



Recollections of Charles Feinberg

C. Carroll Hollis

ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)

ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

Copyright © 1988 C. Carroll Hollis

Recommended Citation

Hollis, C. C. "Recollections of Charles Feinberg." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 6 (Summer 1988), 47-54. <https://doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.1203>

This Back Matter and Back Cover is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

RECOLLECTIONS OF CHARLES FEINBERG

In 1955, for the centennial of the First Edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Charles sponsored at the Detroit Public Library an exhibition of appropriate items from his collection. In the late spring of that year Charles had come to the annual meeting of the Michigan Academy of Arts and Letters in Ann Arbor to inform the American Literature Section of the forthcoming exhibit and to invite those interested to a private showing at his home. I was chairman of the group that year and had the pleasure of driving him back to Detroit, for I was then teaching at the University of Detroit, about a dozen blocks away from his office, where he had left his car. It was our first meeting, and it changed my life a lot and perhaps his a little.

At that private showing in his home, most of the attention was on that famous letter from Emerson, "I greet you at the beginning of a great career . . .," but there were also the only surviving manuscript page for the 1855 edition, the home-made filing system Whitman had devised to keep his notes on *Words*, and many of the other unusual items described in detail in the *Catalogue of an Exhibition held at the Detroit Public Library* (Detroit, Michigan 1955), a remarkable document that is now a collector's item in itself.

There were some dozen scholars at the Feinberg residence, from Wayne State, Ann Arbor, Lansing, and elsewhere in Michigan. But with the exception, perhaps, of Bill White, I think I was the one who profited most. Charles's invitation to us all to make scholarly use of the collection was an exceedingly generous gesture at that time, as only old-timers who remember the formidable strictures most institutions employed for manuscript use will remember. But there was one drawback that even Charles in his beneficence couldn't surmount—the manuscripts had to be examined in the bank vault where they were kept. I was able to get around that obstacle, as I'll explain in a moment.

But first I must tell of the near-disaster that almost closed the Exhibition, and out of which Charles and I became friends. We all know the legend that *Leaves of Grass*, this country's most audacious manifestation of independence in poetry, appeared on Independence Day in 1855. Whether true or not, it made a neat feature to have the official opening of the Feinberg Exhibition on the Fourth of July. It was properly and enthusiastically celebrated, with reporters, city fathers, scholars, and curious citizens in attendance. But before the official opening, the Library itself had a gathering of its employees, with appropriate commendation to Charles for this further manifestation of his support of the Library, which was his favorite charity.

In that group of library employees, there was apparently one who was present not of his or her own free will—and therein lies a tale. Some weeks after the opening, Charles brought some out-of-town guest to the Library to see the Exhibition. As he and his guest were moving around from one display case to another, Charles suddenly stopped and exclaimed, "Where's the *Day Book*?" He was referring to a large volume, full of addresses, notes, records of purchasers of *Leaves of Grass*, etc., typical of the haphazard filing system Whitman employed. A library attendant hurried over, examined the case and found it still padlocked, and assumed it had been removed to be replaced by some other Whitman item. But no, there was no trace of it.

There was understandable commotion and consternation, but finally the police were called. The story leaked to the papers, and there was suddenly a new burst of publicity. The first assumption was that Charles would immediately close the Exhi-

bition, and it was then that I got a first insight to Charles's unusual character and temperament: "Close it? . . . Not at all. With all this publicity about the Whitman Theft everybody will want to come and see what's left! Keep it open, but for God's Sake, let's have police protection around the clock." Which is exactly what happened.

But then, of course, the harassment. Charles had announced a \$5,000 reward, no questions asked. When the corner of the display case was examined closely, it was obvious that someone had unscrewed a binding brace so that the glass top could be lifted and the volume removed. It seemed like a professional job, but there had been no "follow-up ransom note." Charles was so sure it was a theft, in fact, that he hired a professional art-sleuth to check the underground, circulate the reward offer among the prisons and (since Detroit is across the river from Windsor, Ontario) even internationally—but with no result. There was, however, plenty of reaction, and in terms of it I was able to do Charles one favor, for which I've been rewarded in a different way a hundred times over.

