

THE EARLIEST FRENCH REVIEW OF WALT WHITMAN

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MEASURED BY THE CRITERION of public recognition, the decade of the 1850s was a disappointing one for Walt Whitman. Two editions of his poetry were published, but neither in satisfactory fashion and neither received with the kind of public acceptance or critical acclaim for which he hoped. But in an anonymous self-review he wrote in the first week of the new decade, Whitman announced a new edition of his poems and began the 1860s with renewed hopes of reaching a national audience:

We are able to declare that there will also soon crop out the true "Leaves of Grass," the fuller grown work of which the former two issues were the inchoates—the forthcoming one, far, very far ahead of them in quality, quantity, and in supple lyrical exuberance.

Those former issues, published by the author himself in little pittance editions, on trial, have just dropped the book enough to ripple the inner first-circles of literary agitation, in immediate contact with it. The outer, vast, extending, and ever-widening circles, of the general supply, perusal, and discussion of such a work, have still to come. The market needs to-day to be supplied—the great West especially—with copious thousands of copies.¹

He had no book publisher supporting him at the time, although he had already begun to pursue his own cause by sending out poems for periodical publication to the *Atlantic*, *Harper's*, and local papers. But he did have, by the beginning of the new year, a forum for his ideas and work in the influential literary weekly, the New York *Saturday Press*, and he had the enthusiastic backing of its editor and publisher, the witty Henry Clapp, Jr.

Today relatively little is known or written about Clapp, but in his heyday of 1859–60 he was one of the most interesting, colorful figures on the American literary scene—the so-called king of Bohemia. Born on Nantucket in 1814, Clapp had had a varied career—as sailor, editor of a small New England newspaper, secretary to Albert Brisbane, resident of Paris—before founding the *Saturday Press* in late 1858 on extremely modest capital. Coming upon a rapidly expanding periodical market dominated by popular story weeklies, ladies' magazines, and all-purpose monthly magazines, Clapp designed the *Press* as a high-quality weekly paper which, unlike the vast majority of current periodicals, would print only serious imaginative and nonfictional work and would pursue a policy of editorial candor and independence. At a time when the line between newspapers and the book publishing industry was not yet clearly drawn and newspapers routinely printed puffs in ex-

change for publishers' advertisements, the fiercely independent Clapp adamantly made it his policy to refuse to publish puffs or to notice publishers' books for fear of losing his editorial autonomy.

The strong-minded editor of the *Saturday Press* of this period was vividly described by his assistant editor as "brilliant and buoyant in mind; impatient of the commonplace; intolerant of smug, ponderous, empty, obstructive respectability; prone to sarcasm; and he had for so long a time lived in a continuous, bitter conflict with conventionality that he had become reckless of public opinion. His delight was to shock the commonplace mind and to sting the hide of the Pharisee with the barb of satire."² To judge from the reactions of contemporary publications, Clapp did indeed shock and offend many people of more conventional taste than his own; and the *Press* and its circle of supporters and contributors soon earned a reputation throughout the United States and England for its strong views, satiric tone, and literary excellence. A considerable number of the most talented writers of the younger generation became contributors to the *Press*, including William Dean Howells, Edmund Stedman, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Fitz-James O'Brien, William Winter, Ada Clare, and Artemus Ward. But in time, the paper became most closely identified with the poetry and the cause of Walt Whitman.

"It is the painful truth," wrote Clapp in the September 15, 1860 *Press*, "that the authors and the books now most popular with the American People, are, with scarcely a single exception, beneath mediocrity in character." The single major exception, for Clapp, was the poetry of Whitman, which, despite minor reservations he held about the irregularity of its form, he did his best to publicize as the leading American literary achievement of the time. Beginning with the printing of "A Child's Reminiscence" (later called "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking") in the Christmas edition of 1859, the first Whitman poem to be published since the issuance of the 1856 *Leaves of Grass*, and continuing right up until the paper's failure a year later, Clapp consistently attempted to keep Whitman before the public eye by printing and reprinting pieces by, about, and in imitation of Whitman. During the course of 1860, he published in the paper a handful of the new third-edition poems—"You and Me and To-day" (January 14; later retitled "With Antecedents"), "Poemet" (January 28; "Of Him I Love Day and Night"), "Poemet" (February 4; "That Shadow My Likeness"), and "Mannahatta" (June 9) and "Longings for Home" (June 9; "O Magnet-South")—and reprinted from the *New York Times* a poem written too late for inclusion in the volume, "The Errand-Bearers" (June 30; later called "A Broadway Pageant"). Clapp capitalized on the surge of interest inspired by the third edition of *Leaves* by printing or reprinting parodies and imitations of Whitman—"he is more open to parody and burlesque than any living figure," wrote a contemporary—by, among others, Richard Grant White ("I happify myself," June 2), Henry Leland ("Enfans de Soixante-Seize," June 16), William Winter ("The Torch-Bearers: A Paean for the Fourth of July," July 7), and Bret Harte ("San Fran-

