



Whitman's Dead Canary Bird

Ed Folsom

University of Iowa, ed-folsom@uiowa.edu

ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)

ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

Copyright © 1987 Ed Folsom

Recommended Citation

Folsom, Ed. "Whitman's Dead Canary Bird." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 5 (Fall 1987), 43-44.

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.1172>

ON THE BACK COVER:

WHITMAN'S DEAD CANARY BIRD—Stuffed, head somewhat blackened, perched on a plastic branch embedded in dead leaves, shells, and coral, Whitman's canary spends its eternal rest under a cracked bell jar in the Metropolitan Library in Bolton, England. This odd talisman, preserved by a group of English clerks and young professionals who gathered regularly to discuss Whitman's poetry, has evoked its share of wonder and ridicule over the years; Justin Kaplan, in his *Walt Whitman: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), views the rag-tag group of Bolton Whitmanites as one of the more eccentric sects of Whitman's "apostolic church": "A Whitman fellowship in the Lancashire mill town of Bolton, England, cherished among other sacred objects a lock of the poet's hair and the stuffed body of a canary that had once trilled in the parlor at Mickle Street" (pp. 33–34). Dr. J. Johnston and J. W. Wallace—the two leaders of the "Bolton College" (as the group sometimes called themselves)—traveled to Camden, New Jersey, in 1890 and 1891 to visit Whitman; they published the diaries of their visits in *Visits to Walt Whitman in 1890–1891* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1917). Dr. Johnston made the first trip and carefully noted the "inmates" of Whitman's house, including "Polly the robin, Watch the spotted dog, a parrot, Kitty the black cat, and a canary bird"; he goes on to tell of how the nameless bird ended up in Bolton: "This bird, which was the subject of Whitman's lines, 'My Canary Bird,' died shortly after my visit, and Mrs. Davis [Whitman's housekeeper] had it stuffed. It was brought to Bolton by Dr. Bucke, together with an autographed copy of the lines, in 1891, and presented to Mr. Wallace" (pp. 60–61). By the time Wallace made the trip over from Bolton the next year, Whitman already had another canary, to whom he would frequently call, "Sing on, birdie! Go on!" Whitman, wanting to be sure his former canary had weathered the transatlantic voyage, asked Wallace: "The canary you have, the stuffed one, arrived all right, I suppose? I understood that the glass shade was broken." To an incredulous bystander, Whitman had to explain, "I used to have a canary in the front room, and when I sat there alone it was great company to me. When it died Mary [Davis] and Warry [Fritzinger] took it into their heads to get it stuffed and send it to Wallace" (p. 139). (The canary may in fact have belonged to Mary Davis, who moved several of her pets into Whitman's house when she agreed to live there.)

This photograph, then, which I took in May 1987 in Bolton, records the current state of the 100-year old canary, a bird that came to represent for Whitman the increasingly caged and diminished circumstances the poet found himself in during his last enfeebled years. At one time Whitman could boast:

I have not so much emulated the birds that musically sing,
I have abandon'd myself to flights, broad circles.
The hawk, the seagull, have far more possess'd me than the canary or mocking-bird,
I have not felt to warble and trill, however sweetly,
I have felt to soar in freedom and in the fullness of power, joy, volition. (*LG*, 576)

But by the late 1880s, Whitman had turned from hawks and seagulls to the domestic birds in cages around him, finding them the better emblem of his reduced power. As he neared his seventieth birthday, he described himself as "Dull, parrot-like and old, with crack'd voice harping, screeching" (*LG*, 510), and in calling to his canary bird to sing, he was calling also to himself to continue to warble through a bleak and confined time, even if the resultant song would not have the power he once commanded—it would still be a song, and its strength would be in teaching him why the caged bird sang:

Did we count great, O soul, to penetrate the themes of mighty books,
Absorbing deep and full from thoughts, plays, speculations?
But now from thee to me, caged bird, to feel thy joyous warble,
Filling the air, the lonesome room the long forenoon,
Is it not just as great, O soul? ("My Canary Bird," *LG*, 510)

The University of Iowa

ED FOLSOM