

HORACE TRAUBEL.

BY O. E. LESSING.

III.

No American publisher had courage enough to publish at his own risk Horace Traubel's collection of lyrics. The appearance of *Optimos*¹² was made possible only by means of private subscription, and it may well be doubted if any one else besides the subscribers ever saw a copy of the book at all.

The origin of the word "Optimos" is very characteristic of its creator. We have the authentic story from Mrs. Bain: "A learned admiring musician friend said laughing over it: 'It was divine impertinence. How did you dare to do it?' Traubel, too, laughed. He said, nonchalantly: 'Oh, I don't know; if I don't find the word I want when I want a word I make it.' 'How can you justify such a process?' He answered: 'By making good.' Traubel said to me: 'Read the poem with that title line *Optimos*. If you understand the poem you will never again ask the meaning of *Optimos*.' And he also said: 'If I can say *cosmos*, meaning the whole, why shouldn't I say *optimos*, meaning to speak of the cheerful whole?'"—Correct or incorrect, beautiful or hideous, Traubel's new word will live because the book which was so named will live. *Leaves of Grass* is a theodicy from the point of view of super-dogmatic Christianity. *Optimos* is a theodicy from the point of view of super-religious humanity. As *Chants Communal* and *Collects* are arranged according to an artistically conceived plan, so is *Optimos*. There are nine separate but interrelated groups of poems. The first and the last groups deal with the general ideas of a monistic and optimistic philosophy. "A great light was passed to me" and "Everything goes back to its place." The second group, "The golden age is in my heart to-day," applies that philosophy to the general phenomena

¹² B. W. Huebsch, New York, 1910.

of present-day life. The third group, "Just to own my own soul," expresses the self-assertion of the individual soul. The fourth group, "Before books and after books," shows the way to the reality of the poet's ideal of life as it manifests itself in external forms. The fifth group, "To you, going or coming, O woman," comparable to Whitman's *Children of Adam*, proclaims the freedom of woman and the sanctity of sexual love. Then follow poems of love, "I go where my heart goes"; of friendship, "We are just brothers"; and of democracy, "The people are the masters of life."

The attentive reader soon discovers that the book comprises many years and various phases of the author's personal life. There are, as we have seen, a few poems very clearly influenced by Whitman both in form and in spirit. Besides those already mentioned, "O anterior soul" may serve as an illustration. Whitmanesque are the rhythm, the many repetitions and enumerations, the parenthetical questions, the hesitating qualifications of statements, the exclamations:

"I am balanced in the gases, the boiling cauldron swings in infinite space,
I am safe in the fire, I ascend the slopes of flame:
O sun's self—O nebulous prophecies—O solace of promised restoration!
.....

I walk erect, I trade, I am the lawyer in the court,
I labor with the chain-gang, I am sailor and soldier,
I do not stop to count the years of the journey:
Why should I stop for that which never stops, for that as to which I am
unconcerned?"

There is in this poem an element of mysticism more intimately related to Whitman than merely by similarity of expression:

"There is a figure on the height:
I see it—O it embraces me!
It presses a kiss to my lips,
It sets me sail on immortal seas....
It, the anterior soul, taking me, who am god, back to god,
Immersing the ubiquitous life in its own waters."

If some parts of the poem sound like the "Song of Myself," its general trend of thought suggests the spirit of the "Passage to India." To Whitman, immortality means the everlasting life of the individual soul, of the "single separate person," which always has been and will forever be an "identity." Whitman's mysticism, therefore, is the intuitive consciousness and ecstatic feeling of the soul's solidarity with all other identities (souls, persons) rather

than an *unio mystica* which in effect is the total absorption of individual existence by "God." Somehow, he believes, there will take place, or is taking place, a gradual development of, and within, that identity toward a more and more perfect state of spiritualization in the beyond. It is the Christian conception of an eternal life in Heaven in the sight of God, given a philosophical aspect by vague reminiscences of Leibniz's monadology.