As the story was continued in the Detroit papers, with the emphasis on the \$5000 reward, Charles was beleaguered with telephone requests that worried him considerably. By that time I was already beginning to examine some of the materials that weren't in the Exhibition, for he would bring items to his office on Hamilton Ave., and I could buzz over there between or after classes. We would see each other two or three times a week. Sometime in August he told me of his fears about the *Day Book* being destroyed, so we worked out a plan. I think I was the only one of the scholars who had met at his home before the Exhibition who had examined the *Day Book* with any care. In fact, when it had arrived from the Traubels with many other treasures, he had not had the time to examine it carefully himself.

So, we worked out the following scheme. He would tell any caller that I could be reached at another number in his office. I had been using an empty office at the time, making my notes on the *Words* book. He would come there while I was talking to the caller, so that he could respond about the reward if it seemed a legitimate exchange. He had already received some four or five calls threatening to destroy the *Day Book* if he didn't come across, and he was understandably worried and agitated. Well, it didn't take long.

The first call seemed to be from some nervous teenager trying to sound belligerent. I was told, "I've got the book. You put the money in the phone booth in front of the downtown post office at midnight and come back at 2 A.M. and the book will be there. If we see anyone around there, we will burn the book." I asked, "Have you got the book?" and when he said he had, I said, "Open up the back cover and tell me what you see." There was a pause, then some curses, then, "What's that mean—what's supposed to be there?" I said, "Just tell me what you see and you can have the money." This happened four or five times, a somewhat different interchange each time and a different voice, but none of the callers knew that a section of the Philadelphia newspaper for 1887 was folded up and placed inside the cover. I had noticed it while holding the big volume in my lap and had even checked the date of the paper, so the incident had stayed in my mind. Well, there were different voices but similar calls for the next week or so, and then they stopped even as the story vanished from the daily press.

That occurred during the late summer of 1955, but by the time fall classes started the whole incident had disappeared from public consciousness. The Exhibition had closed, and we occasionally talked about it, trying to figure out what had really

happened. I knew some of the Library staff, as did Charles, and we finally guessed it had to be some sort of an inside job, but we had no way of proving it. That semester I had one of those silly little academic chores faculty members get stuck with, this one being a half-hour interview program, in which I would chat with any distinguished visitor to Detroit or to campus that the staff could round up. Few people, then as now, listen to radio interviews from 11 to 11:30 A.M. Saturday morning, but it was a comparatively painless chore and sometimes fun. The wind-up on the *Day Book* incident occurred via that program in the week before Christmas. It was a dull week in Detroit in the way of distinguished visitors, but Charles liked to share his Whitman enthusiasm with anyone who might be listening, and we had a pleasant fifteen-minute chat. He had to leave at 11:20, I think to go to the synagogue, so I just wound up the program myself.

I went over the Exhibition, the *Day Book* incident, saying what a decent man Charles was, and that he had started a Friends of the Library group at the University of Detroit, and had given a good many out-of-the-way Whitman books to our library, and had visited my classes to communicate his contagious regard for Whitman, and so on. I still had a minute or so to go, and finished by saying something to this effect: "Charles Feinberg may not celebrate Christmas the way those of us around here do, but I can't think of a nicer gift to a fine man than that whoever stole it send him back his Whitman book." Perhaps it was a little more convincing than it sounds now, but the next Tuesday I got this excited call from Charles: "Carroll, come on over! It's back!" It did come back, mailed from Grosse Pointe of all places, wrapped in an ordinary brown paper grocery bag, with only Charles's name and address on the outside but inside the intact *Day Book*, with an enclosed printed note—"Tell Dr. Hollis it wasn't stolen."

We finally figured it was taken to embarrass not the library staff but the staff superintendent, something of a martinet who had a morale-breaking practice of mandating that all fifty or so retiring personnel gather in the Exhibition Hall to witness his awarding of a few medals and some certificates to a few "outstanding" employees. Whatever the explanation, Charles never pursued the matter further but rejoiced in the return of one of the least glamorous items of the collection. Indeed, I'm not sure he even had it out with the powers-that-be at the Library, perhaps because he didn't want any repercussions that might kick back on the person who finally cleared up his or her conscience.

During the next year I changed my scholarly field and interests (from Brownson and the New England circle) to Whitman because of the opportunities Charles provided, and it is that for which I feel so much in his debt. He was always encouraging scholars to do with his collection what he would like to have done himself had he had the training. I was lucky in being nearby and also at loose ends at that time (I had finally finished my dissertation at Ann Arbor the year before). The only knack I have that might be different is a passion for solving puzzles, riddles, little mysteries that hold the answer if you can find it. Charles may have recognized this, for he was always bringing me items no one could figure out. After solving three out of four, I was hooked, and still have a raft of notes to develop thirty years later.

