these methods, the simple tabulation, and the others with more or less elaboration, are at root the same. They are all essential, all suggestive, all mystical. And would it be too much to say that the catalogues themselves are poems without interfering explanations?
Lincolnism or Whitmanism?

I’m a collector, of course. Many of my interests may be said to be the interests of the collector, solely and purely, as I realize myself, sometimes in a doubting way. But I’ve collected Whitman with a human as well as a bookish impulse. I’ve believed in him from the start—read as well as collected him—appreciated his just messages, social, religious and economic, with real passion, if I possess such a quality as passion, as I really believe I do. The longer I’ve lived the richer I’ve become in Whitman memoranda, which I’ve bought right and left, the more impressive he’s become to my personal heart. I’ve never hesitated to make it plain, in season and out of season, that I’m a Whitman man, through and through—as you may say I’m also a Lincoln man, without qualification. I always think of the two men together—Lincoln supreme in statecraft, Whitman supreme as a singer, what you call a psalmist. I don’t know which I love most, Whitman’s Lincolnism or Lincoln’s Whitmanism. I suppose the two are about the same, analyzed. I’m willing to be thought a mere collector in some directions. But I’d resent the classification if made to include my Whitman enthusiasm. —William F. Gable

Centenary of Walt Whitman

I think future generations will regard the advent of Walt Whitman as marking a new era in the life of Humanity. He will appear as a great Initiator. His outlook is so large, so generous; his acceptance of life and human nature so warm-hearted; on every topic which he touches he throws a new light; into every relation of life he enters with a new relation.

Why is this? He can hardly be called a great Thinker or Systematizer. He founded no Chair, no Church, no Philosophy. But he did better. He found, as I take it, that the world around did not satisfy, was not expressive of, his deepest, truest Self; he discovered that there were vital elements in his nature which—for centuries at any rate—had never been expressed, and which cried for utterance. There was coming to light within him a profounder, more intimate Self, or portion of the Self; and to this he could not be false. By delivering this hidden being within his own heart, he made one great step forward towards the deliverance of mankind at large. All his poems, when you come to consider them, are the unchaining and freeing of his own great spirit, but in that deep region truly where his spirit was one with that of humanity. The moral is plain; and “he who runs may read.” —Edward Carpenter
Walt Whitman

On the banks of the Mississippi River at Alton, Ill., there stands a great white shaft erected to the memory of Elijah Lovejoy, whose printing press was thrown into the river by patriotic Americans because he had advocated the abolition of chattel slavery.

Down at Harper’s Ferry, West Va., there is a statue of John Brown, who was foully murdered by contemporary patriotic Americans because he raised his eloquent voice in behalf of the Negro prior to the Civil War. School children now sing: “John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave, but his soul goes marching on.”

Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips are today honored and revered by their countrymen as sterling patriots and true democrats, though, a generation ago, Garrison was dragged through the streets of Boston with a rope around his neck because he voiced his opposition to slavery; and every public hall in the land was closed to Phillips for the same reason.

Twenty-seven years ago, when Walt Whitman was on his death bed, he said to Horace Traubel: “Maybe I have got a foothold.” No man in American letters, not even Poe, rode a sea as rough and stormy as that which confronted Whitman during his lifetime. The appearance of *Leaves of Grass* provoked the bitterest condemnation that ever greeted a book. As Traubel says, “the literary sheriffs and hangmen were all busy.” Only here and there were there evidences of friendship and admiration, and such as they were they manifested a courage and devotion that has rarely been matched.

Emerson was one of the very few men in that period who at first attached himself to Whitman and expressed a sincere regard for his book. England seems to have been much friendlier. But in the United States Old Walt not only did not get a hearing but he was vilified in a manner sufficiently severe to have weakened a man of less sterner stuff.

Withal, Whitman and his few friends stood firmly by the flag they had planted, and no abusive storm, however fierce, could level the mast or shake from their faith the devotees of democracy, however few, who gathered about Whitman in those early days.

