

## WALT WHITMAN AND MRS. G.

MARION WALKER ALCARO

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"YOU CAN IMAGINE what such a thing as her Estimate meant to me at that time," Whitman told Traubel. "Almost everybody was against me—the papers, the preachers, the literary gentlemen—nearly everybody with only here and there a dissenting voice—when it looked on the surface as if my enterprise was bound to fail—bound to fail. Then this letter—these letters: this wonderful woman."<sup>1</sup> He was speaking, of course, of Anne Gilchrist, the Englishwoman of letters—widow of Alexander Gilchrist, biographer of Blake—who in 1869 fell passionately in love with Whitman when she read his poetry.<sup>2</sup> Her essay "A Woman's Estimate of Walt Whitman," based on a series of enthusiastic letters to William Rossetti and published in Boston in 1870, was the most perceptive analysis of *Leaves of Grass* that had yet appeared. Patently written by a woman of culture and refinement, "Estimate" was a priceless gift to the beleaguered poet. However, the brilliant and charming friend of the Carlyles, Tennysons, and Rossettis was to give him another and possibly even greater gift. During the nearly two years that Anne and three of her children lived in Philadelphia, Walt was an almost daily visitor at her house and sometimes lived there. During this period, for the only time in his life, Walt was the father figure in a household that included children and was presided over by "a true wife & mother"<sup>3</sup>—thus completing in actuality, for the only time in his life, the great Adamic persona of the poems. "We were a family," the aging poet would reminisce nostalgically to Traubel. "A happy family."<sup>4</sup>

For six years following the publication of "Estimate," Anne and Whitman exchanged letters. Hers were frequent, long, and eloquent. She described her marriage to colorless, pedantic Alex; his death from scarlet fever at the age of thirty-one, leaving her with four young children; her struggle to bring them up. And from her first letter she professed in fervent terms her overpowering love for Walt and her conviction that she was the ideal mate whom she believed the Tenderest Lover was seeking. If they could meet, she told him, if he could "look into these eyes and see the loving aspiring soul in them,"<sup>5</sup> she was certain that he too would be convinced that theirs would be a perfect union. Walt was taken aback. Since William Rossetti, to whom Anne was like a sister, had insisted that "Estimate" be published anonymously to protect her reputation, the poet had known her only as "the Lady," and had

sent his thanks to her through Rossetti. From her first letter, it was clear to Walt that this was an extraordinary woman, spiritually as well as intellectually, and that she was in love with a fantasy—with his own fantasy of himself. However, it was also clear that her love was totally sincere, and he was profoundly moved not only by its rapturous idealism but by its touching naïveté. Although Walt kept most letters in the Sargasso Sea of papers that littered his room wherever he lived, he preserved Anne's letters carefully, never allowing anyone else to read them during his lifetime.

At first Walt's letters to his ardent suitor were kind but wary. In time, however, since the possibility that she might actually cross the Atlantic seemed highly unlikely, they became cautiously affectionate. He sent her a gold ring from his finger, manuscripts of new poems, American newspapers with a mark under the address to indicate the state of his health, and kindly greetings to her children. And he sent American friends—among them Joseph Marvin and Kate Hillard—to call on her when they were in London. Then suddenly the situation changed. With the death of her aged mother, one of Anne's primary responsibilities ended; her oldest child Percy, a metallurgist, was established in his profession and engaged to be married; and Anne was free to leave England. Early in 1876, she wrote to Walt that at long last she and her three younger children were coming to America. Walt panicked. Thoroughly alarmed, the poet replied posthaste: "*My dearest friend, I do not approve of your American trans-settlement. I see so many things here you have no idea of—the social, and almost every other kind of crudeness, meagreness here (at least in appearance). Don't do anything towards it nor resolve in it nor make any move at all in it without further advice from me.*"<sup>6</sup>

But Anne was not to be dissuaded. Aside from her unshakable belief that she and Whitman would marry (a belief shared only with the poet), she also believed that the move to America would benefit her daughter Beatrice. Although twenty-two-year-old Bee had completed a year at the recently founded London School of Medicine for Women, in England women could not obtain a complete medical education since they were not admitted to any hospital for clinical training. However, at the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania, founded in 1850, clinical instruction at a number of hospitals was available to students. Herbert, who was nineteen and a student at the Royal Academy of Arts, would continue to paint and was "looking towards America full of cheerful hopes,"<sup>7</sup> his mother told Walt. Pretty seventeen-year-old Grace, who had vague plans to study either kindergarten teaching or singing, was coming to America "with a gay and buoyant curiosity."<sup>8</sup> Not one of the Gilchests had ever been outside England; not one of them had ever set foot on a ship; and Anne had never seen the Atlantic until 1875. Nevertheless, in spite of Percy's bitter resentment and Rossetti's brotherly reservations about the expedition, Anne exuberantly booked passage on the *Ohio*, leaving Liverpool for Philadelphia on Wednesday, August 30. Her household furnishings—including the beautifully carved furniture that she and Alex had col-

lected, her pianoforte, her music, pictures, china, silver, and books—would follow a week later.

Anne was forty-eight in the autumn of 1876. Fond of long walks in the countrysides of Essex and Surrey, she was a graceful woman with a light, quick step. Slightly above average height, she had dark hair—worn parted in the center and drawn smoothly back into two large puffs—and a lovely and unusually expressive face. Rossetti would write: “She had an eminently *speaking* face: not merely in the ordinary sense that the countenance was genuinely expressive of the mind and character, but it seemed besides to be full-charged with some message to which the mouth would give word: it was a mirror and a prelude. The eyes were the marked feature—full, dark, liquid, and extremely vivacious.”<sup>9</sup> Anne’s voice was especially memorable to those who knew her. Walt would say that “with its varied modulations and blended tones” it was “the tenderest, most musical voice” ever to bless his ears.<sup>10</sup> Like Walt himself, she was endowed with a natural charm that acted like a magnet wherever she went. And Horace Scudder—who, like many of Boston’s literati, was captivated by Anne when she visited that city—would recall with admiration her “fine presence” and “dignity which could bear the added title of quaintness without offense.”<sup>11</sup> This was the woman who must have walked the *Ohio*’s deck daily and watched with eager anticipation as the American shoreline came into view.

