



Whitman's Apocryphal "Star and Stripes Necktie"

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On the Back Cover:

WHITMAN'S APOCRYPHAL "STAR-AND-STRIPES NECKTIE"

On February 2, 1892, Horace Traubel read to Whitman an article entitled "Walt Whitman's Fad" (with the subtitle "He Used to Parade Broadway Wearing a Star-and-Stripes Necktie") that had appeared a few weeks earlier in the *Advertiser*. One of countless short newspaper pieces offering anecdotes about the poet that appeared during the last year of Whitman's life, the article—reprinted from a "New York Letter" in the *Brooklyn Times*—commented on Whitman's ideas of fashion at the time *Leaves of Grass* first appeared. The anonymous writer says that Whitman, even given "his long vegetation [*sic*] in Camden," nonetheless is "in every fiber a thorough New Yorker." The writer goes on to describe in detail what Whitman looked like thirty-five years before, as recounted by an "old journalistic friend":

This city was comparatively small then, and Walt Whitman was as conspicuous a citizen as any—knew everybody and everybody knew him. He was a marked figure on Broadway—a most manly man, as vigorous and virile as his own poetry. His very personality impressed itself upon all passers-by, and men, and even women, turned around to look at him. He was almost the first to make the now fashionable fad of the flannel shirt in Summer his all the year round convenience and comfort, and the broad collar was turned over a silk American flag. His ordinary wear was a neat suit of workingman's clothes. Whatever he might be called, a Democrat or a Republican, he prided himself upon being "one of the people." Brady, then famous as a photographer, was the first to capture Whitman, and thereafter every photographer in town displayed colored pictures of Walt, especially to show his American flag scarf. There were omnibusses in those days—"stages," they called them—and every driver knew Walt Whitman; and up and down Broadway the poet was prominent, often for hours, beside a driver on the box. The lively street was his studio in which he made his pictures of the people and his studies of humanity.

The scene portrayed in this forgotten piece (it is pasted into Traubel's still-unpublished notes on Whitman's final days, located in the Horace L. Traubel Papers in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress—see facsimile on the back cover) is an enticing one, and the American flag tie seems too good to be true. It is. No photos have been found that reveal a starred and striped tie, and for good reason: Whitman never wore such a thing. Traubel's notes record Whitman's reaction to the story, and his response demonstrates that he was always acutely aware of his fashion statements:

He said—"It is all untrue—all of it. I never wore a tie—or rarely—& if I did, it was a black silk one. I dressed in black anyway at that time." When did he adopt grey? "It must have been from 1860 to 65." After a pause—"Perhaps earlier—or perhaps had its suggestion earlier. You know I was in Louisiana—spent some time in the South—

yes, before the War—and I must have acquiesced or hit upon grey while there. This stars & stripes business is new & false—I never heard the story before but”—with a weary laugh—“I have heard as bad & worse.”

There are several interesting aspects to this response, but perhaps the most suggestive is Whitman’s indication that he changed his war-time wardrobe to grey as a result of the time he spent in the South. His clothing, at least in recollection, seemed to reflect for him his lifelong commitment to Union, to the embracing of North and South, even if his Confederate grey wasn’t actually set off with stars and stripes around his neck.

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