I suppose it is pretty well known by now that Charles brought into scholarly awareness and use the best part of the three-way division of Whitman's literary remains. He has told me most of the story, and this is as good a time as any to tell what I remember. The three trustees—Harned, Bucke, and Traubel—apparently took turns

until each had his own third. Each one had vowed never to break up his third, and that was pretty much held to. As I understand it, Harned kept his third at his home in New Haven, but he came home one Sunday afternoon from a country drive with his son to find his house on fire. He was horrified with fear that the Whitman Papers might be burnt, but luckily there was no damage. But the fear had the good result of making him realize that it was not safe to keep them with him any longer. He offered the collection to the University of Pennsylvania, but, as Sculley Bradley told us ruefully years later, the powers that be decided that "Whitman wouldn't last," so declined the offer. Since Whitman had spent a key part of his career in Washington, Harned then donated his third to the Library of Congress to form the first substantial portion of Whitman manuscripts open to scholars. Dr. Richard Bucke held his third and used parts of it for *Notes and Fragments* and Whitman's letters to his mother and to Peter Doyle. But that third too was finally sold, in England I believe, and was ultimately brought back to this country by Dr. and Mrs. Josiah Trent, who presented it to Duke University to form the famous Trent Collection.

The remaining third was that gathered by Horace Traubel. He too wished it to be kept together, and Mrs. Traubel did so. The story of her tenacious guarding was explained to me early on by Charles. As far as I can recall now, it happened this way. She had permitted Clifton J. Furness to use the material for a key early book, *Walt Whitman's Workshop* (1928), and Furness then went on to gather notes for a biography. But this time she imposed a reservation: that she should see his manuscript in full before she would permit him to publish. She did see it and she did refuse, because Furness's projected biography claimed that Whitman was homosexual. She was outraged, refused to even give him back his manuscript, and from then on refused to let any college professors examine the Whitman-Traubel Papers. I remember being very curious about this and asking Charles whether Furness's manuscript was then in her Papers. He said it was certainly not in the material he had received, and maybe someday he would find out from Gertrude what had happened.

With Annie Traubel's suspicion of scholars, it is interesting how Charles ever got on the good side with her. As I understand what happened, she finally got so low financially that she had to sell some letters to help keep her household going. Charles bought the letters and would have bought more, but she wouldn't even answer his letters. Once when he was in Philadelphia, he thought he would try the "direct approach" and took a cab out to the house and rang the bell. She came to the door, and he said he was the Charles Feinberg who had written and since he was in the neighborhood anyway he thought he would drop by and speak with her about other letters. She said "Just a moment" and closed the door. Charles waited on the doorstep for fifteen minutes and finally realized she was not coming back, so returned to his cab and to Detroit. I would, and most everyone I know would, have figured that was that and dropped the whole venture. But not Charles. He got hold of a bookman he knew, Charles Boni of the once famous publishing company. Boni had known both Horace and Annie, and he wrote to assure her that Charles was a fine person whom she could trust. From then on Charles bought any letters she would sell and even sent money to help pay the rent, etc., with the understanding that if she ever did need to sell, she would give him first refusal.

We need to understand her situation. Annie Montgomerie, the daughter of a well-known old-line Philadelphia family, was practically disowned when she married Horace Traubel, son of a Jew, who held a small job in a bank. She was able to

maintain remote contact with the Montgomeries only through a sister, who had married a rising lawyer, Thomas Harned, who thus met Horace and Whitman (and later Dr. Bucke). Harned had composed Whitman's will and presumably made legally binding the three-way division of the literary remains, thus freezing out Tom Donaldson, whose claims never have been explored as far as I now. But it was Horace who organized and ran the Walt Whitman Fellowship, founded and edited the *Conservator*, ran the annual meeting of the "Walt Whitman Society," as it got to be known. For the Walt Whitman Cause there was no more enthusiastic leader—so much so in fact that I personally believe he often hurt the very cause he wanted to support. It was the over-enthusiasm that prompted such scathing appellations as "the hot little prophets," as both Charles and I agreed. But what we didn't agree on was how much of the hidden side of the Walt Whitman Fellowship, its gay ambience, was Horace's doing.

