

WALT WHITMAN'S VOICE

LARRY D. GRIFFIN

SEVERAL WHITMAN BIOGRAPHERS HAVE INDICATED that Whitman's "high-pitched voice," perhaps the result of his stroke, may have curbed his success as an orator.¹ Attestations to the quality of Whitman's voice prior to 1855 make no mention of a high-pitched voice. As early as 1844 Whitman considered purchasing a piano, and of Whitman's voice at this time Joseph Rubin writes in *The Historic Whitman*: "Blessed with a sensitive ear and a good voice, Whitman hoped to save enough money to buy a piano and indulge his passion for music."² Besides declaiming Shakespeare on the shores of Paumanok on outings with friends in the 1840s, Whitman later declaimed from Broadway omnibuses and the Brooklyn Ferry in the 1850s. In "Omnibus Jaunts and Drivers" in *Specimen Days*, Whitman recalls such practices:

I suppose the critics will laugh heartily, but the influence of those Broadway omnibus jaunts and drivers and declamations and escapades undoubtedly entered into the gestation of "Leaves of Grass."³

A ferry hand, Thomas A. Gere, in an interview published in the *New York World*, June 4, 1882, recalled Whitman's declamations on the Brooklyn Ferry: "In my judgement few could excell his reading of stirring poems and brilliant Shakespearean passages."⁴ Henry S. Canby refers to these outdoor declamations in his *Walt Whitman*, and he attributes the oratorical characteristics of Whitman's poetry to Whitman's knowledge of dramatic, therefore oratorical, Shakespeare and English translations of highly oral Latin and Greek classics:

What he seems to have spouted on the beaches and bus tops were the great speeches, oratorical, eloquent, of the plays, and from them he borrowed the complex rhetoric of the seventeenth century, itself based on classic examples taken from the highly stylized languages of Latin and Greek oratory. And this influence from the practice of all languages of the Renaissance was reinforced by the translations from Homer he read extensively, especially Buckley's, which was his favorite. The rhythms were his own, his vocabulary was much simpler and more colloquial and experimental. . . . But the syntax and general rhetorical effect . . . show that if Whitman had not been a poet he would have tried to become an orator. . . .⁵

Thus, in the years prior to the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, Whitman's voice was sufficiently good enough to allow him to participate in various oratorical endeavors.

In the late 1850s Whitman's voice was described by Sara Payson, Bronson Alcott, and Helen Price. Sara Payson (Fanny Fern) in her feature column "Peeps from Under a Parasol" in the April 19, 1856, *New York Ledger* described Whitman's voice as "rich, deep, and clear as a clarion note. In the most crowded thoroughfare, one would turn instinctively on hearing it, to seek out its owner."⁶ Bronson Alcott, who met Whitman in New York on October 4, 1856, wrote that Whitman's voice was "deep, sharp, tender sometimes and almost melting."⁷ Helen Price, a Whitman friend in the late fifties, described Whitman as not "a smooth, glib, or even a very fluent talker," who preferred rather to listen than talk.⁸

As a volunteer nurse during the Civil War Whitman often entertained the soldiers: "[H]e read aloud to the men to break the spell, Shakespeare or the Bible—he never 'read his own poems.'"⁹ Whitman also considered a lecture series to raise funds for his nursing activities, a project he probably would not have considered if he had neither speaking experience nor a voice suited to such activity.

William Douglas O'Connor in his *The Good Gray Poet: A Vindication* (1867) comments on the quality of Whitman's voice:

We who have looked upon this figure, or listened to that clear, cheerful, vibrating voice, might thrill to think, could we but transcend our age, that we had thus been near to one of the greatest sons of men.¹⁰

O'Connor praised Whitman's conversation, too:

His conversation is a university. Those who have heard him in some roused roar, when the full afflatus of his spirit moved him, will agree with me that the grandeur of the talk was accomplished. (*GGP*, 2-3)

