



WALT WHITMAN
QUARTERLY REVIEW

Volume 23
Number 1 (2005)
Special Double Issue:
Memoranda During the War

pps. 49-52

Whitman and Kate Field

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ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)
ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

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Recommended Citation

Scharnhorst, Gary. "Whitman and Kate Field." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 23 (Summer 2005), 49-52. <https://doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.1784>

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2 Whitman, *Memoranda During the War* (Camden, NJ: Author's Publication, 1875-1876), 68. I am grateful to Sarina Wyatt, Assistant Archivist and Special Collections Librarian, University of Rhode Island, for drawing this manuscript to my attention, and to Christine S. Fagan, librarian at Roger Williams University, for curating (with Wyatt) a Whitman exhibition at Roger Williams in 2005 that displayed the manuscript.

WHITMAN AND KATE FIELD

To the long list of pioneering American feminists who admired Whitman another name may now be added: Kate Field (1838-1896), a journalist, travel writer, lecturer, actor, and model for the character of Henrietta Stackpole in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*.¹ In March 1866, as the New York correspondent of the *Springfield Republican*, Field alluded in passing to Whitman's "barbaric yawp,"² and eighteen months later, as the Saratoga correspondent of the *Chicago Tribune*, she referred to him as "a Cosmos—one of the roughs."³ She worked the latter reference to the poem "Walt Whitman" (later entitled "Song of Myself") into her lecture "Among the Adirondacks" (also called "Life in the Adirondacks" and "Out in the Woods") which she delivered dozens of times during the winter of 1869-1870—including dates in Boston, New York, Providence, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Buffalo, Brooklyn, Newark, Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee, and St. Paul—and occasionally during the 1870-1871 season (e.g., in Washington, D.C.).⁴ When she published the lecture under the title "In and Out of the Woods" in the *Atlantic Almanac 1870*, she added yet another quote from the poem: "I want to lounge in an attitude half lying and half sitting, and 'invite my soul.'"⁵

Although there is no record indicating that Field and Whitman were acquainted, Field continued to praise the poet over the years. As the London correspondent of the *Louisville Journal-Courier* in the spring of 1876, she reported on the efforts of Robert Buchanan, William Rossetti, and others to raise a subscription in England for him. Whitman had described his financial plight in the *West Jersey Press* in January,⁶ and excerpts from the article appeared in the London *Athenæum* for March 11,⁷ the same day an anonymous New York correspondent for the London *Daily News* favorably reviewed *Two Rivulets* in its pages.⁸ Two days later, Robert Buchanan published a card in the *Daily News* to rally help for Whitman,⁹ and the following day a letter from William Rossetti appeared in the paper echoing Buchanan's suggestion.¹⁰ Over the next few days Buchanan qualified his criticism of Americans for failing to aid the poet,¹¹ and Alfred Austin, the future English poet laureate, also wrote the *Daily News* to promote the subscription for Whitman.¹² Field mentioned all of these developments—and even quoted about five hundred words from Buchanan's original appeal—in her April 18, 1876 London letter to the *Louisville paper*, as follows:¹³

I think that Walt Whitman has engrossed more public attention than anything or anybody after the brand-new empress of India. Thanks to an article reprinted in the *Athenæum* from the *West Jersey Press*, and thanks to the New York correspondent of the *Daily News*, the position of Walt Whitman is like to be thoroughly understood on both

sides of the Atlantic, very greatly to the pecuniary advantage of the gray-haired poet I hope. That a man of Walt Whitman's ability, that one who gave up years of his life to nursing our sick and wounded soldiers in the hospitals at Washington, should in old age be the victim of poverty, as well as of disease, is a disgrace to America, and I do not quarrel with Robert Buchanan for writing passionately and calling hard names, which he has since withdrawn. "What I hope to suggest is this," says Robert Buchanan, after indulging in eloquent invective against American literati and publishers who fail to appreciate the "God of his idolatry."¹⁴ . . .

