

WITH WALT WHITMAN IN CAMDEN, DURHAM, LENINGRAD, AND ELSEWHERE

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Camden, New Jersey, was a hell of a place for Walt Whitman to end up. Not too long ago, the city—broke for decades, with no tax base to speak of—fired its entire police force. Even in its heyday, perhaps when the Good Gray, crippled from his hospital work in Washington, first went there, Camden was a working-class city, located in the shadow of Philadelphia, across the Delaware River. As Roger Asselineau describes it in his splendid biography of the poet, “Mickle Street [where the poet bought a home in 1884] was undoubtedly democratic, but extremely ugly. There was the noise of trains which passed on the nearby track and frequently the air brought the odor of a neighboring fertilizer factory. . . .”¹ Camden had once been a thriving industrial base, but today nearly one in five of its residents is out of work. According to the *New York Times* article of September 2012 that reported the dismissal of the police force, “Broadway, once the main shopping strip, is now a canyon of abandoned buildings.”² There is no mention of Whitman in this article—only a reference to the “Whitman Park neighborhood,” which is closer to Harleigh Cemetery, where the poet is buried, than it is to Mickle Street, where he lived.

Imagine, the city where Walt Whitman spent the last decade of his life, now in shambles! You’d think the mere spirit of the Poet of Democracy, still lingering overhead, would somehow uplift this urban inferno of crime and illicit drugs. The poet’s name is still all over the city. Besides the Whitman Park neighborhood, there is Whitman Avenue, his elaborate tomb in Harleigh, and a little area near his house, never altogether finished, called “Poet’s Park.” Asselineau wrote in his biography that the idea for the book came to him “during the gloomiest years of the

Editor’s Note:

This is one of a series of essays written by some of the most eminent senior Whitman scholars of our time. These essays, both autobiographical and critical in nature, explore the ways that Whitman entered the lives of these scholars and trace the paths of decades of encounters with his works.

German Occupation of France.” Roger, who had worked for the French Underground and been captured by the Germans and sentenced to death, wrote: “Nothing could have been more natural at that time, when every Frenchman was a prisoner in his own country, than to try to escape from that world of concentration camps into the vast spaces of Whitman’s universe where all is liberty and promise of happiness.”²³ Today, the “occupation” of grief and hopelessness has descended on Camden.

I first visited Camden in the summer of 1975. Even then it was almost in complete decline. I had recently completed my Ph.D. at Duke University and was teaching at Texas A&M University. That year my edition of *The Civil War Letters of George Washington Whitman* appeared. It was the same summer that I visited Gertrude Traubel in her home at 6362 McCallum Street in Germantown, an extension of Philadelphia, where, incidentally, I was born. I’m not sure just when the Traubels moved from Camden to Germantown. It may have been shortly after Horace died in 1919. Evidently, Gertrude was born in Camden, in 1892, the year of Whitman’s death. Her mother Anne Montgomerie Traubel, a beautiful woman, died in the Germantown house in 1954. On July 22, 1975, Gertrude inscribed my copy of volume 5 of her father’s *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, which she had edited in 1964. I remember that I was driving our nearly brand new Volkswagen bus, and because the Germantown neighborhood struck me as somewhat run-down I worried about it while I sat with Miss Traubel in her front parlor.

That summer I was continuing my Whitman studies, which would lead to *Walt Whitman’s Champion: William Douglas O’Connor* (1978) and *Emerson, Whitman, and the American Muse* (1982). I had already met and befriended the Whitman collector Charles Feinberg, and it was he who got me an invitation to visit Gertrude Traubel (she had checked with him after I initially called for an appointment). By the time of my visit, only five volumes of the nine-volume *With Walt Whitman in Camden* had been published. She would edit the next one in 1982 with the help of William White, then the editor of the *Walt Whitman Review*. Gertrude died the following year.

