

## NOTES

### WHITMAN AND SOJOURNER TRUTH

In Thomas Donaldson's *Walt Whitman the Man* (1897), now out of print, the author bolsters his case for the high quality of people who were attracted to Whitman by quoting letters directed to the poet. Among them are four letters from Mrs. Elisa Seaman Leggett, a friend from Whitman's Long Island days. Elsewhere I have written about Mrs. Leggett and her various connections to Whitman.<sup>1</sup> Here I would like to consider just one of the Leggett letters Donaldson quotes, on Sojourner Truth, using it not in the usual evidentiary way to establish a relationship between its subject and Whitman, but rather to point out what are for scholars tantalizing proximities and intersecting events in the lives of these two exceptional figures in nineteenth-century American culture who, so far as is known, never met.

The longest of the extant letters from Elisa Leggett to Walt Whitman is dated June 22, 1881, written at her Detroit home.<sup>2</sup> After thanking Whitman for papers received, she opens her subject with: "I wonder if you know anything about Sojourner Truth, an old col'd woman, known to be 100 years of age. . . ." She goes on to provide a brief narrative of Truth's life.<sup>3</sup> In doing so Leggett places herself, though unofficially, in the already established line of female narrators of the life of the illiterate Truth. That line began with Olive Gilbert, the abolitionist to whom Truth dictated her 1850 autobiography, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*; continued with Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1863 *Atlantic Monthly* article, "Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sibyl"; and ended with Frances Titus, the Battle Creek, Michigan, friend and supporter who authored the 1875 edition of the expanded *Narrative*. Not unlike Donaldson, Titus devotes a chapter to letters sent to Truth by various individuals, many of them outstanding abolitionists and/or feminists; among these is an 1871 letter from Elisa Leggett expressing "earnest respect."<sup>4</sup>

Leggett was part of a wide circle of Michigan progressives, many of them former Quakers, many of them also involved in spiritualism, almost all of them supporters of, first, the antislavery movement and, later, the women's rights movement. In 1860 Sojourner Truth moved to Battle Creek, where she eventually bought a house and was taken up by the local progressives. In the years after the Civil War, Truth turned her efforts to two things—helping resettle freed peoples, and women's rights, the latter a cause Whitman had espoused from his first hearing of the feminist speaker Fanny Wright. In both these causes, Truth was aided by women such as Elisa Leggett. She was a guest in the Leggett home when Mrs. Leggett wrote her 1881 letter to Whitman, which prompted the relation of Truth's life story, ending with an anecdote dating to an earlier stay, in 1864:

I used to read your "Leaves of Grass" to my children. It has formed a large part of their education. Once with my back to the door entering the parlor, in a large chair, my children before me on the sofa, I noticed while I read they looked up. I said: "Pay attention, or I can't read to you." So they were quiet, and I continued. Presently I was surprised to hear Sojourner, in a loud voice, exclaim, "Who wrote that?" I turned, and there in the doorway she stood, her tall figure, with a white turban on her head, her figure and every feature full of expression. Immediately, she added: "Never mind the man's name. It was God who wrote it. He chose the man to give his message." After that I often read it to her. Her great brain accepts the highest truths. She is here now.

Unfortunately, Whitman's response to this—if any—has been lost. It might have been enlightening to learn his reaction, not only to the sentiment (no doubt he would have endorsed it), but to its source. Of particular interest to him must have been Mrs. Leggett's claim that her houseguest thought there ought to be "Scriptures telling of railroads, and telephones and the Atlantic cable." No doubt "Passage to India," written ten years earlier, met with Truth's approval.

Much has been written on Whitman and black Americans, and it is not the subject here.<sup>5</sup> Still, one cannot help comparing photographs of Truth with the image of the black woman in "Ethiopia Saluting the Colors": "Who are you dusky woman, so ancient hardly human, / With your wooly-white and turban'd head, and bare bony feet?" Sojourner Truth was spare and bony, but in photographs no sign of hair is visible, for the head is covered not with a turban, but with a Quaker-style cap. As to her age, Leggett's claim of one hundred repeats a popular misconception, which Truth shared; born around 1797 (Leggett says Truth "remembers the soldiers of our Revolutionary War, going to see them and their wounded legs"), she was in fact about eighty-six when she died in 1883. And though the final line of Whitman's 1867 poem invites a slave narrative ("Are the things so strange and marvelous you see or have seen?"), anyone reading Truth's *Narrative* would have caught the difference between her and the poet's image of "Ethiopia," with the latter's suggestion of a minstrel act in the wagging head, the rolling eye, and the "courtesies" dropped to the regiments as they pass. But then Sojourner (originally Isabella) was not a Carolina slave "from [her] parents sunder'd," but, like Whitman, a New York native, and like him influenced at an early age by Dutch manners and customs. From her first Ulster County owners she learned to speak Dutch (to which she added English when she was sold at age eight or nine), and from a later owner she acquired the name Van Wagener.