Traubel, until the second half of the 'nineties, spoke the language, and seemed to share the religious faith, of that mysticism which is mysticism only in name, since its real nature is dualistic and transcendental or even, if we accept Dr. Bertz's plausible analysis,¹³ polytheistic. However, Whitman's vagueness and inconsistencies could not permanently keep Traubel's mind spellbound. Whitman sprang from Quaker stock with practically no heritage of intellectual culture. Traubel's father was a German Jew of good education, familiar with the essential ideas of the great thinkers of the world. A keen intellect capable of penetrating the most complex problems was the son's racial inheritance. So he merely followed a natural instinct when he turned from Whitman's indiscriminate universalism and sentimental spiritualism to the logical monism of Spinoza. Whether or not Traubel ever made a systematic study of Spinoza is hard to tell. The chances are that he did not. Spinoza's name occurs but rarely in his writings.¹⁴ But it is certain, as I know from Traubel's last few letters to me, that he had made the general principles of Spinoza's *Ethics* his own. There is no transcendental Supreme Being. God is immanent in nature. God is nature, and nature is God. Good and Evil are not two different forces opposing each other but relative values representing stages of perfection and imperfection in the world's everlasting process of evolution. This evolution is based upon the unalterable law of cause and effect. Everything that happens must happen just as it does. Everything depends upon every other thing. In the perspective of eternity there is no small or big, no high or low. Since individual life and cosmic life perpetually merge into each other there is no immortality of "identity" in Whitman's sense. It is the contemplation and sympathetic realization of this collective and individual interdependence, coherence, and unity, that constitute Traubel's mysticism. His mysticism, therefore, is of the monistic, immanent or

¹³ Cf. Eduard Bertz, *Der Yankee-Heiland*. Dresden, 1906, pp. 180f. This is by far the most scholarly discussion of Whitman's philosophy.

¹⁴ Compare, however, the poem "Spinoza" by E. Ritchie, published in *The Conservator*, December, 1899.

cismant, kind and fundamentally different from that of Whitman, however many points of contact the two friends may have in their practical ethics. For Traubel the belief in the oneness of all life becomes the source of his love of mankind. Or should we rather say that the mental process was reversed; that his philosophy originated from an inborn humanitarian instinct nourished by practical experience? At any rate, he agrees with Spinoza in considering it the one great duty of the individual to expand his individual conscience to a collective conscience. Self-assertion and self-sacrifice, egotism and altruism are identical in that sense. Like Spinoza, Traubel knows of no personal happiness except the one that results from the perception of "God," i. e., from the realization of oneness, whereby man is made to do only that which love and sense of duty demand. Duty performed for the sake of reward or for fear of punishment is worthless.

It has often been contended that there is no religion possible without metaphysics. *Optimos*, like Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, contains such a religion. For Traubel's optimistic collectivism is a religion in spite of the protests of orthodox ecclesiastics. Indeed, it is a super-religion inasmuch as its boundaries are not defined by any dogma. It has no special privileges reserved for the officially saved. It includes all races and peoples, all churches and religions, on equal terms. Its only credo is an unshakable faith in man. Not acknowledging anything like an original sin, it denies the Christian doctrine of eternal damnation and assumes universal "salvation" on a purely human basis. According to Schleiermacher, each individual is his own mediator as soon as he becomes conscious of his absolute dependence on God. According to Traubel, man is "saved" in the degree that his heart is filled with love.

Traubel must have given the problem of salvation much thought. By three successive stages he seems finally to have come to a solution which his own heart could accept. Love will always suffer for love's sake. He whose love is great enough to suffer for his fellow beings is as true a martyr for the cause of mankind as was Christ himself, while "there is a fate worse than falls to the man nailed to a cross: it is the fate of the man who has no cross." Thus the poem "The word of all words is the word of the mediator" takes up the motif of the chant "The Blood of the Martyrs" and carries it to its logical conclusion:

"I should feel ashamed and sorry for my race if only one or two of its specimens endured the heat and and the cold of persecution: "

For the road is full of martyrs who came between and made life easier
for the rest:
For the sore feet of the weary came between, and the sad aches of the
condemned came between,
And before the eclipsed martyrdoms all the noisy martyrdoms are still."

Such martyrdom is caused by the evils of sophisticated civilization. If natural conditions prevail, "the savior is not a man nailed to a cross"—

"The savior is any man or woman who without cross or nail lives earth's simple life on the plane of its first propositions."