It is my own hunch that Annie Traubel's near hysterical protectiveness of Horace's "Whitman Papers" was occasioned by her fear of what might be revealed. Charles had no worries about such matters. Indeed, his often-pronounced claim that "hiding the truth always makes more trouble than the truth itself" has been confirmed so dramatically these recent years that it cannot but apply here. But with his attention to the gathering of the Whitman records and the transcribing of the remaining *With Walt Whitman in Camden* screed, there was a consequence: that he didn't always realize the full implications of the materials he had brought together. Indeed that was what he wanted scholars to do—to explore, evaluate, and publish the truths the Feinberg Collection provided, and that is what we should do. Everyone wants to be remembered, and Charles wanted his collection to be his memorial. But certainly he hoped that it would not be a memorial like a statue that we could look at but do nothing about. Rather, he would want it to be used to reveal the truth about Whitman—his thought, his poetry, his friends, his record, his reputation.

Another aspect of Charles's life and character that few know about is his almost boyish and innocent delight in advancing the Whitman cause. To understand that, one needs to know something about his own background. Here again a little background is necessary. When I was teaching at the University of Detroit, I used to invite Charles to come and talk to my American Literature class when we got to Whitman. His contagious enthusiasm was sure-fire with most of the class, and one very bright student, Richard Raleigh, remembered it vividly. Years later Rich wound up teaching at a small college in Miami, now known as St. Thomas University. When he found out that Charles and Lenore wintered nearby (from October to April), he called, introduced himself, and asked if Charles would like to come and do for his class what he had done for mine twenty years earlier. Charles was delighted and did for that little college much of what he had done in Detroit. That continued for some years, and this past June the college gave him an honorary degree. About that time Rich also became Dean of Humanities, and I decided that was too good an opportunity to miss, so I asked Charles in my Christmas letter if he would submit to an interview and asked Rich if he could round up a video camera to do it, and they did so.

Charles tells of his discovery of Whitman in the Seventh Grade Reader, in Peterborough, Ontario, public school. His favorite poem then was "A Child Went Forth," with line 9 made memorable, for it matched his own curious fascination with the minnows in a brook below the house. The family, of very modest means, had come to Canada from London, and Charles, the second son, tells of the necessary part-time

jobs that earned him enough to buy his first *Leaves of Grass*. Later the family moved even nearer to the area where Dr. Bucke, living near London, had entertained Whitman, and Charles was able to purchase a Whitman letter! The letter was not notable at all, but it was written and signed by Walt. Thus, in 1915, when he was still a teenager, a life-long career-hobby began. The price, \$7.50, was his week's salary. His telling of his nervous but elated announcement to the family reveals much of what must have been a supportive family situation. By that time they all knew that his hobby was becoming expensive, but it was his money and his sacrifice. In the ensuing discussion, his father remarked with feigned indignation, "Seven dollars and fifty cents for an old letter! I'll write you one for half the price." The tender teasing, then and later, must have been one of Charles's good memories, for after telling it he stopped speaking for a moment as with a fond smile he thought back over the seventy years to the good, decent, loving family that gave him his start.

And, of course, he also had to leave that family to start his own. He came to Detroit in the 1920s, originally to continue in the shoe business. He and Lenore were married in 1927 and celebrated their sixty-first Anniversary this past January 30th. I'm not sure how he got into the oil retailing business, but I think he put some money into a company that was providing oil and oil-furnaces for home heating. Only old timers like Charles and me, and Gay Allen and Harold Blodgett and Bill White as well, who remember the childhood chore of digging clinkers out of the furnace fire-bed and (forever, it seemed then) hauling out those ashes, can realize the sudden welcome change in home heating that even the Great Depression couldn't stop. Charles's company, the Marathon Oil Company, I believe, was particularly fortunate, he once told me, in being able to purchase oil from British tankers that were able to get to the Detroit-Windsor area. Whatever the circumstances, Charles's very successful business career did not change his character. I know a number of very well-to-do men, but I have never met one with the near-complete absence of guile that I admired so in him.

By that statement I do not mean that he didn't like to show off, for indeed he did, not only his Whitman holdings but his holdings of Joyce and a number of other writers, his magnificent collection of Jewish ceremonial silver, his paintings and other art work, and particularly his handsome home on Boston Boulevard, which he had refurbished beautifully. But when he was showing his treasures, it was with a near-boyish delight, almost an innocence, that made one glad in his joy. He once told me, just after some big purchase, I believe, "Carroll, I'm making so much money just now—I don't know what to do with it!" Well, it didn't take long for him to learn, and his many benefactions are now legendary. His assistance to libraries, his support to Brandeis University and to many Israeli causes, the general public already knows.