The quality of Whitman's voice did not prevent him from delivering memorial lectures on Abraham Lincoln. Beginning in 1879 Whitman delivered for the first of many times his "The Death of Lincoln Lecture."¹¹ Whitman's own reading book for this lecture is in the Library of Congress, and in addition to the speech, it includes eighteen poems (*WWW*, 205-206); after delivering his address, Whitman would often read one or several of these poems. Whitman first delivered the lecture in New York.¹² After he presented the lecture in Philadelphia in 1880, a *Philadelphia Press* reporter described his delivery:

His method of delivery was wholly devoid of tricks of elocution, the sentences being uttered in a tone only sufficiently higher than that he would make use of in talking to a friend to make sure that the most distant hearer would catch every word. Occasionally, in speaking of his personal affection for emancipation's martyr, his voice trembled and eyes of not a few of his hearers were tearful. He was frequently applauded and after the lecture by request repeated his well-known poem on the same subject.¹³

The poem is “O Captain! My Captain!” In 1881, Whitman delivered the Lincoln Lecture in Boston.¹⁴ In the audience was William Dean Howells, who had first met Whitman at Pfaff’s in August of 1860. Of Whitman’s voice Howells wrote: “The apostle of the rough, the uncouth was the gentlest person; his barbaric yawp, translated into terms of a social encounter, was an address of singular quiet, delivered in a voice of winning and endearing friendliness.”¹⁵ In 1886, Whitman delivered this lecture four times; one of the four deliveries was at the Chestnut Opera House in Philadelphia. In the audience, the poet Stuart Merrill recalled that he felt as if Lincoln had died the day before: “I was there, the very thing happened to me. And his recital was as gripping as the messenger’s report in Aeschylus.”¹⁶ In 1887 Whitman delivered the lecture at Madison Square Theatre in New York; in that April 14 audience were James Russell Lowell, Charles Eliot Norton, John Hay, Mary Mapes Dodge, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Daniel Coit Gilman, Mark Twain, and Andrew Carnegie.¹⁷ In “Memoranda” of *Good-Bye My Fancy* (1891) Whitman writes of delivering the Lincoln Lecture for the last time at the Arts Room in Philadelphia on April 15, 1890: “The old poet is now physically wrecked. But his voice and magnetism are the same.”¹⁸ In this paragraph, I have cited eight instances of Whitman’s delivering the Lincoln Lecture, and he may have delivered it as many as thirteen times. If Whitman did not have a voice suitable for such lecturing, then one must admire his courage in continually delivering “The Death of Lincoln” over an eleven year period.

Furthermore, on January 28, 1877, the one hundred fortieth anniversary of Thomas Paine’s birth, Whitman delivered a lecture on Thomas Paine at Lincoln Hall in Philadelphia.¹⁹ The speech is in *Specimen Days* (PW, 1:140-142), and Frank Harris in *My Life and Loves* recalls his experience as a member of the audience. Harris’s first impression filled him with doubts, but

a second look showed me Whitman was a fine figure of a man with something arresting in the perfect simplicity and sincerity of voice and manner. He arranged his notes in complete silence and began to speak very slowly, often pausing for a better word or to consult his papers. Sometimes hesitating and repeating himself—clearly an unpracticed speaker who disdained any semblance of oratory.²⁰

Harris describes Whitman’s delivery as slow enough that he could take down his speech word for word, but Harris also adds that such slow deliberate delivery created an impression of profound sincerity and truthfulness. Thus, Harris criticizes certain formal aspects of Whitman’s speech, but nonetheless finds Whitman’s delivery effective. In a later reference in *Contemporary Portraits* (1920), Harris provides a more positive appraisal of Whitman’s voice:

[T]he whole impression was dignified, imposing; his voice was clear, his utterance deliberate, slow; his choice of words seemed to me good; a big man thoughtful, clear of eye and human, friendly to all.²¹

Harris's criticism of Whitman, if it is negative, is at least sympathetic. Thomas B. Harned in his "Walt Whitman and Oratory" describes Whitman as a speaker whose voice lent itself effectively to oratory:

