

## CHARLES E. FEINBERG: A TRIBUTE

The Whitman community suffered an enormous loss with Charles Feinberg's death this past March. "Whitman studies," writes Harold Aspiz, "could not have reached their present stage without the lifelong dedication and generosity of Charles E. Feinberg. We shall miss him and revere his memory." What follows is an attempt to begin the affectionate remembering. First is a series of brief tributes to Mr. Feinberg, written by some of the Whitman scholars who were most influenced by him and who remain most indebted to him. Following these tributes is an essay by C. Carroll Hollis, recounting some wonderfully characteristic anecdotes about this remarkable human being. Finally, there is a brief sampling of some of Charles Feinberg's own writings on Whitman.

These few pages form our initial tribute, but the real living memorial to Charles Feinberg will be the ongoing work of understanding ourselves through Whitman, for Whitman scholarship from now on will be in some essential way a testimony to the dedicated life of this one man.

They would usually come in the evening, those phone calls from Charlie Feinberg. Once or twice a month, he would call with another scheme, another idea, ways to make *WWQR* better, more solvent. "I'll send you five sets of the Walt Whitman Fellowship Papers—these are the originals, real collector's items, and you can sell them for \$75 and use the money for the journal." Most of the time, his plans were for dispersing more Whitman materials; he would have a set of books that he wanted to contribute to my Whitman seminar, offering them to my students in return for their token dollar donations to the university library. Or he had sets of facsimiles of Whitman manuscripts, and he wanted to talk about where they should go, what libraries were most in need of Whitman materials.

If Whitman was, as his mother said, always going out and coming in, then it might be said of Charlie Feinberg that he was always gathering things together and dispersing them. He amassed the largest Whitman collection in the world, pulling together materials that, over a century, had spread into a hopeless scatter. His dream was to see it all housed in the place Whitman would have been most happy to see it—the Library of Congress, America's repository. His dream came very near to a full realization. But even while he sought that unity, Charlie also desperately wanted to see that Whitman materials were spread out around the country, that libraries in South Dakota and Wyoming and Iowa and Oregon had Whitman collections, too, and he purchased things that he could ship out—free of charge—to hundreds of libraries. Whitman was America's poet, he said, and students everywhere should have the opportunity to feel the excitement of encountering him in vivid ways. That became the process for Charlie, to pull it all together and scatter part of it around the continent. His ceaseless activity on behalf of Whitman studies wove a kind of magical field of good will and friendship among three generations of Whitman scholars; he set the tone and made Whitman scholarship not only one of the most intellectually exciting fields in American literature, but one of the warmest and most friendly of scholarly communities.

I remember particularly one of his phone calls on a winter night a little over a year ago. This time, when Charlie called, it was not about Whitman materials; his youthful-sounding voice was particularly strong, and he announced straight off that he wanted to talk about death. Let's face it, he said, I'm approaching ninety and I won't be around that much longer; let's face it and talk about it. And we did, for an hour or so, tough and direct and unsentimental talk, the way Charlie liked it. He was not going to go gentle into that good night, but he wasn't going to go into it kicking and screaming either. He was going to go with dignity, with the assurance that his life had had meaning, with the awareness that his love of Whitman had in a very real way guided his life toward meaning, with a firm sense that he had lived well and generously. "Without books," he once said, "my life would have been a desert." Anything but a desert, the landscape of Charlie Feinberg's life was lush with leaves, and leaves are his legacy.

ED FOLSOM

I first met Charles Feinberg in the autumn of 1944 in the New York apartment of Edward Naumberg, Jr., who had invited me to examine his valuable collection of Whitman family letters. Later I learned that Mr. Feinberg had a much larger collection of Whitman manuscripts, editions, and correspondence, though it was still small compared to the world-famous collection which he built in a few years.

My first impression of Mr. Feinberg was of a man astonishingly vigorous, exuberant, and voluble. He was enthusiastic about every detail of Whitman's life and bibliography. He had been very successful in several business ventures in Detroit, and had an income which enabled him to outbid nearly everyone else in the Whitman market. Once at an auction in New York City I told him that I had been unable to acquire the original *Drum-Taps* because he always outbid me. He said this time he would not bid on it, and that's how I acquired *Drum-Taps*, first and second issues. He often bought books he already had in order to give them to some college library that did not have them.