William Rossetti seconds Robert Buchanan's appeal and Alfred Austin regrets that Mr. Buchanan should have clouded a question of benevolence with untimely literary fervor. "I believe the American people to be second to none in native kindliness of heart; and though they may not think Mr. Whitman a poet, I am sure they will be the first to help his distress." I believe that Mr. Austin is right, and that the echo of Robert Buchanan's thunder will not fall on deaf ears. It requires something like an earthquake for the world, be it old or new, to realize that literary men and women, who have more brains than popularity, are unlike the chameleon. They cannot feed on air, much less publish books with its currency. Poet or no poet, Walt Whitman's patriotism deserves recognition, and now is the time to allow it.

While Field was a literary traditionalist who scorned most modern poetry, as her last line attests she esteemed Whitman at the time more for his patriotism than his poems.

Later, however, she better learned to appreciate his formal innovations. Her high regard for Whitman is nowhere more evident than in the tribute she published in her weekly paper *Kate Field's Washington* for April 6, 1892,¹⁵ the first issue to go to press after the poet's death on March 26:

The penalty for flying in the face of the conventions of any art is that the rash artist must content himself with post-mortem appreciation or none at all. Everyone who recognized Walt Whitman's genius and loved his poetry must feel glad that the "good gray Poet" escaped the common lot of the innovator. Nothing could be further from the accepted canons of poetry than "Leaves of Grass." It lacked music, it lacked delicacy, it lacked form—or if not actually formless, it was cast in a mould so new and uncouth that it seems, even after we have grown to care for it with reservations, to be almost grotesque. Yet this unfamiliar song contained so much of the subtle quality which makes poetry poetry, that in the short space of less than half a lifetime it gathered around its author a circle of friends and admirers, containing some of the best and brightest minds of the whole country.

The effect of a genius so different in quality from any contemporary talent is almost entirely indirect. No one in his senses would attempt seriously to imitate Whitman's poetry, though it has afforded the richest possible working basis for clever parodists—Mr. Richard Grant White among them.¹⁶ It is wholesome, however, for any art when a great force is developed outside of the pale of its unwritten rules. It reminds the conventionalists that an ounce of originality is worth a pound of conformity, and that, when the two cannot dwell together, the indispensable quality is not the latter. Literary art has been until lately needlessly nervous about the homely details of life. Whitman took the poorest and commonest of them, and blended them into a great chant, and though we may still question the beauty and appropriateness of the result, we can no longer deny that he has given new dignity to humble things and widened the legitimate field of poetic thought. Universality—an ugly word for which we have no synonym—and truth

should be the end of every art, especially of the poet's; and it must be remembered that Whitman preached this saving doctrine in a unique and forcible way.

The poet's death may have inspired more eloquent obituaries, but few more heartfelt ones.

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NOTES

- 1 Scharnhorst, "James and Kate Field," *Henry James Review*, 22 (2001), 200-206.
- 2 "From New York," *Springfield Republican* (March 17, 1866), 2.
- 3 "Saratoga," *Chicago Tribune* (September 1, 1867), 2.
- 4 E.g., "Miss Kate Field on 'The Adirondacks,'" *New York Times* (November 10, 1869), 8 ("every man appeared to be what Walter Whitman calls a 'cosmos'—an unmitigated 'rough'"); "Kate Field's Conversation," *Springfield Republican* (November 18, 1869), 4:2 ("each seemed, as Walt Whitman says, 'a cosmos,—one of the roughs'"); "Kate Field," *Chicago Times* (February 8, 1870), 5:3 ("Every man seemed to be what Walt Whitman calls a Cosmos,—one of the roughs").
- 5 "In and Out of the Woods," *Atlantic Almanac 1870* (Boston: Fields, Osgood, 1869), 49; rpt. in "An Adirondack Camp," *Kate Field's Washington* (August 24, 1892), 114.
- 6 "Walt Whitman's Actual American Position," *West Jersey Press* (January 26, 1876); rpt. in Clifton J. Furness, *Walt Whitman's Workshop* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928), 245-248.
- 7 "Walt Whitman," London *Athenæum* (March 11, 1876), 361.
- 8 "New Work by Walt Whitman," London *Daily News* (March 11, 1876), 5-6.
- 9 Buchanan, "The Position of Walt Whitman," London *Daily News* (March 13, 1876), 2.
- 10 Rossetti, letter, London *Daily News* (March 14, 1876), 6. See also Whitman's "Some Personal and Old Age Jottings" in *Prose Works 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York UP, 1964), 2:699: "Those blessed gales from the British Island probably (certainly) saved me." Among the benefactors Whitman mentions by name are both Buchanan and Rossetti.
- 11 Buchanan, letter, "Mr. Walt Whitman," London *Daily News* (March 16, 1876), 6; and "Walt Whitman," London *Daily News* (March 17, 1876), 3.
- 12 Austin, letter, London *Daily News* (March 16, 1876), 6. For the record, Field had known Austin at least since 1874, when she covered the visit of the Shah of Persia to England for the *New York Tribune* (Lilian Whiting, *Kate Field: A Record* [Boston: Little, Brown, 1899], 312).
- 13 "Kate Field in London," *Louisville Courier-Journal* (April 3, 1876), 3. Field echoed these comments two weeks later in "London Literary Gossip," an unsigned article for the *New York Herald* (April 17, 1876), 3.