On December 11, 1966, Feinberg wrote Gertrude from his Detroit residence, enclosing “my cheque for \$150.” He went on to say, “Mrs. [Katherine] Molinoff has written another fantasy [*Walt Whitman at Southold*. (Brooklyn: Privately Printed, 1966)] based on hearsay from people who heard from somebody about something of W. W. being tarred and feathered after teaching school in 1840? Did she send you a pamphlet? It will have to be answered. I wonder how people can bring themselves to look for dirt in order to achieve a few moments of publicity. And not one fact. Terrible scholarship.” Feinberg closed by asking Gertrude whether there was “any chance of some letters to go to the L. of C.”²⁴

Feinberg died in 1986. I first met him in 1972 at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, where he was lecturing and showing off some of his Whitman artifacts. Later, when he got me into Gertrude's house, he told me that he had made an agreement with her that in exchange for giving her a monthly stipend for the rest of her life she would leave all her Whitman materials to the Library of Congress in his name. He was also in the process of selling his own Whitman collection to the Library, for something like a million dollars, over a period of years. Gertrude's material included Horace Traubel's notes for the future volumes of *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, a record of his conversations with the poet during the final years of his life.

I remember that during my interview, Gertrude preferred to talk about her own life instead of her father's with Whitman. I didn't know then what we now know—that Horace Traubel was a cad who had numerous heterosexual and homosexual affairs, including one with a married couple in Canada.⁵ Gertrude had been a singer and a pianist who taught at Germantown Academy, where two of my uncles had gone to school. She mentioned something about having once been married but had long since returned to using her maiden name. She seemed to want to impress upon me that she had an identity apart from her father's and from the saga of Walt Whitman. Yet all the while we were talking about such matters, my eye was drawn toward the beaded curtains that separated the front parlor from the next room, a dining room. Through them I could discern a table full of stacks of typing sheets. These were, as she finally told me, typescripts of material for the next volume of *With Walt Whitman in Camden*. As I said, her neighborhood didn't look that safe. In fact, she told me of an attempted break-in. When at one point she heard something and went out on her front porch to investigate, I leaned in through the beads to get a better look at the material I so much wanted to read. Afterward, I felt like the narrator of Henry James's *The Aspern Papers*.

I got my start in my Whitman studies at Duke, where I was a graduate student between 1971 and 1973. I enrolled in a Whitman seminar taught by Clarence Gohdes, in his final semester of teaching. I had gotten there just in time. Gohdes had edited with Rollo G. Silver, who taught in the Boston area, *Faint Clews & Indirections: Manuscripts of Walt Whitman and His Family* (1949). (Incidentally, I subsequently purchased a good many of Silver's books from a bookseller in Waltham, Massachusetts, studies of Whitman that had long been out of print. Someday soon I will start to dispose of my own Whitman library.) The Duke family had given to the University the Whitman collection from which Gohdes and Silver edited (quite impeccably, I might add) their volume. Their dedication to the volume reads: "To Josiah Charles Trent/1914-1948/Surgeon, Historian of Medicine, Friend." Trent was

a former student of Clarence's. He had studied Whitman and fallen in love with *Leaves of Grass*. One of his favorite lines from "Song of Myself"—"This is the meal equally set"—celebrates the poet's love of democracy.

After he became a surgeon and a member of the Duke Medical School Faculty, Trent married one of the descendants of James B. Duke, the man who in 1924 gave his name (and money) to Trinity College, the former name of Duke University. Mary Duke Biddle had enrolled as an undergraduate at Duke at the young age of fifteen in 1936. She married Trent in 1939, and on one of the Christmases that she was fortunate to spend with her husband in their short marriage (Trent died of lymphoma at the age of thirty-four), the then Mrs. Trent gave him a very special present—a major collection of Whitman manuscripts, now known as the Trent Collection and housed at Duke. When Whitman died, his papers were split up between the three literary executors: Horace Traubel, Thomas B. Harned, and Richard Maurice Bucke. Eventually, Traubel's papers were sold off in various directions (many ultimately purchased piecemeal by Feinberg and deposited in the Library of Congress); Harned's papers were sold directly to the LC; but Bucke's collection was kept largely intact over the ensuing years until its purchase by the Duke heiress for her husband, who by that time may have already been dying of cancer. For many years after my publication of part of that collection—the George Whitman Civil War letters—Mary Duke Biddle Trent Semans (she remarried in 1953) regularly sent me a Christmas card.