cisco," August 18).³ He also published promotional releases from Thayer and Eldridge, publishers of the new edition, and printed a wide variety of reviews and notices culled from American and foreign publications. Clapp's own assessment of the new *Leaves of Grass*, one of the more searching ones of the year, appeared in the *Press* on May 19; and other reviews solicited by him appeared through the spring and into the summer.

The promotion of Whitman's career in 1860 was plainly a matter of collaboration between the two men. In a letter he wrote to Whitman, Clapp stated forthrightly his intentions for publicizing the book and for seeing *Leaves* through the press: "What I can do for it, in the way of bringing it before the public, over and over again, I shall do and do thoroughly—if the S P is kept alive another month. We have more literary influence than any other paper in the land, and as your poems are not new to me, I can say it will all be used for the book—in the interest of poetry."⁴ Throughout 1860, the fate of Whitman was to be tied to that of the *Saturday Press*. Ironically, Clapp—who had, from the opening issue of the paper, loudly and consistently proclaimed his policy of editorial independence—made himself susceptible to the claim that he was subordinating his autonomy to the career of Whitman. The New York *Sunday Atlas*, in fact, blamed the severe financial condition of the *Saturday Press* in part on the paper's "continual puffs of Walt Whitman's dirty 'Leaves of Grass.'"⁵

Just four weeks before it suspended publication, the *Press*, in one of its last and most interesting attempts to promote Whitman, reprinted an article from a French periodical received by exchange, announcing a forthcoming translation of *Leaves of Grass* and offering a perceptive prefatory commentary on its poetry.⁶ Clapp, knowledgeable about French literary affairs and aware of the importance of what he had fortuitously come upon, immediately reprinted the article as "French Appreciation of 'Leaves of Grass'" and introduced it as follows:

The October number of the *Bibliographie Impériale*, received by the last mail, contains the announcement of a French translation of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, together with a short notice of the work, and a few extracts from the proof-sheets. The name of the translator is not given, or rather it is concealed by the simple initials V. H. The book issues from the press of Messrs. Lefebvre, Martin and Co., rue des Bons Enfants. We subjoin one of the extracts, that our readers may obtain an idea of the manner in which our eccentric poet is understood and rendered "across the salt sea billowy brine."

He then gave an excerpt from the book's preface:

La Poésie, enfant de l'Imagination, mais dont le père est inconnu—la chose ayant été faite pardevant Monsieur le Maire du 21^e arrondissement—la Poésie, disons nous, se permet, de temps en temps, quelques petites excentricités, qui, lorsqu'elles sont bien faites, ne peuvent manquer d'ajouter un attrait de plus à la littérature dont elle fait un des ornements les plus caractéristiques. Mais dans la Poésie française ces excentricités sont assez rares. Chez nous la Poésie a toujours suivi les sentiers battus, elle s'est toujours basée sur des principes plus ou

moins constipés; par conséquent c'est avec un véritable plaisir que nous accueillons une Poésie étrangère qui renferme ces éléments d'excellence et d'originalité dont nous ne cessons pas de déplorer l'absence dans notre littérature poétique . . . Depuis des siècles nos poètes ont toujours commis cette immense erreur—they ont spéculé sur la bêtise de leurs lecteurs. Ils se sont dits que personne au monde n'était capable de comprendre à demi mot, de deviner intuitivement la pensée. Et se laissant guider par cette idée fallacieuse, ils ont écrit de manière à ne laisser aucun travail à l'imagination—on n'a qu'à les lire pour les comprendre. Ont-ils bien compris la Poésie? Nous croyons pouvoir affirmer que non. Un poème parfait doit être complètement incompréhensible, et cependant il doit faufler parmi ses vers le fantôme d'une idée, belle, sublime, qui sera complétée par la vigoureuse imagination du lecteur. Et voilà ce qui fait le charme du poète Américain. En le lisant on ne comprend rien, et plus on ne lit moins on comprend. Cependant on croit éprouver quelque chose. On sent son âme lancée dans une nouvelle voie; ce n'est pas le poème que l'on comprend; c'est l'inspiration du poète que l'on partage; on n'est plus un simple lecteur, on devient un associé dans une grande entreprise poétique . . .