It has not been so many years ago when book shops in the United States were raided for copies of *Leaves of Grass*. It has been even a more recent time when Whitman’s book was barred from the open shelves in public libraries. Even today, in Camden, for instance, the city in which he lived and died, *Leaves of Grass* is permitted only a restricted circulation.

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Today is Whitman’s centenary. It is one hundred years since he was born on Long Island. And since his death he has grown to heroic stature as a world literary figure, and there is not a civilized country on earth that is unfamiliar with the broad-gauged lines, breathing the true spirit of elemental, personal democracy, that are scattered throughout his works. Newspapers and periodicals of this moment are paying tribute, long deferred, to the memory of the Good Gray Poet and his monumental work. Many of these tributes and fulsome praises ring with human sincerity and intellectual conviction. Many others of them are given utterance by persons who, had they lived in a former day, would probably have joined in the intellectual mobbing bees that assaulted Whitman from every conceivable corner and angle.

The universality of Whitman’s democracy is eloquently attested by the fact that all shades of opinion and radicalism claim him as their very own. Like Christ and like Debs, Whitman’s words fit every human and democratic occasion. And like Christ and like Debs, Whitman belongs to no period and to no dogma. He is elemental. His roots run deep. His vision sweeps all horizons. His love touches every shore, and becomes a real, personal thing. His democracy rides all seas and washes all shores.

As a lover of all races, as a believer in all mankind, as a democrat who had the courage to live in the fulness of his democracy, Whitman will continue to grow. — David Karsner

Whitman’s Shiftlessness

One thing about Whitman that always appealed to me was his shiftlessness. By that I do not mean to intimate that I know of anything vacantly worthless or vapidly lazy about him; the record of his life shows that he was capable of the most prodigal expenditures of energy over long periods. At the same time I am sure that there was a large streak of shiftlessness in his make-up, else he could never have written so eloquently of loafing and inviting his soul, of contemplating a spear of grass, of taking the open road.

This element in his verse appealed to me because I was raised on the poetry of Walter Scott and Sir Alfred Tennyson, of John Greenleaf Whittier and William Wordsworth. I was taught to read the works of these kindly old gentlemen because they were supposed to inculcate something moral and noble. The result was that as a child I conceived a hatred for Morality and Nobility that has endured unto this day.

Another result was that when I first discovered Whitman’s work I did not regard it as poetry. Poetry to my mind was something dressed in a ruffled shirt
front, with a high stock collar and silver buckled shoes. It was pointed out to me that Whitman’s work couldn’t be poetry because it dealt with rough, dirty, everyday things like wharf fronts, sweaty draymen and pimply-faced women. That was convincing to me. Hence I approached Whitman with a mind devoid of prejudice.

The more of Whitman I read the more relief I felt. There was nothing about Duty here, nothing about Purpose, nothing about Sin, nothing about Repentance, nothing about the Grave. And whenever Death was referred to at all, it was in the most affectionate terms.

It was all so easy-going that it was highly suspicious. Like all Americans born three or more decades ago I was reared in the belief that whatever is pleasant is wrong and that the heights of spirituality are reached only through suffering, though why the heights of spirituality should be regarded as so desirable a place for a permanent dwelling I have never been able to learn.

Even today Whitman does not measure up to certain standards. He does not inspire one to Efficiency in One’s Work; his poetry does not lead one to join the local Chamber of Commerce; there is not a line of his which would cause a young man to join in the fight for Civic Betterment.

All that Whitman does is to take you for a ramble impartially through woods and cities, to let you look on with him from the gallery of great theaters, to listen to the surf tumbling on the beach, to muse over the wording of a fallen gravestone, to smell the lilac bush in the spring, to tiptoe through the corridors of hospitals, to gaze upon an old woman’s sweet face, to sit by in silence while an old man reflects upon years gone by, to look upon a sunset and remember that it presages a tomorrow.

Plainly a shiftless fellow. I would that I could have sat by a stream with him and fished for many days. — **Phillips Russell**

**Walt and the New World Order**

Wallace says that you would welcome a word for the 31st, so I send you mine with hearty good will.

