

## REVIEWS

### HORACE TRAUBEL'S "SO LONG": THE FINAL TWO VOLUMES OF *WITH WALT WHITMAN IN CAMDEN*

HORACE TRAUBEL, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*. Ed. Jeanne Chapman and Robert MacIsaac. Oregon House, California: W. L. Bentley, 1996. Volumes 8 and 9. Foreword (Volume 9) by Ed Folsom. Volume 8: xii + 624 pp. Volume 9: xiv + 652 pp.

Three days after Walt Whitman's death on March 26, 1892, Horace Traubel received his first "feeler" about publishing his "interesting ms." on the poet's conversations; it was conveyed through Jeannette Gilder, co-editor with her husband of *The Critic*, where Whitman had enjoyed carte blanche publishing privileges since 1880. Little could she know that the manuscript, when published in totality, would extend to nine volumes averaging almost 600 pages each. The publication of the first volume did not occur until 1906, probably because Traubel, as one of the poet's three literary executors (along with Richard Maurice Bucke and Thomas B. Harned), was too busy editing their poet's precious papers for the *Complete Writings* in 1902 as well as their own essays in *In Re Walt Whitman* (1893) and elsewhere. Traubel lived to see two more volumes of *With Walt Whitman in Camden* published before his death in 1919. His widow Anne got out volume 4 with the help of her daughter and an introduction by Sculley Bradley in 1953, and Gertrude Traubel edited volume 5 in 1964. The next volume, also edited by Traubel's daughter and William White, did not appear until 1982, mainly because no university press seemed interested in this essential biographical tool and record of the last years of America's most important poet. (When I visited Gertrude Traubel in her shanty of a row house in Germantown, Philadelphia, on July 22, 1975, I espied stacks of its typescript neatly piled on an old dining room table, my hungry view of these "Aspern Papers" obscured slightly by the beaded curtain closing off the room from the parlor where we talked.) Following Gertrude's death in the 1980s and the relocation of her papers (now the Horace L. and Anne Montgomerie Traubel Collection) to the Library of Congress, the task of editing what amounted to three final volumes of *With Walt Whitman in Camden* was taken up and executed at the same high level of editing by Jeanne Chapman and Robert MacIsaac. Volume 7 appeared in 1992 with a foreword by Justin Kaplan, and the last two in 1996, covering the period of February 11, 1891, to April 3, 1892.

If for no other reason, these volumes are valuable for Ed Folsom's excellent foreword to volume 9 and the new details on Whitman's last months on earth. The foreword is the latest word on Traubel, his early acquaintanceship with the poet soon after he moved to Camden in 1873, his apprenticeship

as a printer and departure from school at about the same age Whitman ended his formal education, his Whitmanlike “loafing” about Philadelphia and Camden and crossing the Delaware Ferry (where he faced declining health in 1909 after being trampled by a horse), his half-Jewish ancestry and socialist connections, and the loss of his only steady employment as a clerk in the Philadelphia Farmers’ and Mechanics’ Bank after attacking in his magazine, *The Conservator*, one of J. P. Morgan’s lieutenants over union busting in 1902. As Folsom rightly notes, Traubel’s socialism “tended more toward the religious and philosophical than the political,” although he did speak at labor meetings in Philadelphia and Camden even before Whitman’s death. Traubel tried again and again to get Whitman to take a socialist position (even expressing annoyance in an earlier volume of *With Walt Whitman in Camden* over Whitman’s accepting \$350 from Andrew Carnegie—for a seat the industrialist didn’t occupy during one of the poet’s New York Lincoln lectures), but he backs off as readily as he pushes his socialist agenda. Perhaps he feared his radicalism as finally doctrinaire and oppressive, the way Whitman viewed organized religion. Folsom has not only read and studied all nine volumes of Traubel’s work but has researched his subject in the largely untouched manuscript collections in Washington, D.C., and Bolton, England. It is now clear that Traubel became emotionally—and sexually—involved with another man and Whitman admirer.