Traubel could raise the question of salvation only as long as his monistic philosophy had not been firmly established; as long as he looked for a cure of civilization's disease in the fashion of Rousseau's primitive panacea. The secret of monism once uncovered, all secondary questions were answered:

"I found that everything was the collateral of something else,
I found that nothing was left without its equal on the exchange,
I found that the seed was revived in the tree and that the tree passed immortally into the seed again, and that this was the formula of being,
I found that the sins and crimes of men were passed in and returned good gold...."

In this sense the poem "There is not enough" does away with the conception of damnation or salvation entirely:

"There is not enough bad in the universe to damn any man,
There is not enough good in the universe to save any man:
Man is not to be saved or damned—he is to be fulfilled."

But what is fulfilment? Fulfilment means perfection, and after man has reached the final stage of perfection, what then? Does not Traubel's religion after all promise a Heaven or a Nirvana? Lessing in his *Education of the Human Race* conceives of the revelation of God to man as a process of evolution which makes possible the salvation of every single soul. Man is given all eternity to reach the ultimate state of perfection. And yet, for his own person, Lessing would rather leave perfection to the Supreme Being and remain an imperfect, ever-erring human being, because life without the stimulus of constant endeavor did not seem worth living to him. Similarly, Traubel's idea of perfection has nothing to do with the Christian Heaven. That, when attained, would try "the patience of his spirit."

"Heaven was the unattainable attained—but I did not wish to close my account with desire....

I, heaven's own, having won heaven, consumed with regret over the lost paradise of my imperfections!"

And now the break with metaphysical speculation; with transcendental idealism; with orthodox Christianity, is complete:

"My heaven contains neither saved nor damned—my heaven contains only love,

My heaven is not given to distinction—it flows out full-tide to the obscure and the useless,

My heaven is simply you when you love me and I when I love you,....

Heaven's earth and heaven's heaven one in an impartial destiny,

The result withheld from none and not postponed."

IV.

There has always been an antagonism between independent artists, poets, writers, thinkers, men of action on the one hand and organized groups of professionals on the other. Traubel wrote a "collect" upon the "writers who are trying to write" and who are "selling their souls" instead of being true to themselves and to life. Similarly, he finds fault with priests who subordinate religion to the doctrines of their respective churches; with professors who ignore the facts of life for the sake of their scholastic learning; with any institution whatsoever that sets up the artificial barriers of class distinctions and special interests against the universality of life. It is life, the ideal life the essence of which is love, that the poet seeks for in all manifestations of external life. Instead of words he demands of the writers confirming deeds of love. From the "eminent professor" and his "dress parade of phrases" he turns away, unconvinced, out into the street where he finds in the eyes of the poor Italian laborer that spark of life which the scholar's learning had failed to give.

The whole section "Before books and after books (is the human soul)" is an elaboration of this theme. Behind the singer's song, behind the artist's picture, behind the mighty symphony, there rises, independent of the artist's will, the creative force of life itself. Nor can the poet be deceived by the false singers, by the false gods, by the slaves of inane conventions. No matter that they keep the truth from the world; no matter that his own plain song is as yet unheard: there will come a time when the past has said its last words; when

the world wakes up from its sleep to listen to the call of the new era :

“The sayers of words have said the last word :

They have shut the doors, they have closed the shutters, they have put out the lights :

The sayers of words have said: Now there shall be no more speech, now the world may sleep.

I come in the dead of its night and challenge the world to meet a new day.”

Again we must refer to Whitman to appreciate Traubel. When Whitman in his *Children of Adam* advocated the equality of man and woman, he followed the lead of the advanced thinkers of his time. He realized that the democratic principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity could not be reserved for one half of mankind alone, if the structure of a new society was to be erected upon an enduring foundation. The new era could be made possible only by a radical revision of the traditional code of masculine prerogatives and by a complete break with the negative asceticism of the Church. But Whitman was not happy in the choice of his weapons. He attacked the despotic one-sidedness of spiritualism with the brutality of a sensualist: he glorified the flesh with the naturalness of a pagan. The crudeness of his anatomical word-lists offended the esthetic taste of liberals no less than the sense of decorum of puritans. For this reason the inherent truth of his ideas was lost to most of his readers.