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I first met Gay Wilson Allen and Roger Asselineau during my final year of graduate study at Duke. Since Gohdes had retired, I had selected for the chair of my graduate committee Arlin Turner, then best known for his biography of George Washington Cable and studies of Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose biography he would complete shortly before his death in 1980. He was at that time editor-in-chief of *American Literature*, which had been founded at Duke in 1929 by Jay B. Hubbell, also the first general editor. Hubbell, sometimes called the "Father of American Literary Studies," had been succeeded by Gohdes, who was followed by Turner. Curiously, it was in a seminar on American Humor taught by Arlin that I first met Gay. We struck up a friendship, mainly because I was deep into archival work on Whitman in preparing my edition of the Civil War letters. (Incidentally, this edition was also my Ph.D. dissertation, something not allowed at most schools today. Yet I think it was the very best preparation for the work of mine that followed.)

On the day Gay Allen came as a guest lecturer to Arlin Turner's class, he also came to Turner's home in the heavily tree-lined neighborhood of Durham, not far from the Duke campus. I was delighted to be asked to the Turners' lovely home on the same day, where an extra surprise was waiting for me. Sitting there next to Gay was the *other* Whitman biographer I had so much admired, Roger Asselineau of the Sorbonne. Both men were rather dashing to me. In something of a reversal, Allen sported in the outdoors a French beret, while Roger, still somewhat boyish looking at around age fifty-six, went bare-headed (Gay, recently retired from New York University, was then around seventy). I had gone to Duke because of its reputation for studies in American literature, especially the nineteenth century, and after that lovely afternoon I was on fire with enthusiasm. Roger, as well as Gay, became friends and mentors of mine.

Duke was a unique place to study American literature. J. B. Hubbell, founder of *American Literature*, was still alive and available to graduate students on an informal basis. The campus, with its Tudor-style buildings, was beautiful, and the main library was full of every item one could imagine (it had, for example, a complete set of Civil War regimental histories, later partially pilfered from the shelves). One day I encountered Professor Hubbell at the Library entrance area talking to other professors and graduate students. Two things he told me I've never forgotten. When he had finished his graduate studies at Columbia in 1906 (where only a half-credit course in American literature was offered every other semester), T. S. Eliot was just matriculating as a freshman. Also, Hubbell was then old enough to have met a man who had *heard* Edgar Allan Poe read his poem "Al Aaraaff."

When I began my post-doctoral teaching career in Texas, I came east every summer, ultimately to New England when I was doing research on the Emerson part of my study of Emerson and Whitman. My sister lived in Fort Lee, just across the George Washington Bridge from New York City, and so I stayed with her on the way up to New England and back, driving that VW van with my wife and two kids (kids now forty-six and thirty-seven!). Gay Allen lived nearby in Oradell, New Jersey, and I always made a visit there while staying at my sister's house. He was at the time working on his biography of Emerson, a work-in-progress he allowed me to read while I was writing *Emerson, Whitman, and the American Muse*. His house was practically all library. Located in a prosperous neighborhood, its downstairs consisted of a drawing room and a dining area, with a kitchen in the back. It was small, but the upstairs struck me as large, for it was lined with books—the entire second story. I never figured out where the bedrooms were, but I once went up to the attic, where Gay had more materials, including the notes of Clifton J. Furness, who had started a Whitman biography but never

finished. Gay's library included a first edition of Emerson's *Nature* (1836) and three copies of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. In one of them, a second issue I believe, there was some prefatory information I wanted to photocopy. So off we went in Gay's Peugeot to the local library in Oradell. Once inside he laid the precious copy of *Leaves of Grass* on the copying machine, opened at the appropriate pages. Standing nearby was a scoutmaster with four or five Cub Scouts, evidently there to copy something and somewhat impatient to do so. Suddenly this burley leader of boys reached out to help Gay do his copying, something he seemed to be having trouble with. The man attempted to press his hand down hard on the spine of the book, when I quickly intervened. The whole incident seemed to bypass Gay, but I felt I had saved one of the copies of *Leaves of Grass*. Gay left his entire library to Duke.

