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Jerome Loving  
*Texas A&M University*

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# WALT WHITMAN'S SEVENTIETH BIRTHDAY PARTY AND THE GHOST OF RALPH WALDO EMERSON

JEROME LOVING

DELIVERED AT THE WALT WHITMAN BIRTHPLACE,  
MAY 31<sup>ST</sup>, 2019



RALPH WALDO EMERSON WAS GONE from the literary scene, having died seven years earlier, but his ghost haunted Walt Whitman's seventieth birthday celebration in Morgan's Hall in Camden, New Jersey, on May 31, 1889. Despite Emerson's famous endorsement of the first *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, when the Concord Philosopher greeted Whitman "at the beginning of a great career," many New Englanders—indeed, readers in general—continued to resist accepting Whitman and his *Leaves* as a major contribution to American literature. More than a hundred guests—lawyers, judges, minor poets—were invited to the event for the Good Gray Poet, but far fewer attended. One of the more surprising guests was Julian Hawthorne, son of novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne, who as far as we know, never acknowledged Whitman's work. Julian was in the general area, having made a visit beforehand to a friend across the Delaware River in Philadelphia.

There were no women in attendance. Richard Watson Gilder, whose *Century Magazine* had opened its pages to Whitman when so many other literary magazines hesitated, was present, but not his sister and associate editor Jeanette L. Gilder. She was represented only by a brief letter collected in *Camden's Compliment to Walt Whitman*, edited by Horace Traubel and published that year.<sup>1</sup> In that manner she joined the majority of invited writers, including Mark Twain, who sent letters instead of attending. Anne Gilchrist, one of the original female critics to champion *Leaves of Grass*, had died in 1885, but her spirit was reflected in the presence of her son, Herbert Gilchrist, who had known the poet since 1876 and appeared to Traubel that night to

be “terribly agitated.”<sup>22</sup> “Noble women of Great Britain have shown,” Gilchrist said in his remarks that evening, “by pen and speech, to our warped and blunted masculine natures, the spiritual meaning and religious fervor which shine through and illuminate the leaves in *Leaves of Grass*.”<sup>23</sup> Herbert had come to the poet, he said, during “darker, less happy times,” and clearly worshipped Whitman, as did the many disciples who gathered around their Christ figure that evening. We don’t know the details of those “less happy times” for Herbert, only that Anne Gilchrist’s son committed suicide, in 1914.

Seeking to husband his dwindling strength, Whitman did not enter the hall until after the meal was served to the guests. His “meal” consisted mainly of a bottle of Champagne, ordered exclusively for the guest of honor. Frail and confined to a wheelchair pushed by his Canadian attendant Ed Wilkins, he sat at the head of a table that connected two parallel tables. The scene included musicians on a platform, banners on the walls, flowers on each long table, and a bouquet at each plate. Whitman had cautioned that he could stay only fifteen minutes but in fact remained three hours. Sitting near him were not only Julian Hawthorne but the prairie naturalist Hamlin Garland, who had already published some of the vignettes that would go into his finest book, *Main-Traveled Roads* (1891). Garland’s admiration of the socialist Henry George had no doubt brought him to the attention of Traubel, who was—as they would later say of American communists—“a fellow traveler.” Just before the poet was seated, the black cook rushed out from the kitchen to shake his hand. Whitman, according to Traubel, had “nursed her husband in the hospital in Washington.”<sup>24</sup>

Samuel H. Grey, a local judge, served as toastmaster. In his notes for what would become the nine-volume *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, Traubel quietly grumbled that Grey “knew nothing of Whitman’s history or work . . . and therefore was dull, if not stupid, in his felicity.”<sup>25</sup> Grey had been selected by the committee of Camden citizens honoring Whitman, not by Traubel. The judge counted a diversity of guests on hand—including artisans and “the distinctively mechanical classes”—but in fact specimens of the “divine average” were no better represented at the function than women, who were

also celebrated in *Leaves of Grass*.

Next up was Thomas B. Harned, a Camden attorney and one of Whitman's three literary executors. "Only now," he said, "are we beginning to realize the importance of his life-work and the grandeur of the man."<sup>6</sup> Speaking not only for the literary executors but the guests that evening as well, he added: "The person of the man is greater than his book." Following Herbert Gilchrist came Francis Howard Williams, a minor playwright and poet from nearby Germantown, who brought up the elephant in the room—Whitman's continued neglect by the New England literary establishment:

For years and years Walt Whitman has been the standard-bearer in a movement no less important than that against the English classical school. For years and years he has borne calumny and misrepresentation from a public which utterly failed to understand him, and from certain exclusive coteries which willfully failed to do so. . . . They said that he was a sensualist, taking no thought of the spiritual essence and spiritual needs of humanity. . . . To-day there are signs that the vindication has come. . . . [W]hatever there is of a literary movement there tends more and more towards the acceptance of at least the fundamental principles and basic meaning of the *Leaves of Grass*—towards a [Transcendentalist] recognition of the fact that all true things are beautiful to him who sees aright. You of Camden can claim Walt Whitman for your own, but you must let us of the bigger town across the river have a share in him because we are now beginning to deserve it.<sup>7</sup>

The next speaker, also from Germantown—a suburb of Philadelphia where Whitman had a number of devoted friends—was John Herbert Clifford, a Unitarian minister. Arguing that "for not much longer" can Whitman's credentials as a poet be questioned (as they still would be almost three years later, in the obituary in *New York Times*), he denounced Edward Emerson's recently published *Emerson in Concord* (1889), which included the following note:

When *Leaves of Grass* appeared . . . , the healthy vigor and freedom of this work of a young mechanic seemed to promise so much that Mr. Emerson overlooked the occasional coarseness which offended him, and wrote a letter of commendation to the author, a sentence of which was, to his annoyance, printed in gold letters on the covers of the next edition. But the first work led him to expect better in future, and in this he was disappointed. He used to say, this 'Catalogue-style of poetry is easy and leads nowhere,' or words to that effect.<sup>8</sup>

Edward Emerson's assault on Whitman, as I wrote in *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (University of California Press, 1999), inaugurated the second-generation effort to separate the New England saint from the Brooklyn sinner. Actually, Emerson had indeed—subsequent to his famous letter of greeting Whitman at the “beginning of a great career”—complained of Whitman's catalogues, at least once in a letter to Thomas Carlyle. Clifford for his part was ready with a defense: “Are there not other catalogues in poetry? In the *Iliad* some of the various outfits for limited operations, though they do lead somewhere. Is it the rub that Whitman's catalogues lead everywhere?”<sup>9</sup>

Following dry speeches from two lawyers, Gilder of the *Century* asked just where, outside of the Bible, “is there a stronger passion for immortality.”<sup>10</sup> For the editor of the *Century*, Whitman had written an American Bible, though he lamented that the poet had “not yet penetrated to the masses, but he will in years to come through the finer intellects of the time.”

By the time it was Julian Hawthorne's turn to speak, Whitman had been thoroughly reconstructed as the Poet of Democracy. Hawthorne was placed in somewhat of a quandary, however. He had personally known both Ralph Waldo Emerson and his son Edward, having been one of Edward Emerson's childhood playmates and his fellow student at Franklin Benjamin Sanborn's Concord school. And now he had just heard his boyhood friend criticized for attacking the guest of honor whom Julian was set to celebrate. The speaker felt ambushed—stuck with prepared remarks that he suddenly wished to discard—but it was too late. Julian Hawthorne was a talented critic and writer of non-fiction, and his remarks, entitled “Deputy of Nature,” turned out to be the most positive—and eloquent—statement of the evening. Julian remarked that he had always thought of Whitman “less as an individual man than as a gospel.”<sup>11</sup> He praised the poet for his love of Lincoln and the poem, “O Captain! My Captain!”

Then, interestingly, the son of the author of *The Scarlet Letter*, which some reviewers at the time of its publication condemned as a novel merely about the revolting subject of extramarital sex, chose to praise “To a Common Prostitute.” Just as Julian had already defended *The Scarlet Letter* and his father in *Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Wife*

(1884), he defended “To a Common Prostitute” and Whitman as having “entered into no question of untoward circumstances, nor into any gradations of sin—original, hereditary or personal.” He described the poet as one “whose sympathy can extend from the highest specimen of our times [i.e., Lincoln] to the lowest nameless outcast.” As a “deputy of nature,” Whitman “saw that our universal mother Nature lavished upon [the prostitute], as upon the most immaculate of her sisters, the warmth of the sun, the freshness of the rain, the perfume of the flowers and the rustling of the leaves, and he said to her, ‘Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you.’”<sup>12</sup>

According to Traubel, Julian’s remarks received “great applause” that evening, and the guest of honor, who had verbally responded to Clifford’s denunciation of Edward Emerson’s footnote in *Emerson in Concord*, shouted out to Julian that “the great applause” was directed as much to Nathaniel Hawthorne for writing *The Scarlet Letter* as it was that evening to Julian Hawthorne for defending “To a Common Prostitute” against “untoward circumstances.”<sup>13</sup>

Julian had spoken up for Whitman on earlier occasions, saying that the poet had rebelled in the right direction, but his remarks in Morgan’s Hall in Camden that May evening in 1889 were the last time he would offer such praise. After that, as if to fully retract or erase his previous celebrations of the poet, Julian went on the attack. In his introduction to one of the first textbooks on American literature, published in 1891, he wrote that “much of [Whitman’s] apparent originality is due to his remarkable ignorance.”<sup>14</sup> For the rest of his life, which extended to 1934, Julian continued to denounce Whitman. As late as 1925, he referred to Whitman as a “cheery old ragamuffin” who was the victim of his own obsessive egotism—a poet with “the herd instinct of gross, indiscriminate familiarity. . . . He blunders on bovine-like, never betraying a trace of high intellect or of fine perception or discrimination.” Whitman was “no intellect, but [instead] a dense, obtrusive nature, more apt to attract highly organized persons than the proletariat . . . the democracy—which he purports to address.”