Walt Whitman was gifted with many of the attributes of a great orator. His build, his commanding stature, his exceptional health of mind and body, his highly developed moral and emotional nature, his courage, firmness, and resolution, his creative imagination, the grace of his movements and gestures, the magnetism of his presence, the cheery, ringing, clarion voice, his sense of harmony, his freedom from conventions, his originality of thought and statement, his sympathy with humanity, the personal conviction that he had an important message to deliver to the American people, and his determination that he be heard, all favorably qualified him to approach an audience through oral statement.²²

Harned, of course, was Whitman's friend and literary executor, and he may be exaggerating Whitman's qualities as a speaker; nonetheless, most of the evidence provided by Howells, Merrill, and Harris suggests that Whitman at least had oratorical skills that were worthy of exaggeration.

Several testimonials to Whitman's voice after his stroke of 1873, not specifically related to public lectures, also offer positive appraisals of his speaking skills. Bertha Johnson remembers Whitman's voice in 1877: "I have a vivid memory-picture of him seated at the end of a large sofa, reciting in melodious, dramatic, voice, the somber verses of the 'Midnight Visitor.'"²³ Thomas B. Harned in his *Memoirs* refers to Whitman's voice and his recitation of "The Midnight Visitor":

He never recited his own poems at the table. He had a fine clear voice and was a good elocutionist. He had a version of "The Midnight Visitor" by Berger [*sic*]. . . . Sometimes he would recite Maico Bozzaris with fine effect.²⁴

Susan Hunter Walker reports hearing Whitman's voice in 1888: "I don't recall his words, but I shall never forget his voice. It was low, clear and of a particular melodious quality."²⁵ Richard Maurice Bucke in his *Walt Whitman* (1883) reprints Whitman's anonymous appraisal of his own voice in "Walt Whitman as the Reader of His Own Poems" from the July 21, 1875, *Camden Republican*:

His voice is firm, magnetic. . . . He uses gestures, but those very significant . . . the bent of reading, in fact the whole idea of it, is evidently to first form an enormous mental fund, as it were within the regions of the chest, and heart, and lungs—a sort of interior battery—out of which, charged to the full with such emotional impetus only . . . he launches what he has to say, free of noise or strain, yet with a power that makes one tremble.²⁶

Bucke himself adds in introducing this quotation: "His way of rendering poetry was peculiar but effective." Horace Traubel remarks on Whitman's voice on at least two occasions. On September 9, 1888, Traubel writes that Whitman read "An Evening Lull" to him: "His voice is strong and sweet."²⁷ In "Walt Whitman at Date," Traubel writes:

His voice has been strong and resonant. . . . It has high tones not so sweet. In ordinary talk it may give out the defects with virtues, of monotone. But for depiction of events or repetition of prophetic utterance he gives it curious and exquisite modulations.²⁸

Hamlin Garland recalls in his *Roadside Meetings* (1930) that he visited Whitman in October of 1888; Garland describes Whitman's conversational voice:

He spoke slowly, choosing the best word for the place with impressive care. There was no looseness or mumbling in his enunciation. Every word came forth clear-cut and musical.²⁹

The English physician John Johnston visited Whitman in Camden in 1890 and 1891, and he, too, wrote of Whitman's voice:

His voice was always musical ("a tender baritone") and the most flexible I have ever heard, with a marvelous range of modulations and of delicate subtleties of tone and expression.³⁰

These testimonies after Whitman's 1873 stroke characterize his voice as "low," "clear," "melodious," "firm," "magnetic," "strong," "sweet," and "musical." Only Traubel suggests his voice is monotonous, but Traubel claims that such monotones have "virtues"; he also suggests that Whitman sometimes had "high tones" in his voice, but Traubel certainly does not characterize Whitman's overall voice as "high-pitched."