On a reproché à Mr. Whitman, l'usage de métaphores vulgaires, on a même été jusqu'à l'accuser d'obscénité. Mais on a eu tort. Victor Hugo a dit, dans sa belle comédie de la Mort d'Abel: "Qui se sent morveux qu'il se mouche." L'esprit de Mr. Whitman le trouve souvent dans cet état; peut-on lui reprocher son mouchoir dans ces circonstances, même s'il sonne du cor un peu fort? Non, mille fois non.*

"From this extract," Clapp commented, "it will be seen that an honest appreciation of Mr. Walt Whitman is rapidly gaining ground in France. In that Imperial country his democratic poetry is taking root, and will live. We congratulate him sincerely on this enviable result of his inspirations, and on the

* Poetry, child of the Imagination but of unknown paternity—the matter having been arranged before his Honor, the Mayor of the 21st District—Poetry, we were saying, allows itself from time to time certain minor eccentricities which, when well done, cannot but add a further charm to literature, of which it is one of the most typical embellishments. But in French Poetry, these eccentricities are rather rare. Poetry with us has always followed the beaten path, has always been based on more or less cramped principles. It is therefore with genuine pleasure that we greet a foreign Poetry which contains those elements of excellence and originality whose absence we cannot leave off lamenting in our own Poetry . . . For centuries our poets have always made a profound mistake: they have taken for granted the obtuseness of their readers. They have told themselves that no one in the world was able to catch a hint or intuit their thought. And allowing themselves to be guided by this incorrect idea, they have written in such a way as to leave no work for the reader's imagination—one has only to read them to understand them. Have they truly understood the essence of Poetry? We feel that we can answer: no. A perfect poem should be entirely incomprehensible yet still slip among its lines the ghost of an idea, of a beautiful and sublime idea which will be filled out by the forceful imagination of the reader. This is the charm of our American poet. In reading him, one understands nothing, and the more one reads the less one understands. And yet, one senses something. One feels his soul launched on a new path; one does not understand the poem, exactly, but one shares in the inspiration of the poet. One is no longer a mere reader but a partner in a great poetic venture . . .

Mr. Whitman has been reproached for his use of vulgar metaphors and has even been accused of obscenity. But his critics have been mistaken. Victor Hugo said in his fine comedy, *The Death of Abel*: "Let he who has a runny nose blow it." Mr. Whitman's spirit is often in this state; can one begrudge him his handkerchief in these circumstances even if he blows his horn a bit loud? No, a thousand times, no. [my translation]

fact of his having obtained a foothold for his popularity, where the greatest of English poets, Tupper, failed before him."

Clapp then reprinted translations from the proposed French edition of *Leaves of Grass*—poems Whitman eventually retitled as "Faces" and "Of Him I Love Day and Night," as well as the opening lines of "Apostroph" and the opening stanzas of "Song of Myself." Given the conservative state of French poetry, these free-verse translations were remarkably faithful to the form and rhythm of Whitman's poetry. Finally, Clapp closed with a prediction which could only have pleased Whitman's vanity inordinately:

These few quotations will suffice to show how thoroughly the poems of Walt Whitman may take root in the French language. Poetry is not a matter of words, it is all in its ideas, and so perfectly cosmopolite are those poems which Walt Whitman has given to the world, that even a change of language in no wise impairs these [*sic*] power or their sweetness. The French translation: "Brins d'herbe," will appear early in January. We predict for it a large sale abroad, and a proportionate increase of the author's reputation.

The whole affair is (and, at least for now, must remain) something of a mystery. The proposed translation did not appear the following January, and in fact no translation of Whitman into French would appear until the publication of several Whitman poems by Jules Laforgue in 1886. Why the announced book of translations never appeared we can do no more than speculate, but it should at least be understood in this regard that Whitman's free-styled verse was even more foreign to the French than to the Anglo-American poetic tradition, which itself hardly knew at first what to make of Whitman's poetry. It would help in explaining the book's nonappearance if Clapp's original source could be located, but this has proven an insuperable problem. Part of the problem inheres in Clapp's attribution of the article to the *Bibliographie Impériale*, a misnomer; no such periodical existed. As to the Parisian publishing house, I have been unable to learn anything of substance about it. And no known correspondence on the matter ever passed between Clapp and Whitman—nor should one expect them to have corresponded about something they could more conveniently have discussed face-to-face.