The *Ohio* docked at the port of Philadelphia on Sunday, September 10. The great Centennial Exposition had opened in Fairmount Park in May and the city was teeming with visitors. In January, Anne had asked Walt for the name of a boarding house where she and her children could stay while they looked for a house, since she would like to avoid hotels if possible. There is no record that Walt sent any information. The Gilchrists went to the Montgomery House, a hotel probably recommended by someone in England, possibly Moncure Conway. John Burroughs, with whom Anne had exchanged letters about raising funds for Whitman, had come to see the Exposition and was also staying there. He was the first American friend whom the Gilchrists met after their arrival. “Much we liked him,” Anne wrote to Rossetti.<sup>12</sup> And much the naturalist liked the Gilchrists. “Mrs. Gilchrist is a rosy woman without a gray hair in her head. I like her much,” he wrote to his wife. “The daughters are fresh and comely, like soft light-skinned peaches.”<sup>13</sup> Walt seems to have been uncertain about the exact date of Anne’s arrival. Burroughs must have sent word to the poet that she had arrived; and on Wednesday, September 13, Walt took the ferry to Philadelphia from Camden, where he was living with his brother George and his wife, and called on the Gilchrists at the Montgomery House.

Few meetings have been the subject of so much conjecture and speculation—and of so many conflicting opinions about what happened—as the first meeting of Anne Gilchrist and Walt Whitman. Each had a preconceived image of the other. For each it was meeting both a total stranger and a singularly

intimate friend. For each it was an intensely dramatic moment. And what did happen?

On one point there seems to be no disagreement. Like Burroughs, Walt was instantly taken with the Gilchrists. If he had feared that, when they met, the woman who had wooed him so passionately for six years would fling herself into his arms uttering ardent entreaties, his fears vanished when he met Anne Gilchrist with her gracious manners and gentle dignity. From the first moment he was charmed with the lovely Englishwoman and her attractive children and felt wonderfully comfortable with them. As a family there was no doubt about their admiration of him as a poet, or their affection for him as a man. And the warmth of family love and respect, as well as the exhilaration of being the center of attention, was something that the poet needed desperately. He had become more and more unhappy living in Camden. Not that George and Louisa Whitman were unkind to him—far from it. But George had no interest in his brother's literary achievements; freedom-loving Walt had to adjust his habits to family routine; and in Camden, where he had no friends, the poet, still recuperating from his stroke in 1873, felt neglected, isolated, "lonesome utterly."<sup>14</sup> Sometimes he escaped to his friends the Staffords in Kirkwood, New Jersey, where in the simple farm family he found a replica of his own home life when he was a boy. Now, in the Gilchrist family, he recognized another refuge, closer at hand, intellectually stimulating, and emotionally fulfilling. "Walt came over every evening from Camden and took supper with us and we had much talk," Burroughs wrote to his wife from the hotel. "He likes Mrs. Gilchrist and her family, and they like him. They are going to housekeeping and expect to spend several years in this country. It will be a god-send to Walt."<sup>15</sup>

So much for the joyous outcome of the meeting for Walt. What about Anne? What was the outcome for her when she came face to face with "the real I myself" that was Walt Whitman? Here there is wide disagreement.

With few exceptions, Whitman scholars have believed that Anne Gilchrist abandoned her one-sided courtship of the poet reluctantly and only gradually. They have pictured her returning to England "disappointed" and "disillusioned," or, more often, "defeated." And they have taken it for granted that, while she was in America, Anne was languishing with love for the poet and continuing to press her suit. One critic has even suggested that Walt had to retreat to Kirkwood to escape her "importunities."<sup>16</sup> There is no evidence anywhere to support these myths.

The scenario that evidence does support is that, when she and Whitman met, Anne knew that she had made a mistake. A wild error. A mistake of heroic proportions. The tall, majestic figure before her—with white hair cascading down to his shoulders and a long, full, white beard—was certainly not "a very plain personage," as he had described himself to her. On the other hand, he was clearly not the mighty lover she had imagined, who was yearning for an ideal mate. He was "a batter'd, wreck'd old man," broken in health,

dragging a paralyzed left foot, and looking older by twenty years than his age of fifty-seven. Anne's reaction had to have been split second, unblinking, incredibly valiant. And in a matter of moments her passion for the imaginary gave way to loving compassion for the actual that endured as long as she lived.

What is the evidence for this? It couldn't be clearer. If Anne had continued her fervent pursuit of the poet as critics have claimed that she did, if Walt had really been pressured by "importunities," if he had felt that Anne was secretly suffering, if he had had to be cautious about every word and glance and gesture when he was in her presence, he would not have been comfortable with Anne Gilchrist and her family—and heaven knows Walt was comfortable with the Gilchrists during the nearly two years that they lived in Philadelphia!

John Burroughs went house-hunting with the Gilchrists. Although they had been warned not to take a newly constructed house, the Gilchrists couldn't resist one on the outskirts of the city at 1929 North 22nd Street because it had "such a jolly lot of room." Their household "goods"—that, in addition to the beautifully carved furniture, Anne's blue and white china, and her handsome family silver, included Blake's "Elijah Mounted in the Fiery Chariot" and a collection of rare prints—must have arrived promptly from England. For on September 25 Walt made the first of his extended visits. He stayed until October 9.

Some of the dire predictions about taking a perfectly new house proved to be true. The range at 1929 wouldn't burn, pipes leaked, doors and windows and floors were so ill-fitted that daylight could be seen through them, and the furnace wouldn't heat. In December Anne wrote ruefully to Burroughs that although she and her children longed "for the society of a friend or two in this new house," she could not extend a definite invitation until "our landlord has fulfilled his promise of giving us a good brick furnace to warm our rooms—for I believe an American would be fairly perished here." She would write again, she told him, as soon as they could get the thermometer "up to a reasonable point in our rooms, say 65 degrees."<sup>17</sup>

But a chilly house seems not to have deterred Whitman. Throughout the fall he alternated visits to 1929 with visits to the Staffords. He visited "Mrs. G" on the evening of October 31, and spent November 18, 19, and 20—"dark & rainy days"—as well as November 24 with the Gilchrists.<sup>18</sup> In December he wrote Anne the following suggestion: "As (though better this winter) decidedly sensitive to the cold—how would it do for me to have a little sheet-iron stove, & some wood sawed & cut, & carried up in the south room, immediately adjoining the one I before occupied? Could it be done? Is there a hole in the chimney in that room—or place for a stove pipe?"<sup>19</sup> He followed this with a plaintive letter to Herbert: "Though I am pretty well physically it is very lonesome & dreary to me here, & I have been thinking all day how much I would like to come over & see you all, & stay awhile with you. Herbert, see

about the stove & have put up as soon as convenient—& have some *dry oak wood* sawed the right length, split, & carried up there, & piled in the room. Send me word before the end of the week. I wish much to come— Love to all.”<sup>20</sup>