But to the volumes themselves. Here is Elizabeth Keller’s description of Whitman’s sickroom on Mickle Street. Keller was hired as a nurse after Whitman almost died in December of 1891:

The walls are too dusty to touch near his bed. The room is crowded with articles incompatible with a sickroom. The bed is infested with bugs and the carpet with moths. Not only the bed but other articles in the room have nits that will next summer produce an army of fresh bugs. The bedstead is an old one, no amount of care would make it fit for an invalid (or any other person) to lie in. His old shirts have been patched until they are all in tatters, and there is a general lack of everything. He uses the bedpan usually but at times the bed has to be changed quickly and occasionally the sheets are used much faster than they can be washed and dried. There are no towels, napkins, or tray cloths to speak of—neither dishes usually provided for invalids. He needs a bed rest and some other things. Everything in the house is old and fast falling to pieces. The room Mrs. Davis and Warren [Fritzinger, Mrs. Davis’s adopted son and Whitman’s “nurse”] use (one by night and one by day) is unfit . . . for human beings. The whole house is unwholesome in the extreme.

This description is in a letter to Bucke of January 19, 1892, which Traubel includes. Plans for an early spring cleaning were soon quashed by the poet, whom Mrs. Keller described in frustration as “wedded to his way of living.” Whitman considered himself in one sense just another of nature’s “critters” and stoically took what came. “Whatever is good for thee, O Nature, is good for me,” he quips to Traubel (echoing Epictetus) in earlier volumes. In volume 9 Traubel writes: “And once in his room I called his attention to the fact that a mouse was down at his feet, seeming to linger there without fear. Again he only remarked, ‘I suppose, and there must be others,’ but he did not stir.” In the twentieth century, we remember Whitman as “clean” and

a regular visitor to the public baths, but the nineteenth century was a little grittier, and its inhabitants were closer to lower nature as well as the actual circumstances of death. (During Whitman's autopsy, Traubel, though not Harned, witnessed the cracking of the skull and the removal of the poet's brain.)

The autopsy, as we already know, revealed one collapsed lung and the other with only one-sixteenth breathing capacity. In my own recent researches, I have discovered that Whitman contracted miliary tuberculosis during the Civil War, either from one of the soldiers he attended or from his brother Andrew Whitman, who died of the disease in 1863. As long as he was strong and healthy, the latent TB was not a problem, but after his first stroke in 1873 and decreased physical activity, it gradually worsened. All that remained perfectly "healthy" at death, according to Traubel, were the heart and the brain. And if we are to believe Kaplan in his biography of the poet, the latter was dropped (and then discarded) at a laboratory for the American Anthropometric Society, founded to study "high-type" brains.

All along, the three literary executors had been promised information about Whitman's past, specifically about his alleged children. In volumes 8 and 9, as time runs out, the campaign is intensified. But when Harned approaches Whitman for a statement on December 2, 1891, the poet puts him off with excuses about not feeling well that day. Yet he tantalizes his investigator by saying, "It is a nasty story anyway." Later Harned hears that the so-called children were conceived by two different women. (This is almost enough to bring Emory Holloway back from the dead.) Dr. Bucke, too, is given information, though it does not vary from what we already know to have been alleged. By the time Whitman is almost about to enter his tomb (he had been given his own key on November 28, 1891), Bucke is more interested in another of Whitman's secrets. He is writing, or beginning to think seriously about, his book *Cosmic Consciousness* (1901)—still in print, incidentally. He sends Traubel a list of nineteen questions, which he is supposed to ask Whitman four days before his death. Number twelve asks whether the approach of cosmic consciousness (which Bucke thought was most perfectly developed in Whitman) was "accompanied by a sensation of physical illumination? As if he were in the midst of a great flame? or as a bright light shone in his mind?" Whitman never answered any of the questions but earlier said of the Doctor's project: "It is a great subject—appalling—it will give Doctor a great grapple: I would be afraid of it." Earlier, in 1874, Whitman had flatly refused an invitation to write something about spiritualism for the New York *Daily Graphic*, dismissing it as "altogether a poor, cheap, crude humbug."