Whitman never referred to this review in any of his writings, but one can reasonably surmise that he knew about it. It is hardly conceivable, first of all, that Clapp would not have spoken to Whitman about his French admirer and the prospects for the first translation of his poetry. They were both eager to see Whitman widely translated; and, Francophiles both, they would have been particularly excited by the thought of the imminent translation into French. There is, moreover, an unannotated copy of this article in one of the oversized Whitman scrapbooks in the Trent Collection at Duke University. Although the scrapbook was compiled by Dr. Bucke, most of the clippings, especially the earlier ones which predate their friendship, were Whitman's own. Whitman was always an avid reader of magazines and newspapers, often clipping out pieces about himself; he would have had special motiva-

tion, even apart from the prospects of the translation, to be delighted by this article, for it departed significantly from the conventional moralistic and aesthetic standards of the time that Whitman abhorred in criticism as much as in imaginative writing.

These were precisely the standards by which he was judged and condemned the following year in the only other substantial Whitman criticism of the Second Empire, Louis Étienne's attack on Whitman as a "rowdy" who violated the norms of good taste.⁷ And in Amédée Pichot's brief remarks on Whitman in 1868, we can see further evidence of how difficult Whitman could be to those who approached him with conventional expectations: "Je voudrais bien savoir ce que pense Ch. Dickens d'un poète yankee nommé Walt Whitman, dont on a réimprimé les oeuvres à Londres et que j'avoue n'avoir pas encore pu comprendre. J'y arriverai peut-être . . . en oubliant un peu Longfellow, qui écrit dans un style plus clair."⁸ Pichot did single out for praise, however, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," but even here his attempt to read the poem strictly in narrative terms suggests how poorly equipped a critic of this sort was to handle Whitman's poetics. "V. H.," by contrast, not only defended Whitman against the moral charge but also characterized Whitman's poetry in a way which closely paralleled Whitman's own theorizing about modern poetry: poetry as a dynamic process requiring for its completion the active participation of the reader. In this regard, Whitman's 1860 critic was an important early link in the chain of French criticism leading up to the broader understanding and acceptance of Whitman by the symbolist critics and poets of the next generation.

Although we cannot directly ascertain Whitman's response to this article, we can nevertheless infer it from his written reaction to an analogous piece of French literary criticism he read in translation in the 1869 *North American Review*. The January issue of that quarterly contained a critical notice of the most recent volume of Sainte-Beuve's *Nouveaux Lundis*, giving high praise to "Les Cinq Derniers Mois de la Vie de Racine" and reprinting an excerpt from the important conclusion in which Sainte-Beuve distinguished between "classical" and "romantic" poetry:

Formerly, during the period called classic, when literature was governed by recognized rules, he was considered the best poet who had composed the most perfect work, the most beautiful poem, the most intelligible, the most agreeable to read, the most complete in every respect, — the Aeneid, the Gêrusalemme, a fine tragedy. To-day something else is wanted. For us the greatest poet is he who in his works most stimulates the reader's imagination and reflection, who excites him the most himself to poetize. The greatest poet is not he who has done the best, it is he who suggests the most, — he, not all of whose meaning is at first obvious, and who leaves you much to desire, to explain, to study, much to complete in your turn.⁹

Whitman, in turn, cited this excerpt approvingly in its entirety in one of his most ambitious critical articles, "The Poetry of the Future"; the purpose of such poetry, he claimed, was to "arouse and initiate, more than to define or

finish. Like all modern tendencies, it has direct or indirect reference continually to the reader, to you and me, to the central identity of everything, the mighty Ego."¹⁰ But this was not the only use made of this excerpt by Whitman and his small circle of early supporters. John Burroughs took the identical quotation as the epigraph for the 1871 edition of his Whitman-assisted biography of the poet—probably with Whitman's approval and possibly at his initiative.¹¹

As for the earlier French review, there was at least one nineteenth-century man of letters who did take cognizance of it in writing. In the earliest stage of his career, William Dean Howells had been one of the many future distinguished writers drawn by its reputation to write for the *Saturday Press*, to which he contributed numerous poems and critical pieces (including "A Hoosier's Opinion of Walt Whitman" on August 11, 1860). During the years in which Clapp would fall into obscurity and die in poverty (and Whitman, his chief protégé, would never fully earn the acclaim in America that they had both sought for him), many of the bright young men of the *Press* had gone on to achieve literary fame—William Winter as New York's leading drama critic, Thomas Bailey Aldrich as the editor of the *Atlantic*, Edmund Stedman as the editor of the highly regarded, eleven-volume *Library of American Literature*, and Howells as the unofficial "dean" of American letters during his editorships at the *Atlantic* and *Harper's*.