The stove was installed, the wood supplied, and from then on the south room was always kept ready for Walt; Edward Carpenter would describe it as “a kind of prophet’s chamber.”<sup>21</sup> On January 16, 1877, Walt wrote to Burroughs from 1929: “I have been over here with the Gilchrists for a week—go back to Camden this afternoon or tomorrow—I have a nice room here with a stove and oak wood—everything very comfortable and sunny—most of all *the spirit* (which is so *entirely lacking* over there in Camden, and has been for more than three years). . . .”<sup>22</sup>

At 1929 Walt was truly a paterfamilias. With Anne’s children, he experienced, for the only time in his life, the love, companionship, concern for well-being, and even exasperation that go with being a parent. Herbert idolized him. During the first months that the Gilchrists lived in Philadelphia, Herby took copious notes of his conversations with the poet. He visited Walt in Camden and went with him to Kirkwood to visit the Staffords. The young artist did not study at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, as he and his mother had planned. Instead he spent more and more time at the Staffords’ farm, painting on his own—for the most part, painting Walt. How Herby felt about “Dear Darling Walt” would be made dramatically clear in the portrait of him that he would paint in 1887 (see Figure 1). In his celebrated portrait of the poet painted at about the same time, Eakins would emphasize the jovial side of Whitman’s nature. Herbert would emphasize his impressive size. Walt fits so tightly into Herbert’s portrait that he fills the picture; the top of his head touches the top of the canvas; his arms press against its sides. There is an unmistakable Olympian quality about the massive figure and the expression on the Jovian face is both august and benevolent. Herbert saw Whitman as God the Father.

Walt was especially devoted to Beatrice—Beatrice whose long, thick, blonde hair Tennyson had admired, saying “Hearts, little maid, will lie in those golden locks one day”<sup>23</sup>—and she returned his affection. “The elder one is the noble one,” Walt wrote to nineteen-year-old Harry Stafford, “the more I see of her the better I like her.”<sup>24</sup> And to young Jack Johnston, in describing the Gilchrists, he wrote: “There are two grown daughters—the eldest is a *first class trump*, she is my favorite every way.”<sup>25</sup> Immediately after the Gilchrists’ arrival in Philadelphia, Bee had enrolled in the Twenty-Seventh Annual Session of the Woman’s Medical College that began on October 5, and Walt was deeply interested in her medical studies. His visits to sick stage drivers at the New York Hospital before the war, and his devoted service to wounded soldiers in field hospitals and in army hospitals in Washington gave him a clear idea of what Bee was required to accomplish and endure. He admired her ambition, understood the emotional stress that was involved, and worried about

the effect that the hard work might have on her health. He wrote to her from Camden about a healthy young woman of twenty-six, a friend of friends in Washington, “who too overwhelmingly swamped herself as a student at your Phila: medical school . . . (crowding too much & too intense study into too short a time) resulting in terrible brain troubles & a general caving in, & now . . . of death lately in a lunatic asylum—just from sheer overwork, & too intense concentration.” He added: “My own trouble is an illustration of the same danger & I feel peculiarly sensible of it in others near to me.”<sup>26</sup>

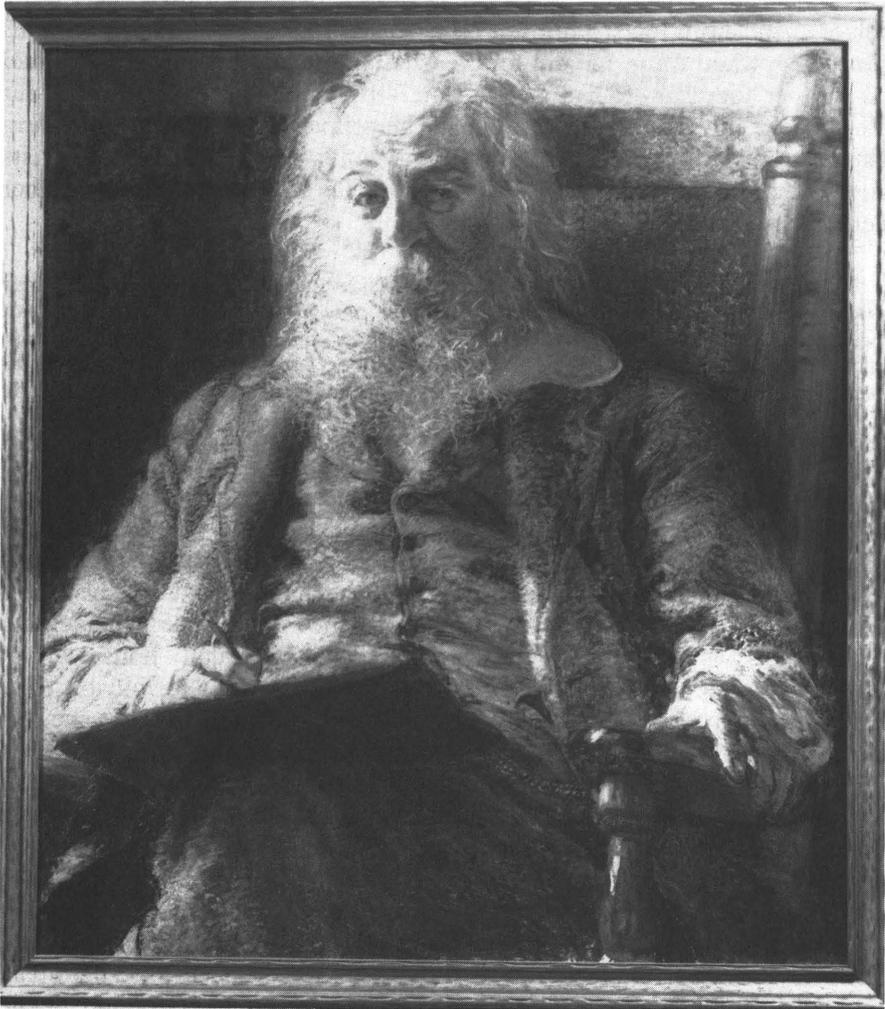


Figure 1. Portrait of Walt Whitman by Herbert Gilchrist (1887). The Walt Whitman Collection, Department of Special Collections, Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania.