Sometimes his generous enthusiasm for the Whitman cause had funny-sad consequences, as in the strange episode of Whitman's watch. Some months after I met Charles, he asked me to come home with him for there was something he wanted to show me. On the way there he explained that in the mass of items he had received from Annie Traubel there was Whitman's watch that he had willed to Horace. Horace's son had died as a child, but there was a grandson (Gertrude's son Malcolm) who had run away years before and had never kept in touch with the family. Even so, Charles reasoned, the watch really belonged to this boy (by then, of course, a grown man), so he hired a detective to track down the address (somewhere in Iowa, I believe). When the address was found, Charles carefully packaged the watch in a neat

square box with plenty of padding, enclosed a little note explaining the background of the gift, congratulated the new owner on his unusual inheritance, and invited a reply about his Whitman interests and memories.

By that time we had reached Charles's home, and as we entered he pointed to the hall table and said, "It just came back." There was the unwrapped square package, opened to reveal the remains of the watch—the crystal shattered, the face crushed, with the hands awry, the spring unsprung and twisted around to make a little nest. No one looking at the now-shattered watch could miss what had happened: the grandson's anger at his mailing address being discovered, the growing frustrated rage as he read Charles's innocent letter, the renewed rejection of all that Whitman worship, and finally going to his work-table, seizing the hammer, and giving Walt Whitman's Waltham Watch one well-aimed blow. One can even imagine the grim satisfaction in wrapping it up again and sending back this emphatic rejection.

I may not remember everything about the incident, but I'll never forget Charles's honest distress, "What did I do wrong?" And to such an upright, decent man, it was a deep shock, I'm sure. I think I repeated the well-known truism that children of literary parents often reject their parents' enthusiasms. Perhaps young Malcolm had had an overdose of the Whitman reverence that dominated the Traubel household. So Charles's well-meant gift may not have been seen that way at all but as a ploy to get him back into a family situation he could not stand. I doubt my attempts to explain away the occasion of Charles's deep hurt were very helpful, but as we talked he seemed to get back his usual cheerful composure. Finally, I asked what he was going to do with it—try to get in touch with Malcolm again? repair the watch? throw it away? He replied, in a return to his normal bright manner, "Oh, I can't throw it out! It's still Walt's watch, you know, so I'll just keep it."

I often wonder if Charles ever told Gertrude about the watch . . . and, indeed, to this day I don't know what finally did happen to it. But certainly none of his other many benefactions was ever rejected. I was the recipient of many of them. It was no secret at that time that the Library of Congress was anxious to upgrade its Manuscript Division, and in 1960 with a new President it was given the go-ahead to expand. It was also the fond wish that the Feinberg Collection might ultimately end up at the Library of Congress—which has now happened. When a new position was created there, Specialist in American Cultural History, Charles alerted me, and his letter of recommendation paved my way. It was a great job, for a couple of years, and I would see Charles whenever he came to Washington, but I had been so long in the academic world that I found I didn't want to lose it permanently. For me, the year doesn't start January 1st but with the first semester registration in the Fall, which I came to help with in Chapel Hill in 1963. The Trent Collection is at Duke (seven miles away) so I've had the lucky break of knowing intimately the three major manuscript collections. The New York University *Collected Writings* project, another Charles Feinberg benefaction, has now, through the brilliant editorial skills of Bill White and Ed Grier, made these collections available to all, but there is a special thrill in deciphering and using the originals that I will always be especially grateful to Charles for providing.

Charles was a devout Jew, and I was a far-from-devout Catholic, and mutual friends always wondered, aside from Whitman, how we got along. I guess it was something of a learning experience for us both. We didn't talk about such matters very often, but I once told him that the only Pope for whom I had any respect and

affection was John XXIII, the one who opened Church windows and let in some fresh air. Shortly thereafter, on a trip to Israel with some other benefactors, the group stopped in Rome and had a Papal audience, which Charles found very rewarding. I also found it rewarding, for Charles brought me back a very ornate and, I'm sure, expensive medallion of that good man. I still have it around somewhere, and whenever I see it back in the drawer I think of Charles and smile.

C. CARROLL HOLLIS