Howells recounted in an 1895 retrospective the trip he had made thirty-five years earlier as an ardent Western novice to experience "literary New York," which at that time he associated primarily with the *Saturday Press* crowd and its hangout at Pfaff's beer cellar. Although written with a mild revulsion for his younger self, his account of that visit provides a number of vivid character sketches that are still illuminating. That of Whitman, with his imposing physique and casual manner, nicely complemented by the accompanying illustration reconstructing the first meeting between the two men at Pfaff's, is especially memorable; but it is the subsequent attempt at a final character assessment, as Howells tried to reconcile his ambivalent feelings about the man and his work, which is immediately relevant:

As to his work itself, I suppose that I do not think it so valuable in effect as in intention. He was a liberating force, a very "imperial anarchy" in literature; but liberty is never anything but a means, and what Whitman achieved was a means and not an end, in what must be called his verse. I like his prose, if there is a difference, much better; there he is of a genial and comforting quality, very rich and cordial, such as I felt him to be when I met him in person. His verse seems to me not poetry, but the materials of poetry, like one's emotions; yet I would not misprize it, and I am glad to own that I have had moments of great pleasure in it. Some French critic quoted in the *Saturday Press* (I cannot think of his name) said the best thing of him when he said that he made you a partner of the enterprise, for that is precisely what he does, and that is what alienates and what endears in him, as you like or dislike the partnership. It is still something neighborly, brotherly, fatherly, and so I felt him to be when the benign old man looked on me and spoke to me.¹²

This is the last reference that I have been able to uncover to a curious, overlooked nook in Whitman's career, and, coming from Howells, it is not without a certain symbolic significance. For it nicely captures the dichotomy by which Whitman, in his own time, would exert a strong appeal to European intellectuals, while at the same time he would fail to win the approval he desperately sought at home among the ranks of the American middle class, whose taste and views were well articulated by Howells.

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NOTES

- 1 "All About a Mocking Bird," *New York Saturday Press* 3 (January 7, 1860), 3.
- 2 William Winter, *Old Friends* (1909; rpt. Freeport, New York: Books for Librarians, 1971), 58.
- 3 George S. Phillips, quoted in Charles Glicksberg, "Walt Whitman Parodies: Provoked by the Third Edition of 'Leaves of Grass,'" *American Notes and Queries* 7 (March 1948), 168.
- 4 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, ed. Sculley Bradley (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953), 4:196.
- 5 Quoted in *New York Saturday Press* 3 (Nov. 17, 1860).
- 6 "French Appreciation of 'Leaves of Grass,'" *New York Saturday Press* 3 (Nov. 17, 1860).
- 7 "Walt Whitman, poète, philosophe et 'rowdy,'" *La Revue Européenne* (November 1, 1861), 104-117.
- 8 Amédée Pichot, "Correspondance de Londres," *Revue Britannique* (May 1868), 267-268. ["I would like very much to know the opinion of Charles Dickens of a Yankee poet named Walt Whitman, whose work has been republished in London and which, I must say, I have never been able to grasp. I will perhaps manage that one day . . . by forgetting Longfellow a bit, who writes in a plainer style." (my translation)]
- 9 *North American Review* 108 (January 1869), 296-299; see Betsy Erkkila, *Walt Whitman among the French* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 48-50.
- 10 "The Poetry of the Future," *North American Review* 132 (January 1881), 202.
- 11 John Burroughs, *Notes on Walt Whitman as Poet and Person*, 2nd ed. (New York: J. S. Redfield, 1871). That there was collaboration at some stage between Whitman and Burroughs can be easily proven, since they made identical errors of transcription in citing this quotation.
- 12 "First Impressions of Literary New York," *Harper's Magazine* 91 (June 1895), 65; rpt. in William Dean Howells, *Literary Friends and Acquaintance*, ed. David F. Hiatt and Edwin H. Cady (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 68.