Although years later Grace would write two magazine articles about Whitman, and close an unpublished memoir of her mother with an imagined picture of the poet's deathbed that pulls out all the stops of sentimentality, there was less rapport between the two while the Gilchrists were in America than between Walt and her brother and sister. Since young Grace—Giddy, as her family called her—had a limited interest in literature, conversation with the poet would have held no special fascination; and in the eyes of an eighteen-year-old he would have been incredibly ancient, Father Time himself. Walt seems to have been aware that, in spite of his overtures, there was a lack of enthusiasm toward himself on her part. In a letter to Harry Stafford from 1929, when Anne was out for the evening, he wrote: "The girls & I had our supper together, & had a jolly time—the younger daughter came out finely, & she showed that she could make herself very agreeable & interesting when she has a mind to."<sup>27</sup> In describing Walt's farewell to the Gilchrists when they left for England, Grace would write a revealing passage in her memoir of her mother:

Walt kissed each in turn, my mother, brother and sister. When it came to my turn, I drew back, I hardly know what youthful caprice actuated me, or whether it was caprice. In some part it was constitutional dislike to being kissed by "bearded lips" but the larger part lay in a jealous concern for my family. Subconsciously I felt they had invested so large a capital of love and devotion in the wayward poet, that by a certain rough, youthful justice, I was constrained to give no more.

"Not a kiss for Walt?" argued the "good grey poet." I shook my head, and remained silent. Carlyle has described his hero Teafelsdrockh [sic] as made "immortal by a kiss." I fear being young and callow I remained indifferent to any chance of immortality.<sup>28</sup>

Had she felt, even as a girl, that the "wayward poet" had imposed not only on her family's love and devotion, but on their hospitality? And did she resent the imposition? One can hardly blame her, since during the Philadelphia years Grace was her mother's principal helper with the daily housework at 1929—and in the nineteenth century daily housework was a formidable task.

Rossetti wrote to Anne that he was alarmed by her report that she was "servantless."<sup>29</sup> In Philadelphia, Anne had difficulty finding household help that "was not a source of more discomfort than comfort."<sup>30</sup> It is also probable that she could not afford competent help; for, although she had inherited her mother's modest estate, her means were limited and she had to manage her income carefully. However, as she told Walt in her first letter to him, in the early years of her marriage to impecunious Alex she had "learned to cook & turn my hand to all household occupation," and had "found it bracing, healthful, cheerful." Anne was an accomplished cook. Carlyle liked her bread so much that, when she and Alex lived next door to the Carlyles on Cheyne Row, she taught Jane to make it. Anne believed that cooking was an art and took pride in serving guests excellent food that she had prepared herself, rather than a servant's uninspired creations, or the wares of the local confec-

tioner with “everything looking like what it isn’t and tasting of nothing in particular.”<sup>31</sup> Iconoclastically, for one of her background and upbringing, she did not believe that doing housework was beneath a lady’s dignity. On the contrary, it was her impassioned conviction that if women wanted to achieve the equality that they were clamoring for they must give up the concept of “fine-ladyism”—and the rigid separation between upstairs and downstairs occupations—and learn to do their share of the bodily work that daily life required, rather than burdening fathers and husbands with the financial responsibility for having all of it done by others. This was a radical view and a courageous stance for an English gentlewoman in the 1870s. Nevertheless, one hopes that while she was in Philadelphia Anne found someone to at least carry firewood and empty ashes when Herby was away, and to take over the boiling-rubbing-sadiron ordeal of a nineteenth-century washday.

Whitman flourished at 1929. “Never saw Walt look so handsome—so new and fresh,” Burroughs wrote in his journal after spending a night with Walt at the Gilchrists’.<sup>32</sup> Grace would remember the poet singing about the house, or in his room before breakfast—opening bars and snatches from operas, street songs, even “The Star-Spangled Banner”—as “an outburst of pure emotional and physical *abandon* to the delight of living.”<sup>33</sup> As Burroughs had predicted, the Gilchrists and 1929 were a godsend to Walt. “We have good meals, & take our time over them—I have the best room in the house, breezy & cool (& the water in it),” he wrote to Jack Johnston on June 20, 1877.<sup>34</sup> And a day earlier he described life at 1929 to Harry Stafford:

. . . it is all very pleasant here, every thing is so gentle & smooth, & yet they are all so jolly & much laughing & talking & fun—we have first rate times, over our meals, we take our time over them, & always something new to talk about. . . . I don’t suppose it would be so much fun for you here—but it suits an old man like me, (& then it pleases one’s vanity to be made so much of). . . . At present it is about 11½ o’clock—Herbert is down stairs painting—the girls are sewing—Mrs. G is out shopping & at the groceries . . . & I am sitting here in my front room in the great bay window at a big table writing this—a nice cool breeze blowing in.<sup>35</sup>

Even when he was not actually in residence at 1929—and when he was not with the Staffords at Kirkwood—Walt would come over by the afternoon ferry from Camden every evening except Sunday for six o’clock “tea-supper,” riding the red cars of the Market Street line out to North 22nd Street. The “family” that gathered at the tea table is recreated in “The Tea Party” that Herbert painted from memory in 1884 (see Figure 2). In this oddly composed picture, Anne is pouring; Walt, dressed in gray and looking very old, is seated on her right; Grace, a pink flower in her dark hair, is seated on her mother’s left. The strange thing about the picture is that Walt is looking down, Anne is looking over his head, and Grace, her napkin in her hand, is looking off and up, as if she were listening for something. No one is looking at anyone else, not even at the artist. But in spite of its curious composition, or perhaps because of it, Herbert’s picture conveys a wonderful sense of sus-

pendent motion—as if the principals, like children playing “statue,” would come to life again at any moment, and continue their tea-drinking and conversation.

Sometimes in the evening Anne played the piano. Sometimes Walt recited poetry: seldom his own—with the exception of “The Mystic Trumpeter” that he loved to declaim—but often Tennyson’s. On summer evenings the family gathered outside on the “stoop,” with Walt seated in a large rattan rocking chair that had been carried out on the pavement for him, the others

