

Walt Whitman Quarterly Review

<http://ir.uiowa.edu/wwqr>

In Memoriam: Clarence Gohdes

Jerome Loving

Volume 15, Number 2

(Fall 1997)

pps. 139-140

SPECIAL DOUBLE ISSUE:
Whitman and the Civil War

Stable URL: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/wwqr/vol15/iss2/10>
ISSN 0737-0679

ANNOUNCEMENTS

IN MEMORIAM: CLARENCE GOHDES (1901-1997)

Clarence Gohdes, one of the last surviving members of the editorial board of the New York University Press edition of the *Collected Writings of Walt Whitman*, has died. He passed away on December 8, 1997, aged 96. He retired from Duke University in 1971, not long after teaching his last graduate Whitman seminar. I was one of three students enrolled in the course, held in the basement seminar area of the Perkins Library. The low enrollment was probably due to the fact that Professor Gohdes (it was not until many, many years later that I dared address him as "Clarence") had a reputation for no nonsense whatsoever. It was rumored that on at least one occasion he had politely asked an "unprepared" student to "sum up" in the middle of his oral report. He did not tolerate anything very theoretical or any argument too far from the textual evidence.

But he introduced me to the wonders and mysteries of Walt Whitman. He would arrive to class every Monday and Wednesday afternoon with his dog-eared paperback copy of *Leaves of Grass*, ready to take us through "Song of Myself" and other major poems line by line. I still have my course text, which now looks in about the same condition as Clarence's copy of *Leaves of Grass* did then. It contains invaluable marginalia, quotations from the master at that time, some of which have shaped my own writings about Whitman, many others which still stand as corrections to the New York University Press edition. He often wore a carnation in his lapel, grown in his famous garden. In class he sat at the end of the long seminar table, with his three students huddled close by. At age seventy, he was still smoking cigarettes and would bring two to class, which he lined up beside his book. After smoking them, he usually borrowed one or two from me. (You could still smoke in class in those days, the spring semester of 1971.) Clarence went through *Leaves of Grass* methodically and dogmatically, illuminating the poems with anecdotes and useful citations not in the textual notes. We were not a little overwhelmed at his vast knowledge of Whitman, especially the biographical. We were all newly minted M.A. students, coming in from other universities. Not only were we somewhat awed by Duke itself, but by this Southern gentleman, a Texan born in San Antonio, but educated in the North, receiving his doctorate from Columbia University in 1932 (where he studied under one of Emerson's biographers, Ralph L. Rusk). His reputation as managing editor and later editor-in-chief of *American Literature* and right-hand man of founding editor Jay B. Hubbell (1885-1975), was clearly before us. Sometimes what we said in response to his lectures was well received, but other times I left feeling better qualified for clerking in the nearest A&P.

Yet I loved and admired the man, who, before the advent of student teaching evaluations, conducted himself with the authority of a German professor. Texas was founded largely by Germans (famous today for its Octoberfests), and this Texan of German descent was one of its pioneers in academe. His first book focused on the periodicals of Transcendentalism, and he wrote what is today still one of the most acute and (for its time) best researched histories of the American literary history of the late nineteenth century in Arthur Hobson Quinn's *Literature of the American People* (1959). The invaluable articles on Whitman buried today in the pages of *American Literature* directly benefited from his editorial management. He was possibly best known for his *Bibliographical Guide to the Study of the Literature of the United States* (1959), which went through four or five editions. But for me his greatest service was to the study of Walt Whitman. I mean not only the valued material he funneled into *American Literature*, but his work with the Josiah P. Trent Collection of Whitman at Duke, one of the two or three most important extant manuscript collections of the poet. And, of course, there was his service to the *Collected Writings* edition.

With Rollo G. Silver, he edited *Faint Clews & Indirections: Manuscripts of Walt Whitman and His Family* (Duke, 1949), still a unique biographical and critical resource. I remember his telling me how he detected that Whitman, for the lack of paper or because of its expense, pasted canceled pages face to face so as to produce a new sheet and clean verso. By carefully detaching those pages, he found alternate drafts of early poems and other writings. The namesake of the Trent Collection had been Gohdes's student before he went to medical school and became a promising surgeon. Dr. Trent married into the Duke family, and one Christmas his wife bought him the papers originally belonging to Richard M. Bucke, one of the poet's three literary executors. After Trent's premature death and probably through Clarence's influence, the collection was given to Duke.

My edition of the *Civil War Letters of George Washington Whitman* (1975) came directly from Clarence's Whitman seminar. Also, my *Emerson, Whitman, and the American Muse* (1982) was initially and partially influenced by Clarence's 1929 ground-breaking essay on this most famous literary connection. And I have to say that my forthcoming biography of the poet, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself*, bears his mark too. In 1993 I sent him a copy of a piece I'd written on Emory Holloway, Whitman's first modern biographer, which was published in this journal. His response and last advice to this ex-student: Why did I want to fool around with somebody like Holloway when I could be writing about the likes of Whitman directly? Of course, I had been interested in how our critical view of Whitman had been shaped, and so the magnifying glass on Holloway, but Clarence was otherwise right. Not long after receiving this final admonition, written in his incredibly small editor's hand, I turned to writing the biography. I was only hoping that Clarence would live to see it!

—Jerome Loving, Texas A&M University