If, as I believe, the creative, freedom-giving power of love is the divine spirit, then your festa commemorates an event of the first significance in history; for with Walt Whitman, as with Shelley, there was born one who became a minister of that Power, and in whose written words there is still for all who can receive them the urge of that supreme life.

400  *The Whitman Centennial Issue, May 1919*
Never before did the world stand so much in need of men and women who believe in one another and in freedom, and who are dedicated to the practice of true freedom in fellowship.

Whitman’s may not be the whole of freedom or of fellowship, but it remains an authentic and inspired contribution that neither his generation nor ours has by any means exhausted, and that we shall neglect at our peril.

He has given to all who love him a great inheritance.

He is a challenge, not only to existing institutions and canons of thought and conduct, but also to his own legend and his own message. His poems challenge us that we in our turn may by proof and practice challenge them, and become true comrades and fellows of his.

If, on this occasion, he could sit among you in the flesh, I think that, brooding upon events, he would hark back to his “Years of the Modern.” Nothing that I can add of my own could be so appropriate as to ask you to revive among your company those noble lines. Many of us, overseas, have hailed in the recent work of America, for and in Europe, the first fruits of that conception of the Democratic Republic with which Whitman so earnestly and prophetically challenged the politicians of the world half a century ago. Humanity is today undergoing the birth throes of a new world order. May we who have received Whitman’s words have faith together and dare still to “promote brave soldiers,” still to see “Freedom, completely arm’d and victorious and very haughty, with Law on one side and Peace on the other.” Yours, with cordial greetings, Henry Bryan Binns {This letter was addressed by Binns to Tom Harned.}

Horace Traubel

Dear Comrades and Fellow-Admirers of Walt Whitman: I came here to listen, not to speak. But, since the Chairman has called upon me, being a woman, I avail myself of this opportunity to talk. There are so many here paying eloquent tributes to Walt Whitman, I want to say a word to the chiefest of his lovers, Horace Traubel.

To stand up here and talk about Horace Traubel is like proclaiming the charms and the desirability of one’s sweetheart from the housetops. The truth is, I love Horace Traubel. To discuss him in this public fashion is, therefore, somewhat embarrassing, especially as this is our first meeting. But since we are all “comrades and lovers,” you will let me tell of my admiration and affection for one whom we all love.

There are two men in Horace Traubel. I suppose that is why we love him twice as well as we love other men. He is a mystic, and he is a realist. His heart
is full of dreams and ardent sentiments, and yet he is a most profound observer of men and their actions. He has thought out a scheme of life for himself. His interpretation of the world we live in, while deeply poetical, is very practical and human. He loves the just and the unjust, the wicked and the good, the rich and the poor, because of the inclusiveness of his nature. These antitheses are revealed in his writings. He is angry with evil; he hates injustice and wickedness. But he holds out his kind hand to sinners and draws them to him with cords of human love. There is but one thing he asks of men and women—that they shall love one another. His kindness and magnanimity are inexhaustible. Indeed, there is something of the Savior about his interest in human beings, and his sympathy with their struggles. To him neither the individual nor the crowd is vile. He finds in each man and in the mass beautiful, common, elemental qualities of humanity. It is upon these qualities that Horace Traubel rests his hopes for the future. For him love, valor, self-sacrifice and the free spirit exist, and they are the only vital facts of life. They constitute the important and essential part of his scheme of a better world. Yet he penetrates far into the structure of our social order, and comprehends what is wrong with it. It is here that the mystic and the realist clasp hands. He is the great Optimist, and his work is wholesome and encouraging. His dream is persuasive and inspiring. That is why we love Horace Traubel.—*Helen Keller* {These remarks were offered at the centennial dinner in New York, May 31st.}

**Still the Same**

It is a great pleasure to me to associate myself in spirit, though absent in body, with your celebration of the first Walt Whitman centenary. More than thirty years ago I attempted to express what I think of Walt Whitman. I can only say now that with the lapse of years I do not feel that my love and reverence grow less, nor my estimate of his significance to the whole world.—*Havelock Ellis* {From a letter addressed by Ellis to Tom Harned.}

