

THE CENTENNIAL OF HORACE TRAUBEL'S DEATH:

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION



In our understandable excitement over the bicentennial of Whitman's birth, we may easily lose sight of the fact that 2019 is also the centennial of Horace Traubel's death. The fact that Traubel managed to live to celebrate the centennial of Whitman's birth is itself a remarkable story. In ill health the last several years of his life, he dedicated himself to staying alive so he could contribute to and experience the conclusion of the first Whitman century. In honor of Horace Traubel, the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* is reprinting in this issue his final extended piece of writing about Whitman, a piece that he published in the Whitman Centennial Issue of his magazine, *The Conservator*, a magazine he began after Whitman's death to keep Whitman's work alive and to associate that work with progressive causes. The Whitman Centennial Issue of *The Conservator* appeared in May 1919, just a couple of months before Traubel's own death. This socialist disciple of Whitman had quit his job at a bank in order to devote himself to developing Whitman's reputation, which he did by recruiting his wife Anne and daughter Gertrude to help edit *The Conservator*, by carrying on a nonstop correspondence with admirers of Whitman from around the world, and by creating an International Whitman Fellowship that would assure Whitman's continuing influence.

Here is how I described Traubel's final days in my preface to the final volume of his monumental *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, his nine-volume work recording his daily conversations with Whitman over the final four years of the poet's life:

For the decade after Traubel quit his bank job, he lived an energetic life. He would read most nights until 4 or 5 a.m., then sleep for four or five hours. Each morning he would take the ferry to Philadelphia and work in his garret office on

Chestnut Street, where he would write letters, edit *The Conservator*, and set type. He met regularly with a group of fellow radicals at a Market Street restaurant, his own version of Pfaff's, Whitman's bohemian beer hall. Like Whitman, he loved crowds, and could often be found at baseball games or concerts or on the ferry, absorbing the energy of the masses. It was while riding the Camden ferry in 1909 that Horace faced his first major physical trauma: he was trampled by a horse and suffered severe rib injuries. By 1914 his health had become a major concern, as rheumatic fever had left him with a weakened heart. The outbreak of the Great War was particularly wrenching for this pacifist and believer in universal brotherhood, and over the next few years he declined steadily, suffering his first heart attack in June of 1917, the night before Gertrude's wedding in New York. He suffered additional heart attacks during the next year, and in the summer of 1918, he had a cerebral hemorrhage and was confined to his home. At this point few of his friends expected him to live more than a few weeks.

But with the centenary celebration of Whitman's birth on the horizon, Traubel's notorious stubbornness came into play: he refused to die on any but his own terms. He and Anne moved to New York in the spring of 1919 to be close to Gertrude and their new grandson. They stayed in the home of their good friends David and Rose Karsner, whose five-year-old daughter, Walta Whitman Karsner, brightened Traubel's last months. Horace sat at a window looking out on the East River and over to Whitman's Brooklyn. He ate at the very table that his old friend Eugene Debs had used while in prison—Karsner, who wrote Debs's biography, had procured it and made it available to Traubel. On Whitman's birthday he attended the celebration at the Hotel Brevoort on Fifth Avenue and was given a standing ovation by the two hundred Whitmanites in attendance, after which Helen Keller, meeting Traubel for the first time and touching his lips to understand his words, spoke movingly of this "great Optimist" and "his scheme of a better world." He was pleased to hear speeches that night celebrating Debs and Emma Goldman; his many efforts to bring Whitman and the radicals together seemed at this moment to have succeeded.

There was yet one more centenary event that Traubel was determined to attend—the August dedication of a mighty three-hundred-foot granite cliff at the Bon Echo estate in Canada, to be named "Old Walt" and inscribed with Whitman's words in giant letters. The dedication had been arranged by the Canadian branch of the Walt Whitman Fellowship, and Traubel saw it as a sign of the growing international reverence for Whitman. The frail Horace sat in a specially constructed chair on a rowboat that took him across a lake to the base of the giant rock, where he and Flora MacDonald Denison, the owner of Bon Echo, placed their hands on the spot where the inscription was to be and intoned the words "Old Walt."

For the next few days Traubel struggled through dinners, receptions, speeches, and meetings at Bon Echo. He wrote David Karsner in New York: "Here safe. Tired. Hopeful. . . . Tired still. Damned tired. God damned tired." Flora MacDonald Denison wrote that on August 28th Horace, while sitting in a tower room where he could look out on Old Walt, rapped his cane and shouted that Whitman had just appeared above the granite cliff "head and shoulders and hat

on, in a golden glory—brilliant and splendid. He reassured me, beckoned to me, and spoke to me. I heard his voice but did not understand all he said, only ‘Come on.’” Following this Traubel began to fail quickly, suffering yet another cerebral hemorrhage, and took to his deathbed, nursed continually by Anne. On September 3rd Flora was sitting next to his bed when Traubel claimed he heard Walt’s voice again: “Walt says come on, come on.” Anne stayed by his bedside, held his hand, smiled, and repeated, “No regrets, Horace.” In her account of her husband’s death, written to J. W. Wallace, she does not mention visitations from Walt. She recalls only that, on September 8th, “he didn’t drift, he went”:

Afterwards, he had a very tender and beautiful expression, not as if he had less spirit but as if he had more. There was in fact very little flesh left—but he did not look shrunken, or wasted. He looked exceedingly young. Even then as he laid on the bed unmoving he drew love from my heart. Even then he made the great affirmation. He devoted himself to the art that is life—and to the life that is love—and he has made love as common as bread.