When Isabella obtained her freedom in 1827 she went to New York City and five years later joined the Kingdom of Matthias, removing a year later with its members to Mount Pleasant (Sing Sing), New York. "Do you remember him, in New York?" Elisa Leggett asks Whitman. There is good reason to believe that Whitman did know of the perfectionist Robert Matthews, "the Prophet Matthias," for in 1835, when Matthias was accused of murdering one of his followers, the New York newspapers had a field day with the story. Whitman, employed in the printing trade, would have known all the details. And the book that was rushed into print to capitalize on Matthias's notoriety was written by someone Whitman knew, Gilbert Vale.<sup>6</sup> Vale, a free thinker like Walter Whitman, Sr., and biographer of Thomas Paine, impressed Whit-

man as “a hard nut.” “Take a man: take all sentiment, poetry, philosophy out of him: that is Vaill [sic].”<sup>7</sup> Vale sought to expose Matthias as a fraud capable of anything, including murder, and his principal witness, quoted throughout the book, was Isabella Van Wagener who, though she clearly had been a willing member of the cult, sought to clear herself of any charges.

When Isabella left New York, on foot, to begin her life as a traveling preacher—after renaming herself Sojourner Truth—she journeyed east and arrived in Whitman’s native Huntington, Long Island, on July 4, 1843. From there she went to Cold Springs (home of his maternal grandparents) where a mass temperance meeting was in preparation. She remained with the temperance people for three weeks before moving on by boat to Connecticut. Truth was not really interested in temperance, no more so than Whitman was when, a year earlier, his *Franklin Evans, or The Inebriate* was published in *The New World*. For both, the issue served merely as a means to an end.

In pursuit of their different goals, each of these unique individuals employed considerable self-promotion—both zealously promoted their books, paid for and oversaw the printing, and filled book orders themselves. The cover of Truth’s 1853 *Narrative* carried a blurb by the successful author, Harriet Beecher Stowe, though, unlike Whitman’s use of Emerson’s letter on the spine of his 1856 *Leaves of Grass*, she had requested it for that purpose.<sup>8</sup> Largely because of her illiteracy, Truth realized the success as lecturer that Whitman only dreamed of, and like him she gathered to herself loyal supporters. Though never a Quaker, Truth dressed like one and, as did Whitman, honored Quakers of the Hicksite stripe. When that group took an anti-abolitionist stance that led to the formation of the Progressive Friends, Truth was warmly welcomed by its members.<sup>9</sup> Both Truth and Whitman found the female fashions of their time distasteful; in Providence, Rhode Island, Truth once attacked women for their “Grecian bend-backs and flummeries . . . high heeled shoes and humps on their heads,” asking, “what kind of reformers be you, with goose-wings on your heads . . . ?”<sup>10</sup> Whitman and Truth were similarly disposed to having their photographs taken, and though the number of Whitman photos far outstrips Truth’s, her fourteen or more formal portraits were a remarkable number at that time for someone of her race.<sup>11</sup>

In the Civil War years Whitman and Truth each engaged in that work which seemed to them most urgent. Whitman, of course, devoted himself to the wounded in Washington, D.C., army hospitals; Truth worked among the black troops of the First Michigan Regiment at Camp Ward in Detroit, providing food and clothing to augment their meager rations. (Whitman visited the First Regiment U.S. Colored Troops billeted near Washington, in 1863, and found them looking “as if they had the soldier-stuff in them.”<sup>12</sup>) In 1864 Truth went to Washington with a twofold mission, to see President Lincoln and to aid the freedpeople who were flooding into the city. Just a year earlier Whitman had glimpsed Lincoln at the White House and noted his love for the president in his daybook.<sup>13</sup> He probably would have given a great deal to have an audience with Lincoln as Truth did, though the president was not especially pleased with the visit and addressed her as “Auntie.”<sup>14</sup>

While in Washington working in the various freedmen’s camps, Truth pursued her right to ride the city’s streetcars. Federal law desegregated the street-

cars in March 1865, about the time Whitman met Peter Doyle, a streetcar conductor. While Whitman was enjoying long rides with Pete, Sojourner Truth was reporting conductors who refused to give her rides, and she caused one to be dismissed. She brought assault charges against another, who was convicted for wrenching her arm while trying to prevent her from entering a car.<sup>15</sup> Her actions were part of a campaign by prominent blacks, including Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman, against the black codes that were especially egregious on the street railroads. Some of the offending conductors no doubt were included among Whitman's many streetcar acquaintances, and, though his correspondence and notebooks refer often to their harsh working conditions, there is no reference to these segregationist tactics.