Though Mr. Feinberg might be called a greedy collector (most serious collectors of anything usually are), he was always generous in permitting scholars to use his holdings, even to publish unpublished manuscripts, though that decreased their market value. While I was doing research on my Whitman biography (*The Solitary Singer*) he invited me to stay at his house, while he supplied me with the documents I needed. Though he kept books in his large residential library, he stored manuscripts in a bank vault. At that time he did not have either a complete check-list or a bibliography. But he remembered exactly what he had, and brought me batches of manuscripts from the bank, for me to examine or copy, if I wished, at the desk he had assigned me. (That was before the days of Xerox, and copying was tedious and laborious.)

Mr. Feinberg commemorated the centennial of the first printing of *Leaves of Grass* with a large exhibition from his collection in the Detroit Public Library. The Library published, with his financing, a handsome catalogue (Detroit, 1955). That year he also prepared and distributed free to schools and colleges a traveling exhibition of Whitman manuscripts and other memorabilia enclosed in transparent laminated panels. It circulated widely over the United States for most of 1955, and even into the following year. I edited a *Walt Whitman Newsletter* for the New York Uni-

versity Press, in which I printed schedules of these exhibitions. That *Newsletter* continued at Wayne State University, with Mr. Feinberg's support, as the *Walt Whitman Review*, which in turn became the present *WWQR*.

When the New York University Press started an edition of *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman*, under the general editorship of Sculley Bradley and myself, the use of Mr. Feinberg's collection was indispensable. In fact, we would not have started it if he had not offered to permit the publication of all the letters and manuscripts in his collection. He also furnished illustrations for the volumes, and let us draw upon his vast bibliographical knowledge of Whitman. Meanwhile he was also publishing an occasional article himself, and giving many valuable lectures in this country and England.

Now that Charles Feinberg cannot be consulted, it is fortunate that his vast collection is still available to students and scholars in the Library of Congress. We miss the man, but the results of his fruitful efforts in gathering material will last through this and future generations. Like Walt Whitman in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," time and distance avail not: he is with us still.

GAY WILSON ALLEN

For nearly half a century Charles Feinberg was in a way Whitman's representative on earth and put all Whitman scholars, whether at home or abroad, in his debt. He indefatigably gathered the largest private collection of Whitman books and manuscripts and shared it with everyone instead of selfishly keeping it under lock and key as so many book-collectors usually do. He not only gave scholars free access to all that he had, but generously allowed them to publish the precious documents and letters he might have jealously kept for his own private enjoyment. He thus gave me permission to publish in *Etudes Anglaises* the important notes and remarks Whitman had written while reading Taine's *History of English Literature*. The thought that his collection would lose in value as a result did not deter him.

He ceaselessly encouraged Whitman studies, in particular by donating books to libraries, in America as well as abroad. He thus enriched the libraries of the two universities where I taught in Lyon and Paris.

He could guide and advise scholars in their research, for he knew Whitman's works as well as most of them, if not better, and he gave some very successful lectures on *Leaves of Grass* before enthusiastic student audiences in several countries. Though a self-taught amateur, he was as good as a professional. He ought to have been a scholar by profession and he was a scholar *manqué*, as we say in French. He did a scholar's job in particular by tirelessly hunting in all likely and unlikely places for new Whitman documents and by bringing them together for the convenience of biographers and critics. Without his zeal and diligence (and the extraordinary energy he displayed to the end of his life despite his declining health), many of Whitman's letters would no doubt have been lost and their existence forgotten. The publication of the six volumes of Whitman's correspondence would not have been possible without this preliminary hunt. It is also thanks to him that three more volumes of Whitman's table-talk were added to Horace Traubel's original ones. And similarly the *Walt Whitman Review* and *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* owed much to his moral and intellectual support.

In short, he was present and active wherever books or articles were being written on Whitman, and his name will forever remain associated with the name of the poet with whom he so fervently communed.

To me he was a dear friend.

ROGER ASSELINEAU

Charles Feinberg once told me that he left the deep thinking on Whitman to the professional scholars. He saw himself as "a kind of amateur" when it came to Whitman studies. In the manner of two ambassadors, we both managed to keep a straight face at this remark. I had read several of his essays on Whitman. Some amateur. "Well," he added, "I'm a businessman, not a professor." True enough, but on the other hand, by way of consolation, he did not have to apply for grants to examine the Feinberg Collection. He did his reading on the spot among the wealth of manuscripts, editions, letters, proofs, and other material he had assembled.

