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Walt Whitman and Oscar Wilde: A Biographical Note

Gary Scharnhorst

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NOTES

WALT WHITMAN AND OSCAR WILDE: A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Oscar Wilde's esteem for Whitman and his poetry is well-known. As Wilde told Whitman when they met in Camden on January 18, 1882, his mother had purchased a copy of *Leaves of Grass* around 1866 and "read passages from it to him," so he had been acquainted with the poet "almost from the cradle."¹ Virtually everything that is known about this meeting was reported by Whitman in an interview with the *Philadelphia Press* published the next day. Whitman was so pleased with this article that he sent copies of it to several friends.² To date, Wilde was known to speak publicly about their meeting only once, in an interview with the *Boston Herald* some ten days later. "I spent the most charming day I have spent in America" with Whitman, he said. "He is the grandest man I have ever seen. The simplest, most natural, and strongest character I have ever met in my life. I regard him as one of those wonderful, large, entire men who might have lived in any age, and is not peculiar to any one people. Strong, true, and perfectly sane: the closest approach to the Greek we have yet had in modern times. Probably he is dreadfully misunderstood."³

In fact, Wilde mentioned Whitman often during his North American lecture tour in 1882. In St. Louis on February 25, for example, he declared that Whitman was "a great writer. . . . There is more of the Greek residing in him than in any modern poet. His poetry is Homeric in its large pure delight of men and woman, and in the joy the writer has and shows through it all in the sunshine and breeze of outdoor life."⁴ In San Jose on April 3 and in Salt Lake City on April 11, he defended Whitman as the finest American poet,⁵ and in Halifax in mid-October he made a similar point: "Walt Whitman if not a poet is a man who sounds a strong note. He writes neither prose nor poetry but something of his own that is unique. He is one of your greatest men."⁶ Wilde apparently reminisced about his visit to Whitman in Camden at greater length only once, however—while in Cincinnati on February 20. "The room which has most impressed me" in America, he said, "[is] a little bare whitewashed room" upstairs at 431 Stevens Street "in Camden town, where I met Walt Whitman, whom I admire intensely." He then added:

There was a big chair for him and a little stool for me, a pine table on which was a copy of Shakespeare, a translation of Dante, and a cruse of water. Sunlight filled the room, and over the roofs of the houses opposite were the masts of the ships that lay in the river. But then the poet needs no rose to blossom on his walls for him, because he carries nature always in his heart. This room contains all the simple conditions for art—sunlight, good air, pure water, a sight of ships, and the poet's works.⁷

These comments—which echo his advocacy of the æsthetic movement in his lecture “The Decoration of Houses”—have been lost to scholarship until now.

Because so little has been known about Wilde’s visits to Whitman, including their second meeting in early May,⁸ some of their biographers speculate that the poets were later estranged.⁹ On the contrary: Whitman apparently sent an inscribed copy of *November Boughs* to Wilde in 1888—a presentation copy sold a decade later when Wilde’s library was liquidated for debts while he was in prison.¹⁰ Wilde favorably reviewed the book in the January 25, 1889, issue of the *Pall Mall Gazette*.¹¹ On his part, Whitman always defended Wilde against the slings and arrows of his detractors. As he told Horace Traubel a few weeks after the appearance of Wilde’s review, “Wilde was very friendly to me—was and is, I think—both Oscar and his mother—Lady Wilde—and thanks be most to the mother, that greater, more important individual.¹² Oscar was here—came to see me—and he impressed me a strong, able fellow, too.”¹³ If only all poets were so friendly.

University of New Mexico

GARY SCHARNHORST

NOTES

1 “Oscar Wilde and Whitman,” *Philadelphia Press* (January 19, 1882), 8; rpt. in *Oscar Wilde: Interviews and Recollections*, ed. E. H. Mikhail (New York: Macmillan, 1979), 46-48.

2 *Daybooks and Notebooks*, ed. William White (New York: New York University Press, 1977), 2:278.

3 “Oscar Wilde,” *Boston Herald* (January 29, 1882), 7. A reporter for the *Boston Globe* also present for the interview was more succinct. He quoted Wilde to this effect: “Of all your authors, I consider Walt Whitman far the grandest and noblest. Many of his lines are like a blast fresh from Olympus. I have met him and enjoyed his society more than words can express” (“The Æsthetic Apostle” [January 29, 1882], 5).

4 “Oscar as He Is,” *St. Louis Republican* (February 26, 1882), 13.

5 “Oscar Wilde,” *San Jose Herald* (April 4, 1882), 3.

6 “The Apostle of Beauty in Nova Scotia,” *Halifax Morning Herald* (October 10, 1882), 2.

7 “With Mr. Oscar Wilde,” *Cincinnati Gazette* (February 21, 1882), 10; rpt. in “Walt Whitman’s Æsthetic Den,” *Macon Weekly Telegraph* (March 2, 1882), 2.

8 Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: Song of Himself* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 412-413.

9 See, for example, Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 164, and David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 539.

10 *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), 713.

11 Oscar Wilde, "The Gospel According to Walt Whitman," *Pall Mall Gazette* (January 25, 1889), 3.

12 Lady Jane Francesca Wilde (1826-1895), aka "Speranza," was a prominent Irish nationalist poet.

13 *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, ed. Gertrude Traubel (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), 5:284.

AN UNPUBLISHED WHITMAN MANUSCRIPT ON EMERSON

Kendall Reed has recently added an unpublished Whitman manuscript to his collection of Whitman materials. It is a short note about the poet's reading of Emerson's later work. Here is a transcription of the manuscript, which is reprinted on the back cover of this issue of *WWQR*: "It is very plain ^after^ reading Emerson's early forenoon essays, and then those of his elder age that the latter are not the ^consecutive^ fruits or crowning results of the former".

The manuscript is undated and is mounted in a frame with a copy of an 1871 photo of the poet taken by Gurney and Son, along with a note in an unknown hand that reads: "A bit of Walt Whitman MS. / From / J. H. Johnston New York / To His Grace, the Archbishop / of Canterbury / 1904." Johnston (1837-1919) was a New York jeweler and a loyal friend and supporter of the poet; Whitman visited Johnston's home frequently in the 1870s and 1880s. The Archbishop of Canterbury in 1904 was Randall Thomas Davidson, 1st Baron Davidson of Lambeth (1848-1930); he served as archbishop from 1903 to 1928. Johnston's relationship to the archbishop is unknown, but the archbishop did visit the United States in 1904 to celebrate the one-hundredth anniversary of the Episcopal cathedral in Quebec and to attend the triennial general convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, held in Boston that October. He arrived in New York in late August, where he was met by a distinguished group of New Yorkers and taken by train, in J. Pierpont Morgan's private car, to Quebec. While in North America, the archbishop toured Canada and the United States, visiting Montreal, Toronto, Niagara Falls, Albany, and Washington, D.C., where he met with President Theodore Roosevelt. During his stay, the archbishop came to New York and attended several banquets with prominent churchgoers, receiving many gifts. It is likely that this Whitman memento from Johnston was one of them.

The manuscript is illuminating because it is one of a number of prose fragments in which Whitman expresses some deep reservations about Emerson. One of those manuscripts was printed in *WWQR* in the Summer/Fall 2000 issue; in that fragment, Whitman questions Emerson's "sense of Deity" and