Once again, beginnings and endings fused: Traubel’s death one hundred years after Whitman’s birth emphatically closed the first Whitman century. But before he departed, Horace left behind a final poem, written for the dedication of Old Walt. In this poem he did what he had done so well for so long, what he had recorded in nine large volumes. He sat down and talked, one last time, with Walt Whitman:

Well, Walt, here I am again, wanting to say something to you:
In a strange place, at the considerable north, talking again:

. . .

I just feel like as if I was having another chat with you
as you sit in the big chair and with me in the bed opposite:
Oh! those blessed times, Walt! they’re sacreder to me than
the scriptures of races:
They’re the scriptures of our two personal souls made one in a
single supreme vision:
That’s all for this moment, Walt: but it’s the whole
world of appearance and illumination, for all that.

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Today, as we look back from the beginning of the Third Whitman Century to the celebration of the start of the Second Whitman Century, we present two pieces in honor of the centenary of Traubel’s death. First is the remarkable address by Helen Keller (1880-1968) about Traubel that she delivered at the Whitman Fellowship International dinner on Whitman’s one-hundredth birthday. Keller frequently

acknowledged Whitman's tremendous impact on her, writing in one volume of her autobiography that she first heard Whitman's poetry when she was "still a little girl":

[H]is verses have the quality of exquisite physical sensations. They wave like flowers, they quiver like fountains, or rush on like mountain torrents. He sings unconquerable life. He is in the middle of the stream. He marches with the world's thought, not against it. To me he seems incomparably our greatest poet. He is a prophet, a voice crying the wilderness. . . . As the sea reflects the sky's immensity, so *Leaves of Grass* reflects the glowing, potential soul of America.

On Whitman's ninety-ninth birthday, in 1918, at a commemorative dinner that Traubel was too ill to attend, she gave what the host, Fred Hier, described as "the miracle": "Helen Keller, sightless and without hearing, spoke like a spirit from another planet about Walt Whitman. On her beautiful face shone out the lights and fires from her hidden world. In this, what seemed like an immediate communion with the great poet, I saw the only visible human immortality that I have ever known." Keller that night said he wanted "to pay my deep homage to the memory of the poet of all poets whom I love the best, Walt Whitman. I think we radicals should seek and emphasize much more than we do that which unites us rather than that which divides us. One of the happiest meeting-grounds available is our common love and appreciation of Whitman." She went on to portray Whitman as the very figure who guided her out of her world of darkness and silence, a kind of wondrous poetic counterpart to her teacher and companion Anne Sullivan, who had taught her to communicate:

Whitman came to me like a wonderful friend out of the great world, and he opened many windows in my dark house and flooded it with clear, penetrating light. Impetuously I put my hand in his, and he led me out into his world, the world of men and women where I could feel the eager, turbulent tramp of life—the roar, the adventure, the zest, the gladness, the sorrows, the revolts and the peace won out of strife. By his side I went forth in the dark to prove my spirit equal to that world.

I like to think of Whitman as a sort of adorable vagabond. In imagination I walk the open road with him. We have splendid times together! Our hearts throb high, the rolling earth under our feet seems to respond to our mood. The strong, sweet wind runs before us, and the scent of pine and sea and lilac is in the air. The world is full of gladness and beauty. What a comrade he is! How stimulating! How common things turn to miracles under his touch! How tenderly he guides

my groping feet! He quickens a sense deeper than seeing, and opens the spirit's ear to undreamed music. His imagination has foothold as well as wings. . . .

Keller continued, poignantly, to suggest that not only has Whitman taught her to see and to hear, but so many people have refused his lessons and thus remain in darkness and silence:

He bestows upon all men and all women the gifts of the universe. Not all men and women have accepted his generosity. Many are blind to his vision, deaf to his message. The lover of all men and “maker of poems, the Answerer,” still chants the new day, the coming world of freemen. He still proclaims the cosmic sympathy, his reverberating declaration of love—love that believes all things, hopes all things, breaks down all blind hostilities of castes, schools, religions, philosophies and races.

One year later, Keller delivered another talk at the Whitman Birthday Dinner, this time on Whitman's one-hundredth birthday, and this time more in honor of Horace Traubel than of Whitman himself. We offer that brief address here, followed by Traubel's own spirited prose piece that he wrote for the centennial of Whitman's birth, a piece as relevant today, on the bicentennial, as it was then.

The University of Iowa

ED FOLSOM