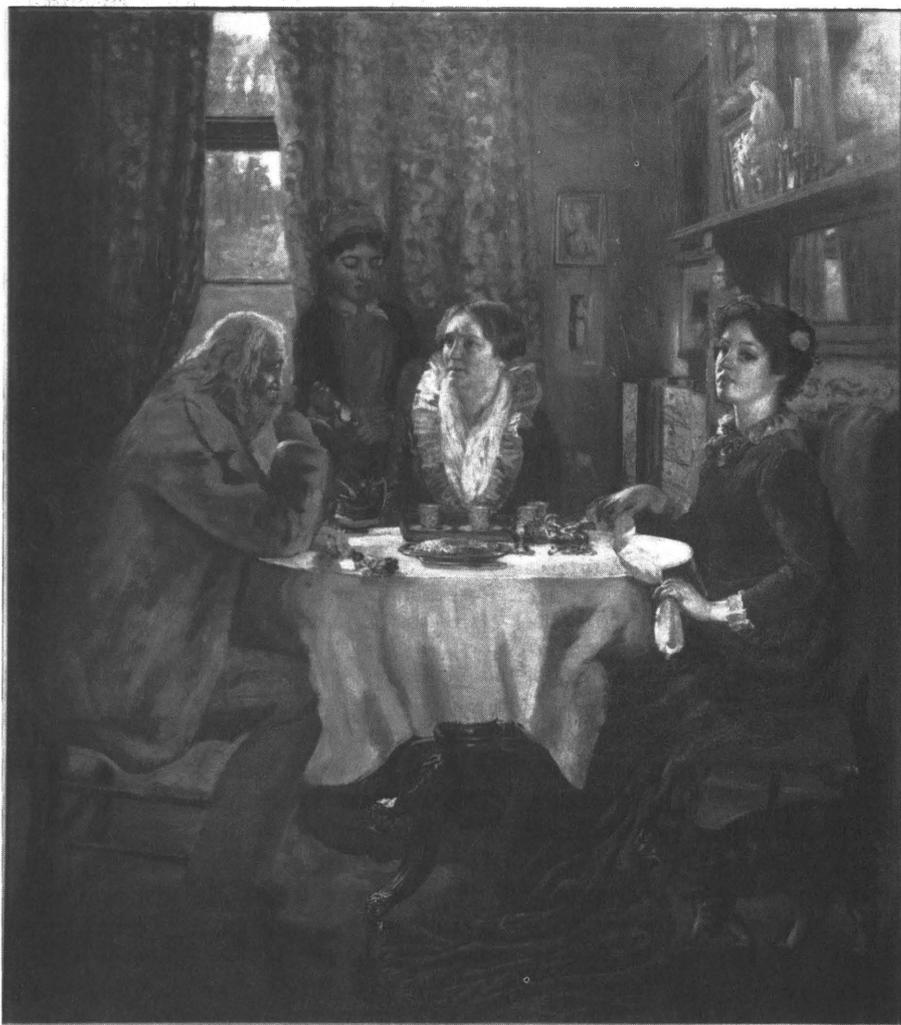


Figure 2. “The Tea Party” by Herbert Gilchrist (1884). The Walt Whitman Collection, Department of Special Collections, Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania.

sitting on the white marble steps. And always the principal entertainment was conversation. Grace would recall that, when the family was together, Walt would insist that the younger members be drawn into the discussion, no matter what the subject might be; he would turn to a young member and ask, "And what does G[iddy] say to this?"<sup>36</sup> But it was his conversations with Anne that delighted Walt most and lingered vividly in his memory.

Walt was not always taken with intellectual women. He detested "the gushing kind." He could not abide "the repartee woman—the woman who would prefer the false to the dull."<sup>37</sup> And solemnly intellectual women bored him beyond endurance. But conversation with brilliant, unaffected, serious but fun-loving Anne was a continuing source of wonder to Walt. Writing was not the best of her, he would tell Traubel: "The best of her was her talk—to hear her perfectly say these things which she has only imperfectly written. I shall never forget—never forget."<sup>38</sup> He marveled at her unrestricted range of thought; with her, he told Kennedy, "you did not have to abate the wing of your thought downward at all, in deference to any feminine narrowness of mind."<sup>39</sup> And, above all, he admired her gentle but adamant independence, her scorn of convention for convention's sake. Walt would recall with obvious relish that, with all her supreme cultivation, Anne "was gifted in a rare degree with a necessary don't-care-a-damnateness."<sup>40</sup> She was a woman, he was fond of saying, who "goes the whole distance of justifying woman—of proving her power, her equality, her consummate possibilities . . . she was *all* courage, bravery, power—yet all *womanly* too. . . . She was never conventional, unless she chose to be—unless she thought it as well to be conventional as not."<sup>41</sup>

The indissoluble bond that developed between Walt and Anne in the Philadelphia years was a genuine comradeship. The two had much in common. They held the same view of traditional theology; both were deeply interested in science; both loved music, flowers, and children. Communication with a strong, creative, masculine mind had always been the most exhilarating intellectual stimulus for Anne Gilchrist. With her father, her brother, her uncle Thomas Probert, and with Alex, the communication had been direct; with the study of Emerson, Rousseau, and Carlyle when she was a girl, it had been indirect. Here, once more, the communication was direct, personal, and on an almost daily basis; and Anne, like Walt, enjoyed it to the utmost. At 1929, they discussed art, literature, philosophy, politics, and personalities—always with spirit, if not always in agreement. Walt, who idolized "great mothers," was distressed by Anne's intense dislike of Queen Victoria. But he applauded her indignant defense of the Carlyles, whose domestic problems were the subject of much published gossip; and he attached "oh! so great an importance to all she said to me on that subject."<sup>42</sup> Anne was the author of six scientific essays published in British journals between 1857 and 1862, with titles ranging from "What is Electricity?" to "Our Nearest Relation," a study of the striking similarity between the gorilla and man. And it

was as a scientist that Walt found Anne—his “science-friend”—most fascinating. In his opinion, in science “she would be classified with the extreme radicals if anywhere; indeed, I imagine she’d take the logic of science and follow it out to the full, even beyond the adventurous limits of the savant himself.”<sup>43</sup> Anne often told Walt that she firmly believed that, in spite of the turbulent and revolutionary tendencies of the time, humanity was “going somewhere.” He would recall that it was “Mrs. Gilchrist’s favorite expression—when she looked out on this surging seething man—that we were all going somewhere—not only that, but somewhere good.”<sup>44</sup>

Whitman invited his friends to 1929 and entertained them there as freely as if it were his own home. “Come to Mrs. Gilchrist’s 16th or 17th—I will prepare them—I will be there,” Walt wrote to Burroughs before one visit.<sup>45</sup> “I have invited Mr. Eldridge, a Washington friend, to come up to your house & spend a couple of hours this evening,” he wrote to Herby from Camden on another occasion. “Please have a fire made ready in the stove up in the room.”<sup>46</sup> Fortunately, entertaining in her own home was one of Anne’s greatest pleasures, for Walt had numerous guests. Joseph Marvin came down from Boston to see the poet and stayed overnight. Joaquin Miller, one of Walt’s old friends, came to tea. George and Louisa Whitman came to dinner. Mannahatta and Jessie Whitman, Walt’s young nieces from St. Louis, spent five days at 1929 when they were visiting in Camden. And in May, 1877, at Walt’s suggestion, Edward Carpenter came to spend a week.