Traubel's views on sexual love, on fatherhood and motherhood, on the equality of man and woman, are as radical as those of Whitman. He, too, emphasizes the sacredness of body and soul alike. He, too, demands that the new society be founded upon the absolutely unrestricted equality of the sexes. But when Traubel wrote “To you going or coming, O woman,” he must have been more mature in spirit, if not in age, than Whitman was when he wrote “A woman waits for me.” Traubel must have been wholly free and therefore capable of self-restraint, while Whitman in regular storm-and-stress fashion overshot the mark. Traubel found a perfectly artistic and poetical expression for the most delicate of all subjects, whereas Whitman sometimes confused the science of physiology with the art of poetry, sometimes *libido* with *amor*. Let every mother and every mother-to-be read “You are going to have a baby” and “And now the baby is born”—there is no more beautiful tribute, in any language, to human life in its individual beginnings and in its universal significance. There is a finality in the statement of facts, a soundness and purity in the spirit permeating all

of these poems which will not fail to impress even the most prudish of puritans:

"For when the body is clean body and soul are one in holiness,
And when the soul is clean soul and body are one in holiness."

The vista broadens. Sexual love is symbolical of universal love and the abstractness of universal love in its turn gives way to the concreteness of individual friendship and collective comradeship. The words friend and comrade as used by Traubel are entirely free from the sense of morbid "adhesiveness" that Whitman attached to them in his *Calamus*. This must be stated here, and cannot be stated emphatically enough, if Traubel is to be understood at all as a personality quite independent of Whitman. In the groups of poems "We are just brothers" and "The people are the masters of life" we find some of the best of Traubel's lyrics, such as the elegies "O my dead comrade" and "As I look into your grave." It is through these shorter pieces that Traubel the poet can be most easily approached. Traubel the prophet, on the other hand, taking up the main theme of *Chants Communal* once more, appears here as the severest critic of our sham civilization. Justice becomes a categorical imperative; love, a challenge. How is the crucial question to be answered: "When you sentence your comrade to hate rather than to love—are you so sure? When you sentence your comrade to death rather than to life—are you so sure?"—If the people, as the poet "with glad assurance" sings, are really the masters of life, how does it happen that some "people sit fed at their tables or warmed at their fires while their wheat is sowed in starvation and their coal is mined in the north wind"? Is it this they have to say:

"The world is too busy: the world has no time to hear:
The world is too busy: the world has no time to love:
The world is too busy: the world has no time to be just."

The bitter sarcasm of "I hear the laugh of the unfed children" and the somber tones of "The bread line trails its clouded way into my sunny heart" prove how near pessimism even the author of *Optimos* could come. The tragic farce of our system of greed, egotism, and pharisaic self-righteousness is here unmasked in its bare hideousness. Like Nietzsche's, Traubel's optimism is founded upon a full recognition of the existing evil. Nor has Traubel been spared the struggle with doubt. Remembering Huxley's guarded statement concerning the theory of evolution, he speaks occasionally of his own philosophy

as of a "working hypothesis." In his poem "I don't know what God is about all day" he frankly admits that he "now and then comes to conclusions which are treacherous with despair." He was too honest a thinker to make light of the terrible facts of life. He was "sick with the sickness of the world"—but he was also "well with the health of the world."

Like *Chants Communal*, *Optimos* closes with an outlook into a better world. If the starving children, if the victims of exploitation, if the disfranchised masses cannot see the light of a new era dawning, the poet can: "The worst comes before the best comes." His final answer to all doubts and questions is always the same: love. "I suspect that somehow it will all be explained and that it will be all about love" what God is doing. He has no proofs to offer for his faith, differing in this respect greatly from the mathematical accuracy of Spinoza's arguments. He says yes to life accepting the bewildering phenomena of life as facts, just as he accepts the invincibility of the power of love as a fact. What gives him strength in times of weakness is not the belief in a transcendental God of love; it is the belief in the essential goodness of mankind as represented by the masses of the common people. The world war destroyed his confidence in the present leaders but not his trust in the people. In discussing his own individuality as compared with Emerson, Hugo, Tolstoy, and Whitman, he said to Mrs. Bain: "Say what you please about all that, but always say also that I have emerged from the crowd and go back to it—that but for the crowd my individuality would have no meaning." The association with, and love for, "the ungarnished populace of the pavements" he calls a "bath of man washing me clean." His only god was the divinity of man.