Harrison S. Morris, himself a Whitman biographer, in a letter to Clifton J. Furness (which Furness includes in his edition of *WWW*) may be the source of the "high-pitched" description of Whitman's voice:

You may quote me as saying that Walt had no oratorical gifts at all. When he spoke from the stage, he could scarcely be heard. He used the same tones which were customary in conversation. He had not gestures, and when I saw him on the platform he was usually seated because of his paralysis. His voice was not strong, rather *high-pitched* [my italics], and it would not carry very far. It was weak in contrast to the big physical proportions of the man. (*WWW*, 203)

Among the dissenters to the effectiveness of Whitman's voice, only Morris is highly critical, and his letter to Furness influenced biographers Edgar Lee Masters, F. O. Matthiessen, Henry S. Canby, and Arthur

Briggs. Since there seems to be far more primary evidence against a high-pitched voice than for one, it is surprising that so many biographers and critics support the high-pitched hypothesis. And the validity of Harrison S. Morris's argument in his letter to Clifton Furness is questionable, too, if we consider what Morris wrote of Whitman's voice in his biography *Walt Whitman* (1929):

A voice of many soft vibrations that rippled now and then into humor and laughter, seldom loud, always measured and even hesitating for the right word, grave in season and never monotonous or complaining.³¹

There is no specific mention of a high-pitched voice here, and this comment clearly is not a negative appraisal of Whitman's voice. If one keeps in mind that, in his letter to Furness, Morris is referring to Whitman's elocutionary or platform voice, at a time when (as Morris himself makes clear) Whitman is visibly suffering from the effects of his stroke, Morris in the biography quotation may be referring to Whitman's conversational voice. Nonetheless, Morris's criticism of Whitman's platform voice is simply that it was too conversational. If one considers Whitman's own self-review of his Dartmouth Reading in the *Burlington [Vermont] Daily Free Press and Times*,³² however, Whitman was apparently striving for a conversational style of delivery, which was perhaps not considered good elocutionary style by most members of a nineteenth-century audience.

I have made numerous references to Horace Traubel's *With Walt Whitman in Camden*. Walter Teller in his *Walt Whitman's Camden Conversations* (1973) describes how Traubel visited Whitman daily, sometimes two or three times daily, from July 16, 1888, until Whitman's death in 1892. Because these are Traubel's chirographic recordings of Whitman's voice, what Harrison S. Morris has written of Traubel's work substantiates Traubel's success at capturing Whitman's voice:

Horace has caught the very accent of Walt's voice in these intimate records of the daily intercourse between them. He has told me that he grew so skilled in Walt's vocabulary, oddness of phrase, and of course thought that he could finish a sentence once begun, as Walt would do it himself. I quite credit this as exactly true. I can detect the phrase and modulation of Walt's slow, hesitating, and sonorous speech on every page of Traubel's records. (*WWBB*, 96)

Traubel's records are conversational rather than records of performance because Whitman was not aware that such records were being made.³³

A written record of a human voice is no substitute for an auditory record of a human voice. Twentieth-century listeners can decide for themselves about Whitman's voice by listening to a primitive cylindrical recording of Walt Whitman reading the first four lines of his six-line "America" (1888). Originally recorded in 1890, this cylinder is in the

Roscoe Hailey Collection in New York,³⁴ and it has also been reproduced by Audio-Text Cassettes.³⁵ When I listen to this recording, I hear that power characteristic of his finest poems. He sounds clear and strong, sweet yet firm, and he speaks with a variety of modulations in a slow, measured way—a voice quite remarkable for a man over seventy and in failing health. The voice is neither monotonous nor high-pitched.

Midland College

NOTES

1 Edgar Lee Masters in his *Whitman* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1937) writes: "The word has come to us that he did not enunciate clearly—his voice was called falsetto by some, baritone by others" (196). F.O. Matthiessen in *American Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941) argues that Whitman's stroke interfered with his becoming a lecturer because his voice was too "high-pitched" (552). Henry Seidel Canby in his *Walt Whitman: An American: A Study in Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1943), and hereafter cited in the notes as *WWAA*, accords with Matthiessen: "A quiet, slow speaker, with a sweet, but rather high voice, he probably never would have succeeded [as an orator] even if the opportunity had been given him" (33). Arthur Briggs in his *Walt Whitman: Thinker and Artist* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1952) also refers to the high-pitched voice in his discussion of Whitman and oratory (336).