The young Englishman, who had been deeply moved by the “Calamus” poems when he read *Leaves of Grass* at Cambridge in 1869, had corresponded with Whitman for several years and had come to America specifically to see him. Walt had not been expecting him and shortly after Carpenter’s sudden appearance in Camden invited him to join him at the Gilchrist’s. Carpenter arrived, bag in hand, to find the whole family sitting out on the doorstep, with Walt seated in his chair, the moonlight shining on his hair and beard. “After this for a week of evenings I made one of the party. How pleasant it was!” he would recall warmly.<sup>47</sup> The Gilchrist’s, particularly Grace, were equally taken with the handsome young poet, who “slid into friendly intimacy in no time.”<sup>48</sup> Writing in 1906, still dazzled by his idol Whitman, Carpenter would picture his hostess only as a figure in the background, describing her briefly as “a capable and large-minded woman,” the first Englishwoman to recognize Whitman’s genius publicly.<sup>49</sup> However, writing in 1924, more than forty years after his visit to Philadelphia—and six years after the publication of Anne’s letters to Whitman had created a sensation on both sides of the Atlantic—he would make her a focal point of his stay at 1929. “The general situation was evident enough—it could hardly be concealed,” he would write knowingly, as if suddenly endowed with Cat-Scan hindsight. “I saw that Anne Gilchrist was suffering.”<sup>50</sup> And he was undoubtedly right. Much as she enjoyed having guests, after a week of extra bed-making, bread-making, shopping for groceries, breakfasts, dinners, and “tea-suppers,” it is

very likely that Anne was suffering acutely—from fatigue.

Did Whitman impose on the Gilchrists? Of course he did. Walt imposed on all his friends—Traubel, Harned, the other young men from Philadelphia and Camden who devoted themselves to the poet in his final years, Mary Davis, John and Ursula Burroughs, the Philadelphia Johnstons, the New York Johnstons, the Staffords. In spite of his idiosyncrasies and monumental absorption in himself—and even when he was a very old man preoccupied primarily with his bowels—Walt's mesmerizing charm held his admirers spellbound, and they allowed him to impose as if he were granting a privilege. In all fairness, the name of Anne Gilchrist must be added to the list of indulgent genuflectors. In her memoir of her mother written in the 1920s, Grace, who seems to have been immune to Walt's charisma, would comment caustically on "the Poet on the other side of the Atlantic, the inspirer of ideal affection and devotion," and ask: "Was he not in reality a strange blend of personalities? the Walt Whitman Superman, creator of 'Leaves of Grass' and the man Whitman of many moods, good and bad. Wayward, colossal, in egotism with an almost childlike vanity and love of applause and notoriety."<sup>51</sup> Surely Anne, a woman known for her astuteness, was not blind to the duality of Walt's personality that was so apparent to her daughter. Surely, as she went to the market for extra groceries, did his needlework, and cheerfully took in his guests—as she created, month after month, an ideal domestic setting for the poet—she was aware that she was being imposed upon. But, like her co-admirers of Walt, she was a willing victim of his charm and unflinchingly paid the price for the pleasure of his company. However, it was not only Walt's charm that Anne found irresistible. As Grace shrewdly observed, there was something child-like about the poet. Others have pointed out that Whitman accepted what was offered to him by his friends—money, hospitality, gifts—as a child unquestioningly accepts what is offered. Anne Gilchrist's mothering instincts were as strong as her sexuality, and the childlike was irresistibly appealing. For as long as she lived, her devotion to the poet was loving, loyal, serving, and also tenderly maternal.

Walt not only enjoyed his own guests at 1929, but those who were not initially his. Moncure Conway had given Anne a letter of introduction to Professor J. Peter Lesley, state geologist of Pennsylvania and secretary of the American Philosophical Society, and the Lesley family and the Gilchrists became lifelong friends. Caroline Virginia Still Wiley, a classmate of Bee's at the Woman's Medical College, was a guest at 1929. Daughter of two of the founders of the Underground Railroad, Caroline would be one of America's first black women physicians, and, as Dr. Caroline Virginia Still Anderson, would have a long and distinguished career in medicine and education in Philadelphia. The frequent visits of a Russian prima donna, from whom Grace was taking singing lessons, were a special treat for Walt. Grace would recall that "he would listen to her with keen enjoyment. She had a fine contralto voice. She sang songs from 'Faust' and from Glinka's 'A Life for the

Czar.’”<sup>52</sup> The prima donna and her children were not the Gilchrists’ only Russian visitors. “The integuments of national character are always markedly interesting—to me full of attractions. It must have been ten years ago, I met Russians—a number of them—at Mrs. Gilchrist’s,” Walt told Traubel in 1889. “There was a Russian vessel came up into the harbor about then—several of her crew got into the habit of stopping at Mrs. Gilchrist’s—so of course I met them, benefited, enjoyed. One was young—fell in love with one of her daughters—even proposed marriage which was declined.”<sup>53</sup> Did Grace’s teacher introduce the Russian crew to the Gilchrists? And was it Giddy or Bee with whom the young sailor fell in love?

Walt spent the 1877 Christmas season—December 10th to 30th—in 1929. It was a joyous holiday for him. “Out everyday—evenings at Mrs. G’s,” he wrote in his Daybook. “—walks at 1 & 2 o’clock along Chestnut st—the crowds of promenaders, purchasers, visitors from the country &c . . . the toy-sellers along the curbstones—the shows of goods & really rich, wonderful, ingenious things in the shop windows.”<sup>54</sup> On Christmas Eve, Walt went with Joaquin Miller to the opening of Miller’s new play “The Danites,” and two nights later the poet took the Gilchrists to see it. “Christmas is kept pretty much as it is in England. The streets are quite green with the display of sapling fir trees for the children,” Anne wrote to Mrs. Simmons, her neighbor at Shottermill in Surrey, on December 23. “We shall have an American Poet & a Russian singer to dinner with us on Christmas day. The latter and her children cannot speak a word of English, but we get on in French.”<sup>55</sup>

In Anne’s long woman-to-woman letter to Mrs. Simmons, in addition to enthusiastic descriptions of America’s “boundless productiveness, its beauty, its brilliant climate, its keen-witted, energetic, high-spirited people”—and of American cranberries (“not like those poor little things we see in England”), American “light delicate cakes, rolls, biscuits,” and rocking chairs (“the most comfortable chairs in the world”)—there is a note of homesickness. She confesses that when she gets to thinking about “dear friends and family scenes, I feel as if I must start off at once on our return.” Although she rejoices “that we came—to see it all with our own eyes,” she also rejoices “that I do not feel as if I ought to stay—as I should have done if it had offered manifestly better advantages and opportunities for Herby and Bee than England.” And, much as she had enjoyed it, she seems to have had enough of 1929. She and her children will “hold on” in the States for another year and a half, Anne tells her friend, but they will be leaving Philadelphia after Bee’s graduation, since Bee is anxious to serve a year’s internship in Boston—“and we to see something more of America.”<sup>56</sup>