**The Ever-living Poet**

Let me too join today in the goodly commemoration feast you are holding in memory of Walt Whitman—the live man that we knew and broke bread with—and the ever-living poet.—*Ernest Rhys* {From a letter from England addressed by Rhys to Tom Harned.}
If all the theologies (guesses about God) were to sink in the quicksands of the word war. If all Greek and Hebrew originals were lost. Out of *Leaves of Grass* would come the flowers of worship satisfying the soul, and forms and ceremonies to meet the use of temples and groves in the religious expression of vital events, as marriage and burial ceremonies. “Whispers of Heavenly Death” hold more comfort for the mourners than any other scripture we have. This explains the mental rest derived from them. We argue no more about God or immortality. Confucius said: “I would that all men might write a book about God. Time so spent would be profitable to the soul.” *Leaves of Grass*—biography of a man—is the biography of God.

*Percival Wiksell*

{This is the final item in the final *Conservator* of June 1919 (30:61). The title is Traubel’s. In his November 1917 essay “Why Men Write,” Traubeil had occasion to refer to the remark of Confucius that Wiksell cites: “We used to be told that God wrote a book about man. Confucius suggested that every man should write a book about God. That wouldn’t help God any. But it’d do a lot for you and me” (31).}
**APPENDIX 1**

**Topical Articles on Whitman in the Conservator**

Following is a chronological list of *Conservator* articles on Whitman of approximately one column or more. A roman numeral following a title indicates the number of installments into which the article was divided; these almost always appeared in immediately following issues. Abbreviations are W = Whitman, WW = Walt Whitman, and LG = *Leaves of Grass*.

**1890:** “LG and Modern Science,” Richard Maurice Bucke (1: 19); “The Quaker Traits of WW,” William Sloane Kennedy (1: 36); “The Case of WW and Col. Ingersoll,” R. Bucke (1: 59)

**1891:** “Dutch Traits of WW,” W. S. Kennedy (1: 90); “The Second Annex to LG,” Sidney Morse (2: 51)

**1892:** “W and Jesus,” William Johnson (3: 12); “Sprigs of Lilac for WW,” II, nearly a dozen responses to WW’s death (3: 18); “At the Observance of WW’s Birthday, Philadelphia, May 31,” II, Traubel (3: 30)

**1893:** “WW the Comrade,” Traubel (4: 7)

**1894:** “WW’s Ethics,” Isaac Hull Platt (5: 24); “The Cosmic Sense as Manifested in Shelley and W,” I. Platt (5: 54); “WW and Good and Evil: A Discussion,” Bucke et al. (5: 103); “W’s Self-Reliance,” John Burroughs (5: 131); “A Visit to West Hills,” Daniel Garrison Brinton (5: 135); “WW and Music,” Helen A. Clarke (5: 153)


1897: “W and Whittier as Patriots,” II, E. Jackson (8:24); “W’s ‘Catalogues,’” Stuart Cole (8:25); “Reminiscent of W,” Frank B. Sanborn (8:37); “W’s Comradeship,” Laurens Maynard (8:53); “The Growth of LG,” O. Triggs (8:84); “Identities of Thought and Phrase in Emerson and W,” W. S. Kennedy (8:88); “WW and His Unsung Songs,” C. Abbey (8:118); “Personality in W,” H. Born (8:154)


Struthers; 11 : 21); “The Awakening of the Soul: W and Maeterlinck,” H. Clarke (11 : 55); “Individuality as W’s Primary Motive,” F. Williams (11 : 71); “WW,” Leon Mead (11 : 90); “The Ultimate Human Problem,” C. Abbey (11 : 106)


1906: “WW in the Present Crisis of Our Democracy,” T. Harned (16 : 167); “W’s Superman,” I. Platt (16 : 182); “W the Revealer,” Alice Herring (17 : 8); “WW as Reflected in Recent French Criticism,” II, Joseph Aymard (tr. by W. Struthers; 17 : 21); “W: The Inner Light of Quakerism,” David Henry Wright (17 : 24); “WW’s ‘Sin Against Chastity,’” I. Platt (17 : 137)


