

THE CORRESPONDENCE OF WALT WHITMAN— “A BACKWARD GLANCE” THIRTY YEARS LATER

THE FIRST TWO VOLUMES OF *The Correspondence of Walt Whitman* appeared in 1961, introducing *The Collected Writings* in the New York University Press edition, and then grew into an edition of five volumes and one supplement—and now the second supplement. This is the time for a retrospective look at the *Correspondence* and for a few speculations as to what we may expect in the future.

The *Correspondence* consists of 2721 numbered letters, but the number rises in the fifth volume with the inclusion of sixty-five letters which appeared while the edition was in progress, usually through the efforts of Charles E. Feinberg. The Supplement of 1977 adds one hundred and three letters, and this second supplement forty-six more. There are now almost 3,000 extant letters in these volumes.

The first volume of the *Correspondence* includes “A Check List of Whitman’s Lost Letters,” with the justification that it “is sometimes important to biographers as well as to critics to know about letters written by Whitman, even though the letters are not extant. For this information I have drawn on the poet’s diaries and notebooks, the daybooks references in Traubel’s six volumes, and the extant letters of Whitman and his correspondents. Over the years the Check List has increased to 1246 items, which would indicate that in his lifetime he wrote over 4,000 letters.

During the thirty-year period only forty of these “lost” letters have surfaced and have been duly included in the two supplements.

There is no way of knowing how many will appear in the future. The only large number of known but unlocated letters consists of the early letters to Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke. These letters did not enter the Trent Collection, now at Duke University, and may well be in an attic somewhere in Canada or the United States. Feinberg spent quite a bit of time and effort in trying to trace them, but to no avail.

There are large gaps, it appears, in the correspondence with John Addington Symonds, William Michael Rossetti, and Edward Carpenter, which may appear, like the letters and cards to Ernest Rhys which entered the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library in the late 1970’s.

However, we can expect surprises. In the past decade suddenly nine letters were sold at a Sotheby auction, the earliest extant letters written by Walter Whitman. No scholar or critic even knew of the existence of Abraham Paul Leech of Jamaica, New York, no reference to him appearing in the six volumes of diaries and notebooks edited by Edward F. Grier, the three volumes of *Daybooks and Notebooks* edited by William White, or the *Correspondence*. This is the most important find of Whitman holograph material in years. Perhaps others will follow, since attics are apparently being ransacked these days in the nation's sometimes frantic search for roots, not to take into account that the market is in excellent condition.

Only a few letters to Civil War soldiers have surfaced in recent years, one of which, to Anson Ryder Jr., appears in this supplement. We should be grateful indeed that so many have survived, since many of the soldiers never knew much about Whitman's importance as a poet: to them he was a bearded, kindly comrade who day after day visited hospitals like Armory Square, bearing gifts of food and tobacco, writing letters home for the wounded and often illiterate youths, and, most important of all, simply being Walt Whitman, a substitute parent or "elder brother."

"A Calendar of Letters Written to Walt Whitman," consisting of 408 items in the first volume of *Correspondence*, now includes over 2800 entries. There are almost as many extant letters to Whitman as by Whitman.

In his chaotic filing system, usually a clutter on the floor of books, letters, memoranda, bills, and so forth, Whitman preserved a large number of letters; by some kind of mystical means perhaps, or a sixth sense, he was able to locate with seemingly little trouble whatever letter he was looking for. Many of these letters were given at various times to the three literary executors, Richard Maurice Bucke, Thomas Harned, and, above all, Horace Traubel.

Because Traubel visited the feeble poet almost daily during the last four years of his life, and gladly welcomed the opportunity to preserve any kind of memorabilia of the man to whom he played Boswell, 1161 letters addressed to the poet from 1888 until his death in March 1892 are extant—almost one-half of the total.

No doubt Whitman received other letters during his lifetime, but there is no way of arriving at a reasonable estimate of how many have been lost, temporarily or permanently, or destroyed. While only a few of Peter Doyle's letters have survived, there are thirty-eight letters in the Feinberg Collection from a former soldier named John Newton Johnson, with whom Whitman corresponded for twenty-one years.

In 1961 the published letters cited in the calendars were primarily in the various Traubel volumes. Since 1961 many more have been edited

and published because of the labors of Jerome M. Loving (*Civil War Letters of George Washington Whitman*), Randall H. Waldron (*The Letters of Martha Mitchell Whitman*), Dennis Berthold and Kenneth Price (*Dear Brother Walt—The Letters of Thomas Jefferson Whitman*), and Artem Lozynsky (*The Letters of Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke to Walt Whitman*). Most recently Charley Shively has published many letters of Civil War soldiers and “Calamus Lovers” (*Drum Beats: Walt Whitman’s Civil War Boy Lovers and Calamus Lovers—Walt Whitman’s Working Class Camerados*), but without the care that one expects of Whitman editors.

The total number of letters to Whitman published in whole or in part is now almost 1200. For this reason the entire Calendar, with corrections and revisions, is presented here so that scholars and students may have ready access to these materials, both the locations of manuscripts and published transcriptions.

Riverdale, New York

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