Mr. Feinberg was not one of those collectors who bought books and manuscripts and then kept them under wraps. His was a working collection which he knew inside out. Several of his essays touch on knotty problems in Whitman scholarship. For example, was the poet who wrote the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* really a "careless idler," a "loafing dreamer," a romantic pose that Whitman himself had perfected? Then Feinberg simply turned up bills, receipts, and other documentation that pinpointed the poet's practical side, his responsibility in supporting his family, and his abilities as a businessman ("A Whitman Collector Destroys a Whitman Myth," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 1958, 52:73-92).

Did Whitman scholars have difficulty with the number of copies of the first edition of *Leaves* that were printed and bound, with estimates ranging widely? Then Feinberg reviewed the bills to Whitman from several binders and established the precise number at 795. He was equally at ease with other collections dealing with the printing of the first edition, as well as with other matters relating to Whitman: "Although Frank B. Sanborn, in writing of the Emerson copy [1855] of *Leaves of Grass*, describes it as 'bound in paper,' it may have been a copy of this [previously mentioned] paper-board bound issue. Unfortunately, this copy, now at the University of Michigan, has been rebound, so we cannot check this. . . . Despite the comparatively large number of copies bound in boards and paper wrappers, no copy in boards is known to exist and only three copies in paper wrappers have survived, including the Houghton copy now in the Library of Congress, and Whitman's own copy . . . which belonged for a while to Horace Traubel and is now in the Oscar Lion Collection of the New York Public Library" ("Notes on Whitman Collections and Collectors," *Walt Whitman: A Catalog Based Upon the Collections of the Library of Congress*, The Library of Congress, 1955, xi-xii; v-xviii). In a similar manner, Feinberg also put an end to speculations about Whitman's health from 1863 to 1892, with his comprehensive essay "Walt Whitman and His Doctors," *Archives of Internal Medicine* (December 1964), 114:834-842. In another connection, Mr. Feinberg always saw Whitman as the complex figure he was, and in one essay focused on Whitman's painful awareness of the distortions and corruptions of the democratic ideal in contemporary American society ("Walt Whitman, Spokesman for Democracy," *Friends of Milner Library*, Illinois State Normal University, 1962, 11:2-12).

As a collector, Charles Feinberg delighted in the physical aspects of a book or manuscript. He enjoyed examining the typeface, the fine paper, the binding. Perhaps he best conveys the pleasures of collecting in his essay "Adventures in Book Collecting," *Among Friends* (Detroit Public Library, Spring, 1962), 26:1-6.

Mr. Feinberg's generosity to Whitman scholars is too well known to rehearse here. Among his other kindnesses, he supplied gratis photostats of items in his collection, and responded in detail, often by picking up the phone, to questions on Whitman, and always with encouragement and warmth.

In 1969 the Library of Congress acquired Mr. Feinberg's great collection. A year later, the variety and depth of the collection were surveyed, with illustrations, by John C. Broderick in "The Greatest Whitman Collector and the Greatest Whitman Collection," *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* (April 1970), 27:109-128. The Feinberg Collection in the Library of Congress has been catalogued, and one need only work with it day by day, selecting among its riches from 209 large containers housing approximately 25,000 items, fully to appreciate the legacy this great collector and absolutely first-rate person has left to Whitman scholars and to the national culture.

ARTHUR GOLDEN

I first met Charlie Feinberg on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte in 1972 when I was a graduate student at Duke University. Working on an edition of the Civil War letters of Walt Whitman's brother, I had gone to Charlotte to meet the famous Whitman collector and possibly to learn of manuscript material relevant to my project. I was not disappointed. Not only did I learn of a pocket diary that George kept for most of the war, but I met an extraordinary individual whose hobby had long ago become his heart's delight. Feinberg's campus "show" included a display of manuscript pages and first editions of *Leaves of Grass*, the free distribution of pamphlets and facsimiles whose cost he had largely underwritten, and a lecture that quickly established him as intimately familiar with the facts of the Whitman biography. (In 1976, following CBS's abortive production of "Song of Myself," a docudrama starring Rip Torn, he pointed out to me that Whitman had not been left-handed!) I spent two days with what was verily an engine of vitality when it came to Whitman and American literature in general. Charlie gave me both information on the whereabouts of manuscripts and photographs and (which turned out to be much more important) a new sense of Whitman the person as well as the poet. (He began collecting Whitman manuscripts as a teenager in Canada and once described to me his first thrill at handling a letter written by the author of *Leaves of Grass*.) By the time of our first meeting, he had turned over most of his collection to the Library of Congress, but he retained two or three first editions which he used in his lectures. I will never forget having—as a poor graduate student—to "protect" these volumes at our farewell breakfast when Charlie left the table for what seemed an interminably long telephone call. We met again in 1976 during the centennial celebration of my university. As old as the century but still indefatigable, he lectured almost non-stop to my classes and colleagues on his favorite subject for five days. That was our last meeting, though hardly the last of our correspondence, which aided me immensely in the next book I was writing. Yet this story can be told by scores of Whitman