Truth's work among the various freedmen's refugee camps lasted from 1864 to 1868, after which she became highly involved in the fight for women's suffrage. Only one great mission remained for her, one that would again suggest a rough parallel to Whitman's experience. Throughout the 1870s Truth lectured on, raised money for, and attempted to interest Congress in the establishment in the West of reservations on which the freedpeoples of the South could begin new lives. In 1879 her work was overshadowed by a social phenomenon not of her making, the exodus to Kansas of thousands of blacks fleeing what they feared would be a return to slavery at the resurgence of the Democratic Party in southern states. Despite her age and ill health, Truth journeyed to Kansas along with other volunteers to aid the refugees.

In that same year, 1879, Whitman fulfilled a long-held desire to visit the West. Though it had nothing to do with the Exodusters, the first place he visited was Kansas. Whitman's friend, J. W. Forney the Philadelphia journalist, arranged for Whitman to accompany him as far west as Lawrence, Kansas, where Forney was to speak at the state's quarter-centennial celebration. At a similar meeting in Topeka, Whitman was expected to read a poem but was unprepared; instead he wrote out some remarks which, after missing the meeting entirely, he left with his hosts and later published. There is no mention in these remarks of the exodus then under way, but the unavoidable irony of Whitman's visiting Kansas in the year of the Exodusters lies in the fact that his Free-Soil philosophy was based primarily on his belief that the western states should be for settlement by whites; barring the inclusion of slaves was a means to insuring this. Sojourner Truth's petitioning for freedpeople's reservations in Kansas and the rush of southern blacks into Kansas both ran counter to this belief, but we have no record of his acknowledgment of either occurrence.

In his Topeka remarks Whitman refers to the prairies as shapers of such "leading modern Americans" as Lincoln and Grant.<sup>16</sup> Lincoln was never far from his mind in these years, and one wonders what he would have made of the painting by Frank Courter, done in 1893, depicting Sojourner Truth with the president. It is the only known painting of her, while there are many of Whitman, including one by the grandson of Eliza Seaman Leggett, Percy Ives. Yet even in this there is a parallel between the two, since Mrs. Leggett informs Whitman that at the time of her letter, in 1881, both her son-in-law, Lewis Ives, and his son, Percy Ives, were painting portraits of Truth. If Percy Ives did, in fact, complete the portrait, it would provide another link between these two.

We know from Leggett's letter that Sojourner Truth knew of Walt Whitman and revered his poetry; we know also that, thanks to Leggett, Whitman knew of Truth, at least after 1881 (though it is likely he was aware of her sooner). But as with Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman, he made no reference to her or to the efforts of blacks such as these three to improve the condition of their people. The lines of his life and theirs—or, at least, of Truth's—remained parallel but never intersected.

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## NOTES

- 1 "Walt Whitman's Long Island Friend: Elisa Seaman Leggett," *Long Island Historical Journal* 9 (Spring 1997), 223-233.
- 2 Just four months later Whitman presented one of the first copies of the new edition of *Leaves of Grass* to her grandson, Percy L. Ives; see Charles E. Feinberg, "Percy Ives, Detroit and Walt Whitman," *Detroit Historical Society Bulletin* 16 (February 1960), 4-11.
- 3 Leggett, quoted in Thomas Donaldson, *Walt Whitman the Man* (London: Gay & Bird, 1897), 242-246. All quotations from the letter are from this source.
- 4 *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (New York: Arno Press, 1968), 280.
- 5 One of the more recent studies is Martin Klammer, *Whitman, Slavery, and the Emergence of Leaves of Grass* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995). To the already familiar Whitman comments on blacks there is now added that which appears in Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (Oregon House, California: W. L. Bentley, 1996), 8:439.
- 6 See G. Vale, *Fanaticism; Its Source and Influence, Illustrated by the Simple Narrative of Isabella, in the Case of Matthias, Mr. and Mrs. B. Folger, Mr. Pierson, Mr. Mills, Catherine, Isabella . . .*, 2 vols. (New York, 1835).
- 7 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1961), 3:140.
- 8 Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth, A Life, A Symbol* (New York: Norton, 1996), 130.
- 9 Painter, 144.
- 10 Carlton Mabee and Susan Mabee Newhouse, *Sojourner Truth: Slave, Prophet, Legend* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 190-191.
- 11 See Painter for reproductions of the photos and of the oil painting of Truth.
- 12 Whitman, *Prose Works*, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1964), 2:588.
- 13 See *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, ed. Edward F. Grier (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 2:539.
- 14 Painter, 206-207.
- 15 Painter, 210-211.
- 16 Whitman, *Prose Works*, 1:208.