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The time has not arrived when full justice can be done to Horace Traubel. How should a world drunken with the atrocities of a war of blood and with the atrocities of a peace of starvation listen to the voice of love? Besides, not nearly all of Traubel's writings have as yet been made generally accessible. From *The Conservator* alone, not to mention other journals and papers, enough material of permanent value might be selected to fill several other volumes like *Chants Communal*, *Collects*, or *Optimos*. There are an indefinite number of essays on economic, social, and political subjects. There are dramatic, literary, and musical reviews in which Traubel's originality often appears more evident than in his other

work. There are, finally, piles of manuscripts for the great Whitman biography. Traubel's death, on the eighth of September, 1919, created very little, if any, commotion outside the immediate circles of friends. If the so-called "leading" organs of public opinion took notice of the event at all they gave Traubel credit for what he did as "Whitman's literary executor and biographer," not for what he did as Horace Traubel. It is true; no historian of American literature will ever be able to interpret Walt Whitman and his period without leaning upon Traubel. But it seems to me no less true that, with Traubel's own original work left out, the historian of American literature since Whitman would find his subject deprived of much, if not of most, of its vitality and spiritual significance.

It has not been my intention to set Traubel up as another hero to worship. We have had quite enough of Whitmania to dread an epidemic of Traubelmania. The foregoing pages do not advocate blind adoration but the serious study of a personality and an author who is all too often criticized without being known. Horace Traubel claimed little for himself. He wished his friends rather to belittle than to magnify his work. After reading the manuscript of David Karsner's monograph he published a review of it in *The Conservator* in which he expressed his surprise that any one should consider him important enough to make him the subject of a book. He expected neither fame nor material reward from the world. He said to Mrs. Bain: "The world don't want me, but I want myself."¹⁵ He did his duty as he saw it living his own life according to his own ideals. Like every creator, he hoped that his work would be understood sometime; but he entertained no illusions as regards the attitude to him either of the responsible few or of the irresponsible many.

Of all his published books *Chants Communal* probably has the best promise of being received by the people for whom it was written. As labor gradually is coming into its own, in things spiritual as well as material, it will seek an artistic formulation of its ideals, and this it may find here. Except for the labor poems,

¹⁵ Before this article went to press I received the proofs of Mr. Karsner's book: *Horace Traubel: His Life and Work*. By courtesy of the author I am permitted to quote the following statement by Traubel in conversation with Mr. Karsner: "No one, not a soul, not even Anne, knows what a terrific struggle I have had to put up all my life to be what little I am. O God! sometimes it's been awful. The tide always, somehow, seemed to go the other way, and I trying to be myself was often stranded in midstream. It was the utter loneliness of the struggle that made it hard. Let a man try to be himself! Let him try to follow the light of his own soul! What does he come to at the end?"... Mr. Karsner mentions a book by Traubel unknown to me, and evidently no longer on the market: *The Dollar and the Man*.

Optimos will very likely never find more than at best a few hundred readers. Even "intellectuals" as a rule do not take the time that is necessary to overcome the prejudices of literary taste and religious convention. Too many of them cling to the habit of measuring the greatness of an author by the yardstick of their idiosyncrasies. Only spiritual freedom responds to spiritual freedom. To those who are lords or slaves in spirit the message of *Optimos* sounds too disturbingly free. They will discard Traubel's philosophy as "all wrong" and continue to ignore an author for no other reason but that they do not agree with his opinions. And yet:

"I'm just talking all the time about love:

And maybe I'm nearer the meanings of things than any one who talks anything else:

And maybe your laugh about me is out of place: maybe I should be the one to laugh:

And maybe some day you will put my portrait upon your walls and speak well of it after I am dead:

I who go about among you just talking all the time about love."