scholars whose works bear the stamp of Charlie's generosity and enthusiasm. We will all miss him.

JEROME LOVING

The idealism and affirmation of Walt Whitman's poetry and vision—that faith which has led some to deny his relevancy in our troubled century—rest upon an unflinching awareness that death is part of the continuity of life. It is, then, not surprising that our greatest optimist composed the nation's greatest elegy, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," or that he is the singer of love and death, of the inevitable renewal of the personal and kosmic "procreant urge."

On learning in August 1863, in the midst of the nation's worst bloodshed, of the death of a young New York friend, Charles Chauncey, Whitman records his response with rare delicacy:

When I went up to my room that night towards 11 I took a seat by the open window in the splendid soft moonlit night, and, there alone by myself, (as is my custom sometimes under such circumstances), I devoted to the dead boy the silent cheerful tribute of an hour or so of floating thought about him, & whatever rose up from the thought of him, & his looks, his handsome face, his hilarious fresh ways, his sunny smile, his voice, his blonde hair, his talk, his caprices—the way he & I first met— . . . I loved him then, & love him now. . . .

On Anne Gilchrist's death in December 1885 he writes to her son Herbert: "Nothing now remains but a sweet & rich memory—none more beautiful, all time, all life, all the earth—I cannot write any thing of a letter today. I must sit alone & think." His response following the death of William D. O'Connor in May 1889 is similar: "After a great trouble, or death, a sort of *silence* & *not* trying words or to depict y'r feelings come to me strongest."

I am sad that I am writing a eulogy but at the same time glad that I have this opportunity to honor Charles E. Feinberg, whose memory remains an enduring pleasure which I share with my wife and all those others who knew him. I still delight in recalling those glistening eyes behind the glasses, the bubbling conversation, and the physical energy, expressed in his body language, of a man who spoke of his heart attack as he moved about with the vitality of a much younger man.

I have had the pleasure of knowing Charles for over thirty years, during which time we established an unusually close relationship between collector and scholar. From the outset we had one thing in common. He was a self-educated man who proudly wore his honorary Phi Beta Kappa key and whose life was changed when he discovered Walt Whitman. Although I had all the necessary credentials of a supposedly educated man, I had in 1953 when I began my work in Whitman no training in American literature, having had only a one-semester undergraduate course, but gradually became a self-educated or, perhaps more accurately, a Feinberg-educated Whitman scholar.

I did not know in 1953 when I began what I thought was only a bibliographical project, the completion of a checklist of Whitman letters which a colleague at Simmons College, Rollo G. Silver, had undertaken years earlier, that I would abandon Elizabethan literature for a new career which has given me enormous pleasure.

I hesitated in the beginning to approach Charles until I had familiarized myself with the major Whitman holdings in university and public libraries. It was late in 1953 or early in the following year that I introduced myself. In answer to my first inquiry about his collection, which at that time was not well known, he asked me how many letters I thought he owned. I thought, foolishly, that he had a hundred or more, when in fact he had over one thousand as well as almost two thousand letters of the poet's correspondents.

Despite my blunder and my ignorance, from the beginning of our relationship Charles had full confidence in what I would do as an editor, and I, frankly, had no intention of betraying his trust and his unending generosity in making the riches of his holdings available to me.

First there was the publication of the *Checklist* of 1957, in which my wife collaborated, and then there was the edition of letters which inaugurated the New York University Press edition of *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman*.