One long-awaited item does surface for Traubel. On October 17, 1891, he and Whitman finally find Emerson's famous letter, greeting the poet "at the beginning of a great career." Whitman was going on again, as he does in earlier volumes, about Salmon P. Chase, Lincoln's secretary of the treasury (who sought to have his picture on the one- and five-dollar bill to boost his planned run against Lincoln in 1864), calling him "Handsome, smart, but a bad egg!" Traubel was astonished to see Whitman "so shaken up and shaking us" about the politician who thought *Leaves of Grass* a disgusting

book. In the midst of the commotion, he writes, "I turned over a couple of yellowed letters fastened by a gum band and, picking them up, found my heart to stand still at the inscription that met my eye! The Emerson 1855 letter at last!" Traubel wants to take it home immediately, but Whitman hangs onto it for four days. There exist two other significant Emerson letters with regard to the poet. One is to Chase, which the Secretary, upon its presentation by John Townsend Trowbridge, kept to have something in Emerson's hand. But the gum band did hold Emerson's letter on behalf of Whitman as a candidate for government employment during the war to Secretary of State William H. Seward. Traubel thinks Whitman was "cute" to have never delivered that letter, thereby retaining for himself a "confirmation" of Emerson's 1855 endorsement of *Leaves of Grass*. When he asks the poet if this was the reason for its non-delivery, the poet answers: "For a number of reasons, probably—for one, I did not altogether like it." He never tells Traubel precisely why, but Whitman may have winced at Emerson's description of him as having "marked eccentricities" and of his writings as "in certain points open to criticism"; this indirect reference to the "Enfans d'Adam" poems would have undermined the enthusiastic endorsement of the 1855 letter. Emerson, Whitman may have suspected, seemed to be backing and filling a bit.

I came away from these volumes with a greater respect for Traubel as a writer. Often the narration is quite moving, especially as the end approaches. When on December 28, 1891, Dr. Bucke is reluctant to return home to Canada because he knows this is probably the last time he will see the "Master" alive again, Traubel writes:

Bucke, removing his chair, sat on the edge of the box near the head of the bed, regarding W. intently. For a few minutes utter silence, except for W.'s hiccoughing. Then Bucke arose and took W.'s hands, bending over him with intent gaze and emotion, which for an instant checked any attempt at speech. Then he broke forth. "Well, good-bye Walt! I must go!" "I suppose! I suppose!" "Well, I ought to go, Walt. I don't want to go. . . ." "Yes, Maurice, I know." "But if I go now, I can no doubt get back soon to see you again." "No, Maurice, you will never see me again!" . . . Bucke stooped over and kissed him—and kissed him again—withdrew from the bed a minute, "Oh! so loth to depart!" then back and took W.'s hand again, and stooped over and once more kissed him.

Bucke, Whitman's first biographer, would not get back in time for the poet's death.

And what of the alleged gay Whitman? Halfway through a critical biography of Whitman, which I am now completing, a distinguished Americanist from Yale asked me whether I had answered the \$64,000 question, i.e., had I found any conclusive evidence of the poet's homosexuality? I never did, and neither do volumes 8 and 9 present anything definitive. I did note, however, some significant nuances as to Whitman and his American disciples' uneasiness about the English attitude toward "Calamus" as characterized by Edward Carpenter and John Addington Symonds. These two English disciples, as we know, were more out of the closet than Traubel, who married Anne Montgomerie in Whitman's bedroom on May 28, 1891, and was later