Topical Articles on Whitman in the Conservator 407


1911: “WW’s Significance to a Revolutionist,” Eliot White (22:71); “W and Cosmic Consciousness,” L. Bazalgette (tr. by M. Bain; 22:166)

1912: “Bliss Perry’s WW,” Jane Graves Noble (23:70)


1914: “Notes from an Autobiography,” William W. Thayer (25:54)

1915: “Was WW a Baconian?” Julius Chambers (26:86)

1917: “W and the America of Today,” Harvey Dee Brown (28:86); “Keir Hardie and WW,” J. W. Wallace (rpt. from London Labor Leader; 28:118); “W, Democrat,” Albert Mordell (rpt. from Philadelphia Record; 28:120); “WW’s America,” Traubel (28:134); “WW and Elbert Hubbard,” L. Maynard (28:151); “W and Carlyle,” Bertrand Russell (28:142)

1918: “Whitmania,” Traubel (29:40); “W’s First Free Verse,” Emory Holloway (rpt. from the Nation; 29:74); “The Poet of All Poets,” Helen Keller (29:87); “WW’s Contribution,” W. H. Smith (twenty-fifth anniversary of WW Fellowship; 29:89); “WW after Twenty-four Years,” E. White (29:103); “Vicious Circle Still Bars W,” Morris Lychenheim (29:104); “W’s Children of Adam,” G. J. Smith (29:120)

## APPENDIX 2

### Libraries Holding the *Conservator*

The WorldCat database indicates more than one hundred libraries in thirty-nine states possess all or part of the *Conservator*’s run. Libraries whose runs are complete or nearly complete are listed here alphabetically by state (all but a few are in hard copy). Consult WorldCat for other libraries with incomplete runs. Note: WorldCat is not a complete record; visits to individual online catalogs revealed several more runs, included here.

| AK | U. Alaska         | IN  | Indiana U.                      |
| AR | U. Arkansas, Fayetteville | KS  | U. Kansas                       |
| AZ | Arizona State U.  | KY  | U. Kentucky                     |
| AZ | U. Arizona        | LA  | Louisiana State U.              |
| CA | Calif. State U., Long Beach | LA  | Tulane U.                       |
| CA | Huntington Library | MA  | Amherst C.                      |
| CA | Stanford U.       | MA  | Brandeis U.                     |
| CA | U. Calif. Santa Barbara | MA  | Smith C.                        |
| CO | U. Colorado, Boulder | MA  | Williams C.                     |
| CO | U. Northern Colorado | MD  | Hood C.                         |
| CT | Eastern Conn. State U. | MD  | Johns Hopkins U.                |
| CT | Trinity C.        | MI  | Eastern Michigan U.             |
| CT | Yale U.           | MI  | Michigan State U.               |
| FL | Barry U.          | MI  | Wayne State U.                  |
| FL | Florida State U.  | MI  | Western Michigan U.             |
| FL | Rollins C.        | MN  | Carleton C.                     |
| FL | St. Thomas U.     | MN  | C. St. Catherine                |
| FL | U. Florida        | MO  | U. Missouri, Kansas City        |
| GA | Emory U.          | MO  | Washington U.                   |
| GA | U. Georgia        | MT  | Northern Montana State U.       |
| IL | Augustana C.      | MT  | U. Montana                      |
| IL | Eastern Illinois U. | NC  | Duke U.                         |
| IL | Knox C.           | NC  | U. N. Carolina, Chapel Hill     |
| IL | Newberry Library  | NE  | U. Nebraska                     |
| IL | U. Illinois, Urbana | NH  | U. New Hampshire                |
The Henry Saunders index is held, most always in the form of two microform cards produced circa 1956, in the following libraries (again, this is not a complete list): Huntington Library; U. Arizona; Stanford; U.S.C.; U. Florida; U. Miami; Rollins; U. Georgia; Amherst; Smith; U. North Carolina, Greensboro; Central Michigan U.; Oberlin; Ohio U.
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