He continued on as my mentor for ten years, until I brought out the Emerson-Whitman book, which I suppose established my name enough that it was time to live up to Emerson's advice in "Self-Reliance" and "trust thyself." When a decade later, I announced that I was going to write a new critical biography of Whitman, Gay wasn't quite so encouraging as he had been in the past, saying on the telephone in the year of his death that I probably knew "about as much as anybody" to complete the job. It was after attending a hundredth birthday conference on the poet in 1992, held at the University of Iowa and orchestrated by Ed Folsom, that I concluded that some of the basic facts about Whitman were becoming obscured. Also, much new information had appeared since the appearance of Gay's *The Solitary Singer* in 1955. That Iowa conference, by the way, became the last stand for a number of esteemed Whitman scholars. As I write, the poster for the meeting which lists all the participants hangs above me on my study wall.

The occasion was the last time I saw Gay before he died. Also present and now sadly departed was Roger Asselineau, whom I had known since the seventies and especially after 1982, when he taught for a semester at my university. The names of the other participants at that centennial conference in Iowa City are familiar to anyone who has studied Whitman seriously: Harold Aspiz, V. K. Chari, Betsy Erkila, Ed Folsom, Arthur Golden, Walter Grunzweig, C. Carroll Hollis, George Hutchinson, M. Jimmie Killingsworth, Robert K. Martin, James E. Miller, Jr., Joel Myerson, Vivian Pollak, Kenneth M. Price, M. Wynn Thomas, Alan Trachtenberg, and James Perrin Warren. All approaches were represented, from biographical approaches to linguistic applications. Although Whitman was studied mostly by men into the eighties, the two women mentioned were groundbreakers—and for a long time seemingly the only females in the "club." I also hosted a centennial conference that year, either some weeks before or after the March meeting (the month Whitman had died). My wife Cathy had

just earned her Ph.D. in science education and wanted to try out a job at Fresno State University; so I took a leave from Texas A&M and went along with her and our fifteen-year-old daughter Cameron, who literally grew up with Whitman's work and with Whitman scholars all around her. She was particularly shocked, incidentally, at her graduation from the University of Texas in 1996, when, sitting with her fellow students on a grandstand facing the UT Tower, one of them asked, "Is that where Walt Whitman shot all those people?"—confusing the Good Gray with mass murderer Charles Whitman in 1966.

Not long after 1992 I began the work on my biography of Whitman. I reread almost all of the primary material. My model was Gay Allen's critical biography, but I was also inspired by Justin Kaplan's 1980 biography of the poet, which I had read for him in typescript. From Allen I took the model of scholarship; from Kaplan the model of style. I don't think I measured up in either category, but they had set the bar very high. One other model of mine was Robert D. Richardson, Jr., whose Thoreau and Emerson biographies I much admired. Bob more than I measured up to the Allen and Kaplan standards. Richardson read my typescript and recommended it to the University of California Press. I had sent it to multiple presses, and soon others were also interested. Suddenly this obscure Whitman scholar who had hardly ever earned a dime in royalties was looking at offers with five-figure advances. I became my own literary agent (not recommended). When the book came out in 1999, I even went on a book tour, one that began with a lecture at the Library of Congress, filmed by C-SPAN. It was around the time of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. Bill had allegedly given Monica a copy of *Leaves of Grass*. When somebody asked me about it, all I could think to say was, "Well, at least they were reading a good book."