Charles was a successful businessman in Detroit, but Whitman was his passion and brought him many honors here and abroad in his lifetime and, more important, deep gratification. Unlike some collectors he was eager to have his collection published, for he felt a deep obligation to repay his debt to the memory of Walt Whitman. He lectured at many universities and before all kinds of audiences with an enthusiasm which staid scholars rarely evidence. His zest was translated into an irresistible sales pitch which Whitman, himself a master of promotion, would have thoroughly enjoyed.

On one occasion I was present when he brought a group of businessmen to his lovely home on West Boston Boulevard in Detroit. He gave each person a copy of Emerson's famous letter to Whitman on the appearance of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, and his voice as well as his eyes sparkled as he talked about Whitman, seemingly unaware that many in the room understood neither his enthusiasm nor his collection. I never told him that two of the businessmen cornered me during the afternoon to ask how much the Emerson letter was worth and what was the value of the collection, to which I pleaded academic ignorance.

While I edited the letters, Charles continued to add to his collection tirelessly, with the result that we were in constant correspondence, exchanging one or more letters weekly. I drew upon his almost inexhaustible knowledge of the poet's life, and he kept me informed about the search which created the greatest private collection of Whitman materials ever assembled. Our correspondence grew eventually to over two thousand letters, which are now part of the Feinberg Collection at the Library of Congress, and record the trials, tribulations, and, above all, excitement of collector and editor.

Charles was as proud as I that in 1961 the first two volumes of letters were reviewed by Richard Chase on the first page of the *New York Times Book Review*, and that in *Time* they received as much space as the latest "inside" book of John Gunther. At the reception that summer at the Brooklyn Public Library where Charles and I were photographed, he lovingly held and beamed at the two volumes which were indeed his as much as mine. After the appearance of the fourth and fifth volumes in 1969 Charles gave a party in my honor at the Grolier Club in New York. As I said then, and with undiminished gratitude repeat now, he was always my collaborator.

In recent years after the completion of the *Correspondence* we communicated less

frequently. Not too many years ago he telephoned me from Florida to report that he had acquired yet another letter. As he read the letter to me, I thought that it sounded familiar. When I checked the *Correspondence*, I found that it had not only been published but was in the Feinberg Collection. Charles was not perturbed. The dealer, he said, had purchased it in good faith, and he was delighted to return the letter to the Library of Congress, from which it had been stolen. The gesture was characteristic of a remarkable man.

In the words of the poet who united us in friendship, “. . . so now finally, / Good-bye—and hail! my Fancy.”

EDWIN HAVILAND MILLER

I'd like first to say that if it were not for Charles Feinberg there would be no *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*. It all began many years ago when Charlie did me the great honor to ask that I edit a periodical devoted to Whitman, a periodical that eventually evolved into *WWQR*.

It is, of course, painful to all of us who knew Charlie to realize that he is no longer here to encourage us to write about Whitman and *Leaves of Grass*. Charlie came from entirely different roots than the poet: born in London, moved by his parents to Canada as a boy, and finally settling in the United States as a young man, making Detroit his home.

“My life would have been a desert without books,” Charlie once said. And I can only paraphrase this with a twist by saying that *my* life would have been a desert without Charles Feinberg.

His genuine and ever-present enthusiasm for the materials of literature—especially American literature and most especially Whitman—and his enormous fund of information about these materials: all this is common knowledge in the world of literary scholarship. The great loss, to myself and to letters, is this store of information he had at his fingertips, and his eager willingness to make both the published and unpublished material in his collection available to scholars and students.

Many private collectors and indeed institutions preserve and hoard their manuscripts, books, and rare items for their favored few scholars, for their own prestige, or even for the best financial returns on their investments. But Charlie Feinberg's primary reason for collecting was to make available in one place for anyone the writings of the authors he was interested in. He repeatedly said to me and to others that he did not wish to compete with scholars and did not consider himself a scholar. Nonsense: anyone who heard him knows how vividly and vitally he narrated stories about Whitman and other authors.

Finally, if it were not for Charles Evan Feinberg, not only would the world have been a lesser place, not only would there have been no *WWQR*, but the ongoing *Collected Writings of Walt Whitman* (now over twenty volumes) would not have been possible. To the very end he kept saying, full of enthusiasm and eagerness, “Why don't we do this? Why don't we do that? What do you think about this? When can we get started on that?”

No words can sum up this man: he was unique, just as Walt Whitman was unique. He was, too, a close personal friend—no one will replace him.