Bee received her degree of Doctor of Medicine at the Twenty-Sixth Commencement of the Woman’s Medical College on March 14, 1878. After graduation, both she and Caroline Wiley were accepted as interns at the New England Hospital for Women and Children, where they would be roommates. Walt wrote to Burroughs on March 29 that “the G’s break camp here

in three or four weeks.”<sup>57</sup> The Burroughs had invited the Gilchrists to stop at Esopus for a visit after they left Philadelphia, but Anne explained later that this was impossible because she could not tell “when we should get off, we had planted our tent so firmly and spread our possessions around us so, at 1929.”<sup>58</sup> She lent her pictures and prints to the New Century Club, “a ladies club of which I am a member, to hang on the walls of their beautiful drawing-room, which not only gives them the opportunity of enjoying them, but was much better for my treasures.”<sup>59</sup> Her “jolly antique furniture” was lent to the loan exhibition of the Pennsylvania Museum, “where they will store it for me as long as I please for nothing, and glad to have it.”<sup>60</sup> China, glass, blankets, carpets—“all that would pack in moderate compass”—were stored.<sup>61</sup> On April 23 Walt spent his last evening at 1929. A few days later, Herby went to Brooklyn to begin studying painting in New York, Bee went to Boston, and Anne and Giddy went to the Round Hill Hotel in Northampton, Massachusetts, recommended by the Lesleys, for a summer’s rest. 1929 “stands empty and forlorn now,” Anne wrote to Burroughs from Round Hill.<sup>62</sup> And so ended what three years later, looking back, she would call: “Strange episode in my life!”<sup>63</sup>

Anne and Walt met again in New York in the late spring of 1879, shortly before the Gilchrists returned to England. It was a happy reunion, but with Anne and her children living in a boarding house at 112 Madison Avenue and Walt visiting the Johnstons at their house on Fifth Avenue, the domestic intimacy at 1929—the sense of being a family—was missing. For both Anne and Walt, 1929 standing “empty and forlorn” was a paradise lost that they both remembered nostalgically and hoped to recreate. It was Anne’s dream that, when she had a home of her own again in England, Walt would join her there—“for you belong to one country as much as to the other,” she told him.<sup>64</sup> Walt had a dream of his own. “Herb,” he had written from Camden in February, 1879, “why don’t you all get a big cheap house in Brooklyn by the month or quarter, with the privilege of keeping it for two or three years?—room enough for all hands—Percy & his if he chooses to come on—a room for me—I would come on & stay & pay a moderate board—Can’t we make it pay?”<sup>65</sup>

The Gilchrists left New York on the *Circassia*, bound for Glasgow, on June 7. There are two versions of Anne and Walt’s farewell. Both are undoubtedly authentic. In 1912, J. H. Johnston told Clara Barrus that, on the Gilchrists’ last day in New York, Anne and Walt said goodbye at his home. The two had a long private conference in the parlor, Johnston told Dr. Barrus, and when they rejoined the family it was obvious that both were deeply moved. Neither ever revealed what passed between them. In her memoir of her mother, Grace recalled that Walt came to 112 Madison Avenue on the eve of their departure to say a last goodbye. The Gilchrists were gathered in the parlor of their boarding house, and Walt kissed each in turn, Anne, Herbert, and Beatrice—all except obstinate Grace. “Walt turned and walked

slowly to the door and we followed him to the front entrance as he descended the flight of steps. He turned when half way down and said sadly, 'It seems kind of tragic-like your all going back to England.'"<sup>66</sup>

Walt and Anne never met again. But as long as she lived—and even when she knew that she was dying (although, until the seriousness of her condition could no longer be concealed, she told no one, not even her children, that she had cancer of the breast)—the poet's welfare was one of Anne's primary concerns. On July 20, 1885, the day she wrote her last letter to Walt, she also wrote her seventh letter in four weeks to Edward Pease about a campaign to raise funds for Whitman that she and Rossetti were organizing.<sup>67</sup> On September 20, Herby, apparently still not overly alarmed, reported to Walt that his mother was "very sickly." But on November 19 he sent Walt the dreadful news that her condition was critical. Anne died on November 29.

Critics and scholars have made widely varying assessments of Anne Gilchrist's role in the life of Walt Whitman. She has been acclaimed as the first great critic of *Leaves of Grass*.<sup>68</sup> And she has been disparaged as a "pathetic Victorian lady,"<sup>69</sup> whose trans-Atlantic pursuit of the poet provided "an amazing spectacle, the stuff of tragedy for some writers, of comedy to others."<sup>70</sup> However, Walt himself unequivocally defined her role. "Rossetti mentions Mrs. Gilchrist," he told Traubel. "Well, he had a right to—almost as much right as I had: a sort of brother's right: she was his friend, she was more than my friend. I feel like Hamlet when he said that forty thousand brothers could not feel what he felt for Ophelia."<sup>71</sup> It was clear to Walt—if not always to posterity—that his relationship with Mrs. G, beginning with the happy interlude at 1929, was one of the most enduring and all-nurturing relationships that he ever experienced with any woman.

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## NOTES

1 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Co., 1906), 1:218.

2 Anne Burrows was born in London, February 25, 1828. Her mother, née Henrietta Carwardine, was descended from an old and distinguished family in Essex; her father, John Parker Burrows, was a solicitor in London. Until she was sixteen, Anne attended a school for girls at Highgate, where she was an outstanding student. After completing the courses offered there, she continued her education on her own, reading widely and eclectically. She was especially interested in science and philosophy. On February 4, 1851, she married Alexander Gilchrist—barrister-at-law turned writer—who died in 1861. After his death, with the help of William and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, she completed her husband's biography of Blake, published in 1863, and edited a second edition in 1880.

Until now only two books have been written about Anne Gilchrist. In 1887, a year and a half after her death, her son published a hastily assembled biography of his mother; and in 1900 Elizabeth Porter Gould wrote a sentimentalized version of this memoir. Since both Her-

bert Gilchrist and Gould wrote their biographies before the publication in 1918 of Anne's ardent letters to Whitman, neither was aware that her initial attraction to the poet who boldly hymned the joy of sex was not purely intellectual.