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Even after writing a biography and three other books about Whitman, I continue to ponder what exactly it is that attracts readers to *Leaves of Grass*. Most readers can possibly answer that question because they discovered the book as students, either in high school or college. I inadvertently saved Whitman for my middle age—or nearly. I didn't discover *Leaves of Grass* until I was in my late twenties, when I took that Whitman seminar from Clarence Gohdes. I had already gotten married, gone to a war, and seen the birth of my first child by the time I read *Leaves of Grass*. I probably didn't experience the same electric response other readers had who discovered the bard earlier in life, merely astonishment that poetry could say so much about the commonplace. Roger Asselineau recalled what he found in that poetry during World

War II—"the vast spaces of Whitman's universe where all is liberty and promise of happiness."⁶ I suppose I found that, too, though not in time to help sustain me, as it had Roger in World War II, during my brush with war in Vietnam. For me the poet's greatness mixed from the very beginning with the remarkable facts of his life. For, as one of my professors at Duke put it, Whitman had little else to celebrate *except* himself. As the son of a failed used car dealer, I must have been somehow excited by the democratic wisdom in *Leaves of Grass*.

If there is another poet who better celebrates the idea of a level playing field in America, let me, as Emerson says in "The Poet," "read his paper, and you may have all the arguments and histories and criticism." I came to Whitman through Emerson, who had so influenced him. As I said, Gay Allen was writing his biography of Emerson (*Waldo Emerson: A Biography*, 1981) at the same time I was at work on my book on Emerson and Whitman. As a new Ph.D. in 1973, I knew Whitman pretty well but had a lot to read and absorb on Emerson. I can never forget reading his collected letters in the lobby of the Leningrad Hotel as a Fulbright scholar in 1978, while tourists walked by speaking Russian and other Eastern European languages I couldn't understand. Indeed, I may have come across, at that very time, Emerson's observation that being in a foreign country without the use of its language is like being a baby reborn.

By the way, while in Russia I once spoke on the phone with the Russian specialist on Whitman, Maurice Mendelson, who lived in Moscow. I had wanted to meet him while I was in Leningrad, but the Soviet authorities prevented me from leaving the city without paying my hotel bill and moving—with my wife and two children—completely out of the hotel room, which was our home for the winter of 1978. The bill had been inflated from zero to \$100 a day because my family had accompanied me. The dispute wasn't settled until the U.S. Ambassador got involved, but my trip to Moscow nevertheless failed to materialize. When during my telephone conversation with Mendelson I described Whitman as a great poet, naturally expecting no resistance from a fellow (albeit Soviet) scholar of Whitman, he quickly insisted that Boris Pasternak was head and shoulders above Whitman as a poet. (Pasternak's anti-Marxist *Doctor Zhivago* simply did not exist in the Soviet Union.) Mendelson had been one of a number of American expatriates who migrated to the Soviet Union in the Depression-era 1930s. Many of them returned to the United States, disillusioned with Stalinism, but Mendelson remained, finally publishing in 1976 a *Life and Work of Walt Whitman*, an overview of the poet's life and a Marxist's look at his poetry. Citing Whitman's early theme of revolution in "Resurgemus," he thought that Whitman was alone among the American romantics to

see the internal contradictions between “the democratic slogans of the American republic and the grim reality of the bourgeois ways of life.”⁷

Whitman was Emerson’s poet, the one the New Englander said he originally looked for “in vain.” Emerson’s poet was nature’s interpreter, who could report back to the rest of us the conversation we also had had with nature but couldn’t articulate. Nature was the emblem of the spirit. “Listener up there!” Whitman announced at the close of “Song of Myself.” As the Emersonian poet, he could “do” nature as well as Wordsworth. His seashore poems also suggest the land as the Body and the sea as the Soul. But he was also our first urban poet, and there his lines take us to the heart of darkness to reveal the light in all things. Whitman got his first practice as a writer in composing his novel *Franklin Evans; or The Inebriate* in 1842, the same year he heard Emerson give his lecture on “Nature and the Powers of a Poet.” At the time Whitman may have been troubled with drink himself, but he found Emerson’s definition of The Poet even more intoxicating.

I celebrate myself, and sing myself
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
....

The butcher-boy puts off his killing clothes, or sharpens his knife
at the stall in the market,
I loiter enjoying his repartee and his shuffle and break-down.

Blacksmiths with grimed and hairy chests environ the anvil,
Each has his main-sledge, they are all out, there is a great heat in
the fire.
....

The pure contralto sings in the organ loft,
The carpenter dresses his plank, the tongue of his foreplane whistles
its wild ascending lisp
....

Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion,
A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor, quaker,
Prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest.

I resist any thing better than my own diversity.

“Wherever Macdonald sits,” Emerson proclaimed in 1837, “there is the head of the table.” During the Vietnam War he was blamed for American imperialism, but Emerson never said that one’s center negated

another's. We were all at the center, our center, whenever we were in harmony with nature and thus the object of its correspondence—even the ex-school teacher, ex-newspaper reporter, ex-house builder, who came out of nowhere to write the first *Leaves of Grass*. As the poet Randall Jarrell once said, Whitman “had his nerve.”

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As a poet of the American vernacular, Whitman knew how to distinguish the “right word” from the right word, or correct usage. He simply demanded more out of words, believing them to be signs of natural facts, which, as Emerson had taught him, were signs of spiritual facts. He wanted his words “to swim, row, ride, wrestle, shoot, run, strike, retreat, advance, resist, defend themselves.” That line comes from “A Woman Waits for Me.” Just as he sought to liberate women (and men), he expected more out of language than the journalist in him had supposed. “Cut these words, and they would bleed,” Emerson had proclaimed in “Montaigne; or The Skeptic”; “they are so vascular and alive.” Whitman’s “leaves” were full of grass, or his sign for democracy. His words were often spontaneous, alive, and were always on the lookout high and low for his subjects—from the president “holding a cabinet meeting” to the prostitute dragging “her shawl.”

Whitman never lost his touch. He meant it when he called each and all the “divine average.” Even in a poem like “O Captain! My Captain!” which academics have disparaged for its sing-song rhythm: that poem first came alive for me in 1999 when I heard Rip Torn read it at the Barnes & Noble store in Union Square. The award-winning actor had performed as Whitman in two movies. He and Whitman biographer David S. Reynolds had come to Barnes & Noble to introduce me when my biography of Whitman was published. Torn came wearing an old fisherman’s cap and was otherwise dressed casually. He carried a small, well-fingered edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Frankly, at first I wished he’d have selected a “better” poem. But once Rip stood up and began to read, I was astonished at the poem’s power of sympathy for Lincoln and the fallen soldiers from both the North and South. As he began to read, Torn—then fully the actor—suddenly realized he was still wearing his cap and quickly pulled it off, as if a mourner at Lincoln’s funeral. Then he continued to read:

O CAPTAIN! my Captain! our fearful trip is done;
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won;
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring:
But O heart! heart! heart!

O the bleeding drops of red,
Where on the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;
Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills;
For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding,
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;
Here Captain! dear father!
This arm beneath your head;
It is some dream that on the deck,
You've fallen cold and dead.

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still;
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will;
The ship is anchor'd safe and sound, its voyage closed and done;
From fearful trip, the victor ship, comes in with object won:
Exult, O shores, and ring, O bells!
But I, with mournful tread,
Walk the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

Whitman once told Traubel that he was “almost sorry” he had ever written the poem, but that was probably because its popularity crowded out attention to his other, more unconventional poems. He called it a ballad and said it had “reasons for being.”⁸ I wish he could have heard Rip Torn read it.

I've studied and written on most of the American writers of the nineteenth century and a few in the early twentieth. Most of them have celebrated democracy either directly or ironically, but only one can claim primacy as *the* poet of democracy. As Emerson said of America in “The Poet,” we might say today of Whitman—that he “is a poem in our eyes.”

NOTES

1 Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 1:253. Hereafter, *Evolution*.

2 Kate Zernike, “To Fight Crime, a Poor City Will Trade In Its Police,” *New York Times* (September 29, 2012), A1.

3 Asselineau, *Evolution*, 1.

4 Charles E. Feinberg Collection of Walt Whitman, Library of Congress.

5 Marilyn J. McKay, “Walt Whitman in Canada: The Sexual Trinity of Horace Traubel and Frank and Mildred Bain,” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 30 (Summer 2012), 1-30.

6 Asselineau, *Evolution*, 1.

7 Maurice Mendelson, *Life and Work of Walt Whitman* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 82, 25.

8 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1915), 304.