14 The excerpt begins "I have already said that Whitman is preparing an edition of his works in two volumes" and concludes "Whitman is the worst poet in the world to be judged by mere 'dipping,' or by any amount of extracts, however admirably chosen."

15 *Kate Field's Washington* (April 6, 1892), 216.

16 The American philologist Richard Grant White had published an early Whitman parody in *Albion* (May 26, 1860), 249.

WHITMAN AND TEDDY ROOSEVELT: AN UNPUBLISHED WHITMAN PROSE MANUSCRIPT AT SAGAMORE HILL

At Sagamore Hill, Theodore Roosevelt's home on Long Island, there is a framed portrait of Whitman (an 1871 photograph by George G. Rockwood) accompanied by a manuscript fragment written, as many of the poet's manuscripts from the 1870s are, on Department of Justice stationery. The stationery reads "Department of Justice, Office of the Solicitor of the Treasury, Washington, D. C., 187_." The manuscript itself (reprinted with the permission of Sagamore Hill) reads:

In science, we shall of course bear our part, in common with all civilized lands

The geni

The genius of Democratic America demands something rough, ~~amp~~ very ample not [[^] too] delicate [[^] not thinly "good,"] not too particular [[^] ~~and~~ fierce, rank] something of the qualities of Roman Juvenal and Rabelais of France.

At present what is called literature is [[^] appears to be] in the hands of a lot of thin-blooded [[^] rose-scented—] gentlemen, ~~quite & little better than~~ dandies, gurgling & in poetry ~~and~~ [[^]] ~~full of intellē~~ writing intellectual magazine articles & criticism, wearisome enough every way.

This fragment joins Whitman's many other drafts of ideas that relate to notions he expressed in *Democratic Vistas* (1871) and elsewhere. Compare, for example, this fragment now in the Library of Congress:

The great themes of the Literatus are as common as the air, the light, the destinies, the pride love of man & woman, and come home to all, like life & death. This writer is noble, but dainty. Not that he is of no value, for he is of measureless value. But he picks and rejects. Strictly speaking he belongs to the aristocracy Much is in his writings, and the young men of America are probably are debtors to them more, far more than to those of [*illeg.*] authors. But the lesson of Democracy, & the lesson of the infinite and all-embracing amplitude of Nature & the Democracy of Nature & the application of that lesson to man, are not in them. He sometimes seems as if he would bravely approach these armored themes, where they stand[?] threatening in full panoply, & do battle with them—but he never really does. Then he is, to speak it plainly, too genteel & conventional—too dandified—no Juvenal, or Rabelais, or blurring Hebrew prophet. After their intellection, dainty suprciliousness seems with all the health & sweetness be the unseen background of character to these writings (*NUPM*, 1757-1758).