In studies of Whitman written before the publication of her letters, Anne is usually mentioned only briefly—as the author of a favorable critique of *Leaves of Grass*, as one of the many distinguished persons who traveled long distances to visit the poet. Although both John Burroughs and Edward Carpenter had known Anne for the last ten years of her life, and both had been her guests in Philadelphia and in Hampstead after her return to England, Burroughs does not mention her at all in his *Whitman: A Study* (1896), and Carpenter, in *Days With Walt Whitman* (1906), notes only that she was the first Englishwoman to publicly recognize Walt's genius. Bucke, who met Anne in Brooklyn, does not mention her in the text of his *Walt Whitman* (1883), but does acknowledge her position as a Whitman critic by including excerpts from "A Woman's Estimate of Walt Whitman" in his book's appendix. In *Walt Whitman: The Man* (1896), Thomas Donaldson confines mention of Anne to a single sentence describing Walt's reaction to the news of her death. However, two pre-1918 Whitman scholars, reading between the lines of "Estimate," seem to have sensed that Anne's ecstatic admiration of Whitman was something more than literary enthusiasm. In *Whitman* (1906), Bliss Perry, although not indulging in any romantic speculations, indicates his belief that Anne was a person of singular importance in Walt's life by mentioning her many times in his text and devoting four pages to "Estimate," Anne's three-year residence in America, and her intimate friendship with the poet as long as she lived. In his *Life of Walt Whitman* (1905), it is also clear that Henry Bryan Binns suspects that "Estimate" was no ordinary rave review; for, although he too refrains from unconfirmable speculations, he points out—and he was the first to do so—the similarity between the Whitman-Gilchrist friendship and the friendship of Michelangelo and Vittoria Colonna.

The publication of her letters established Anne Gilchrist as a major figure in Walt Whitman's life. However, post-1918 critics have judged her and her passion for the poet from widely divergent points of view. Clara Barrus in *Whitman and Burroughs: Comrades* (1931) found Anne, in her capacity to love, as great as Walt in his poems. In contrast, in *Walt Whitman* (1933), Fredrik Schyberg saw the whole episode as a pitiful tragedy. In their biographies of Whitman, Henry Seidel Canby (1943), Gay Wilson Allen (1955), and Justin Kaplan (1980), have offered comprehensive and essentially similar assessments of Anne. They have pictured her as a woman of courage and dignity, whose "Estimate"—although it may have been a love letter in disguise—was a major contribution to Whitman's career; and whose pilgrimage to America—although it may have been an incredibly foolhardy expedition—resulted in a bond of love and friendship that enriched the lives of both.

3 *The Correspondence*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1961–1977), 2:91. Hereafter abbreviated *Corr*.

4 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (1907, rpt. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1961), 2:292.

5 *The Letters of Anne Gilchrist and Walt Whitman*, ed. Thomas B. Harned (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1918), 63.

6 *Letters*, 145.

7 *Letters*, 134.

8 *Letters*, 135.

9 Herbert Harlakenden Gilchrist, *The Life and Writings of Anne Gilchrist* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1887), xiv.

10 Clara Barrus, *Whitman and Burroughs: Comrades* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1931), 151.

- 11 Horace Scudder, "Anne Gilchrist," *Men and Letters: Essays in Characterization and Criticism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1887), 214.
- 12 Herbert Gilchrist, 228.
- 13 Barrus, 138.
- 14 *Corr.*, 2:248.
- 15 Barrus, 138.
- 16 Edwin Haviland Miller, ed., *Corr.*, 3:62, note 94.
- 17 Barrus, 138.
- 18 *Daybooks and Notebooks*, ed. William White (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 1:47, 49. Hereafter abbreviated *DBN*.
- 19 *Corr.*, 3:66.
- 20 *Corr.*, 3:74.
- 21 Edward Carpenter, *Days with Walt Whitman* (London: Ruskin House, 1906), 17.
- 22 *Corr.*, 3:74.
- 23 Typescript of unpublished memoir of her mother by Grace Gilchrist Frend, 8. Feinberg Collection, Library of Congress.
- 24 *Corr.*, 3:87.
- 25 *Corr.*, 3:88.
- 26 *Corr.*, 3:105.
- 27 *Corr.*, 3:87.
- 28 Frend, 82-83.
- 29 *Letters of William Michael Rossetti*, ed. Clarence Gohdes and Paull Franklin Baum (Durham: Duke University Press, 1934), 102.
- 30 Frend, 43.
- 31 Anne Gilchrist, "A Neglected Art," *Macmillan's Magazine* (12 October, 1865), 499.
- 32 Barrus, 160.
- 33 Grace Gilchrist, "Chats with Walt Whitman," *Temple Bar* (February, 1898), 201-202.
- 34 *Corr.*, 3:88.
- 35 *Corr.*, 3:86.
- 36 Frend, 25.
- 37 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (1912, rpt. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1961), 3:268.
- 38 Traubel, 2:268.
- 39 William Sloane Kennedy, *Reminiscence of Walt Whitman* (1896, rpt. New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1973), 9.
- 40 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), 5:150.
- 41 Traubel, 5:12-13.

- 42 Traubel, 2:238.
- 43 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (1952, rpt. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1959), 4:93.
- 44 Traubel, 5:509.
- 45 *Corr.*, 3:78.
- 46 *Corr.*, 3:104.
- 47 Carpenter, 18.
- 48 Frend, 22.
- 49 Carpenter, 16.
- 50 Edward Carpenter, *Some Friends of Walt Whitman: A Study in Sex Psychology* (London: Atheneum Press, 1924), 8.
- 51 Frend, 9.
- 52 Frend, 23.
- 53 Traubel, 5:429.
- 54 *DBN*, 1:75-76.
- 55 Letter from Anne Gilchrist to Mrs. Simmons, December 23, 1877. Feinberg Collection, Library of Congress.
- 56 Letter from Anne Gilchrist to Mrs. Simmons, December 23, 1877. Feinberg Collection, Library of Congress.
- 57 *Corr.*, 3:113.
- 58 Barrus, 145-146.
- 59 Frend, 51.
- 60 Barrus, 145-146.
- 61 Barrus, 146.
- 62 Barrus, 145.
- 63 *Letters*, 190.
- 64 *Letters*, 179.
- 65 *Corr.*, 3:148.
- 66 Frend, 82-83.
- 67 Anne's letters to Pease are in the University of Virginia Library.
- 68 Paul J. Ferlazzo, "Anne Gilchrist, Critic of Walt Whitman," *South Dakota Review* 10 (Winter 1972-73), 79.
- 69 *Corr.*, 5:6.
- 70 *Corr.*, 2:2.
- 71 Traubel, 2:292.