involved in a love affair with Gustave Wiksell, a Boston dentist and member of the Whitman Fellowship. This nuance is further illuminated by a letter from Symonds to Traubel in volume 8, dated February 21, 1891. The ostensible purpose of the letter was to convey remarks, printed in Appendix 2 of volume 8 of *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, to be read at the poet's final birthday party, held in the Mickle Street house. The "public" part of the letter opens with lines from "Song of Myself" about the universe being only at a middling stage, this Spencerian remark perhaps a veiled allusion to the future acceptance of the "Calamus" idea. It is followed by effusive comments which the poet shied away from when Symonds's statement was read at the birthday party and Whitman advised "*caution*." Veiled, too, of course, was Whitman's earlier concern expressed in answer to Symonds's much more direct query about "Calamus" in the Englishman's letter of August 3, 1890.

In the private portion of his letter to Traubel, Symonds is bolder, telling his American counterpart that he had—in the letter of August 3, 1890—"exchanged some words . . . with Walt lately about his 'Calamus.'" "I do not think," he continued, "he quite understood what I was driving at. Yet that does not signify. . . . I wish you would tell me what you & your friends feel to be the central point in this most vital doctrine of comradeship. Out here in Europe I see signs of an awakening of enthusiastic relations between men, which tend to assume a passionate character. I think it ought to be studied." Earlier in this letter, he confesses that he had hesitated to be so frank to Traubel and had torn up the first version of the letter. But a letter he received from Traubel in the interlude, he said, convinced him he was mistaken: "for yours which lies before me now is full of that confidence & straightforward comradeship which inspires a like return, & would have justified the warmth of my spontaneous utterance." Traubel's letter to Symonds has not survived, as far as I know, but knowledge of its existence and character in volume 8 perhaps reveals that Traubel was entertaining the "English version" of "Calamus" as a newly married man and not merely later in his relationship with Wiksell and perhaps other members of the Whitman Fellowship who—as at least one unpublished letter I have seen in the course of writing my biography reveals—felt a strong competition among each other for Traubel's emotional alliance. On the other hand, Traubel's letter may be simply full of the benign "comradeship" counseled by Whitman both in his answer to Symonds's letter of August 3, 1890, and his birthday response to Symonds's public remarks. Later in volume 8, Traubel tells Whitman that another Whitman disciple, Harrison S. Morris, had asked permission to quote from Symonds's letter in an article he was preparing for *The Literary World*. He tells Whitman that he advised Morris not to quote from it because it would break Symonds's "confidence." Whitman replies—on April 1, 1891—"You were quite right—I am sure we should guard well these inner utterances—often they are only and simply for us."

Now it is not clear as to which Symonds's letter Morris was referring to—the one to Traubel of February 21, 1891, or his much more explicit letter to the "Master" of August 3, 1890. Since Whitman turned pale, as Kaplan

notes in his foreword to volume 7, upon receipt of the latter, it was probably the epistle to Traubel, about which he finally told his Boswell to "use your own judgment" regarding Morris's request. (The only *Literary World* article by Morris about this time is entitled "Philadelphia Letter," appearing on the day of the poet's death. It contains no allusion to Symonds, nor is there any reference to a letter by Symonds in Morris's memoir of 1929.) As we know, Whitman sternly, angrily, but perhaps not definitively, denied Symonds's assertion that "Calamus" celebrated homosexual affections, and he also claimed the paternity of multiple children, referred to again several times on his deathbed. Because of the scandal it would cause among their Southern aristocratic family, he told Bucke, they could not be recognized. Nor could their mother, or mothers, be given a place in the Harleigh tomb, where he hoped to be joined not only by family members but "some very dear friends." So Whitman took it with him, as they say. Just as a rich man might spend all his estate on a mausoleum so as not to leave his greedy relatives anything but a place to visit him, Whitman took his secret to Harleigh, but nevertheless left us many interesting "faint clews and indirections." Volumes 8 and 9 of *With Walt Whitman in Camden* continue that tradition.

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