2 Joseph Jay Rubin, *The Historic Whitman* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1973), 112.

3 *Prose Works: 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 1:18-19. Hereafter cited in the notes as *PW*.

4 *Walt Whitman's Workshop: A Collection of Unpublished Manuscripts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928), 210. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text and notes as *WWW*.

5 *WWAA*, 310.

6 Justin Kaplan, *Walt Whitman: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), 216. Hereafter cited in the notes as *WWL*.

7 Bronson Alcott, *Journals of Bronson Alcott*, ed. Odell Shepherd (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1938), 286-287.

8 Gay Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman* (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1955), 200. Hereafter cited in the notes as *SS*.

9 Van Wyck Brooks, *The Times of Melville and Whitman* (New York: Dutton, 1953), 224.

10 William Douglas O'Connor, *The Good Gray Poet: A Vindication* (1867; Toronto: Saunders, 1927), 2-3.

11 *PW*, 1:497-509.

12 *WWL*, 371.

- 13 *Walt Whitman: Memoranda During the War and the Death of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (1875; Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1962), 33-34. Hereafter cited in the notes as *WW:MDW*.
- 14 Gay Wilson Allen, *A Reader's Guide to Walt Whitman* (New York: Octagon Books, 1975), xiii.
- 15 William Dean Howells, *Literary Friends and Acquaintances: A Personal Retrospect of American Authorship* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1900), 73-74.
- 16 Stuart Merrill, "Walt Whitman," *Walt Whitman Review* 2 (1957), 55.
- 17 *WW:MDW*, 40.
- 18 *PW*, 2:685.
- 19 *SS*, 478. This speech is in *PW*, 1:140-142.
- 20 Frank Harris, *My Life and Loves*, ed. John F. Gallagher (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 170.
- 21 Frank Harris, *Contemporary Portraits* (1920; New York: Greenwood Press, 1967), 216.
- 22 Thomas B. Harned, *The Complete Prose Works of Walt Whitman*, ed. Richard M. Bucke, Thomas B. Harned, and Horace L. Traubel (New York: Putnam's, 1902), 5:244.
- 23 *WWW*, 209. "The Midnight Visitor" is an English translation of Henri Murger's poem, and it is included in Whitman's Lincoln Reading Book (106).
- 24 Thomas B. Harned, *Memoirs of Thomas B. Harned: Walt Whitman's Friend and Literary Executor*, ed. Peter Van Edgmond (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1972), 34.
- 25 Susan Hunter Walker, "I Knew Walt Whitman," *1980: Leaves of Grass at 125: Eight Essays*, ed. William White (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1980), 72.
- 26 Richard Maurice Bucke, *Walt Whitman* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1883), 53-54.
- 27 Horace L. Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), 2:287. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text and notes as *WWC*.
- 28 Horace L. Traubel, "Walt Whitman at Date," *New England Magazine* 4 (1891): 280.
- 29 Hamlin Garland, *Roadside Meetings* (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1930), 134.
- 30 John Johnston and J.W. Wallace, *Visits to Walt Whitman in 1890-1891* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1917), 224.
- 31 Harrison S. Morris, *Walt Whitman: A Brief Biography with Reminiscences* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929), 196. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *WWBB*.
- 32 Peter Van Edgmond, "Walt Whitman on the Platform," *Southern Speech Journal* 32 (Spring 1967), 217.
- 33 Walter M. Teller, ed., *Walt Whitman's Camden Conversations* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1973), 4.

34 In a puff for Watershed Tapes in *The American Poetry Review* 19 (January/February 1990), Galway Kinnell writes: "If only somebody had had the wits to start recording poets the moment the phonograph was invented! How extraordinary if we could hear the voice of Whitman, whose bedroom window in Camden overlooked the first Victor talking machine factory!" (14). At present I have been unable to locate the Roscoe Hailey Collection in any New York City library.

35 Leon Pearson, narrator, *Voices of the Poets: American Literary Voices: Readings from Walt Whitman to Robert Frost* (14026), 1974.