It has been suggested that Julian came to hate Whitman’s New-York brand of realism because his own attempts at fiction had been immured in the New-England romanticism of his father’s work,

but I think the change was more personal than regional. As he wrote in his 1925 attack, he discovered that he had been ambushed on that evening in 1889 into going against his childhood friend Edward Emerson as well as the New England literary tradition in which they had both been reared. He said that he discovered after the banquet that Gilder had already agreed to publish some of Whitman's "partly deodorized disquisitions."<sup>15</sup> He also resented the fact that the *Century* editor had had the audacity that evening to place "the Good Grey Poet above Emerson and Tennyson; it set him secure with Homer and Isaiah, with Job and David struggling in the rear." He described the reaction to Gilder's speech that evening as filled with thunderous applause: "Walt led the cheering, waving his glass and flourishing his beard." Julian concluded his 1925 essay by saying that Whitman, after "having bagged Gilder and the *Century*," was finally safe from the second-generation assault of New England: "He could afford to do without Emerson, and there were no more worlds to conquer."

Instead of subtly defending *The Scarlet Letter* by finding nothing "untoward" in "To A Common Prostitute" that evening in 1889, Julian had inadvertently pulled the Hawthorne name down to the level of Whitman's notoriety as the celebrant of Body as much as the Soul. By this time, he himself was finished as a writer of fiction and had turned to yellow journalism. Desperate for an adequate income in the 1890s, he got involved in promoting worthless gold and silver mines in Canada in the next decade and was convicted of mail fraud, spending nearly a year in the federal penitentiary in Atlanta in 1913.

Julian's little speech was the final one of the evening back at that 1889 Camden dinner. When Traubel published *Camden's Compliment to Walt Whitman* in the fall of that year, he bulked up the thin volume with a series of letters from "Over-Sea" and "Over-Land," beginning with one from Hallam Tennyson and ending with a number from American writers, including a masterful one by a writer who at that time was appreciated primarily as a humorist—Mark Twain. "What great births you have witnessed!" Twain wrote to Whitman. "The steam press, the steamship, the steel ship, the railroad, the perfected cotton-gin, the telegraph, the phonograph, the photograph, photo-gravure, the electrotype, the gaslight, the electric light, the sewing

machine, & the amazing, infinitely varied & innumerable products of coal tar, those latest & strangest marvels of a marvelous age.”<sup>16</sup>

Twain was not new to birthday dinners. People were probably still thinking about his performance twelve years earlier, in 1877, at another American poet’s seventieth birthday dinner, this one for John Greenleaf Whittier, an event hosted by *The Atlantic Monthly* in Boston. There he presented a satire which likened three New England literary saints—Emerson along with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Oliver Wendell Holmes—to three drunks in a mining cabin in the foothills of California and went on to make light fun of their writings. Like Whitman, Twain was an “outsider” in New England literary circles, feeling the sting of their supercilious glances. In fact, when *Leaves of Grass* was “banned in Boston” in 1882, Twain composed another satirical attack, this time on the hypocrisy of New England morals in literature, which allowed the publication of Rabelais and other scatological classical writers but banned *Leaves of Grass* for a number of less-offensive lines. Twain prepared the letter for the *Boston Evening Post*, but apparently never mailed it. In the case of the Whittier birthday incident, Twain at the behest of William Dean Howells, then editor of *The Atlantic* and host that evening, wrote letters of apology to Holmes, Longfellow, and Emerson. Both Holmes and Longfellow replied that they had taken no offense at the clever satire, but Emerson was already descending into senility in 1877, and his answer was dictated by his daughter Ellen. She wrote that the family was disappointed since “we have liked almost everything we have ever seen over Mark Twain’s signature.” To add insult to injury, she addressed the response to Mrs. Clemens, not to the humorist Mark Twain or even the trinomial Samuel Langhorne Clemens.<sup>17</sup>

The “Over-Land” letters in *Camden’s Compliment* noticeably exclude any from the surviving Schoolroom Poets. Whitman and Twain, of course, are our first major writers of the American vernacular, and neither during his lifetime was appreciated the way they are today. Whitman was considered vulgar, Twain merely a humorist—until the twentieth century. In Whitman’s case, it was worse because humor, which in Twain’s hands was at least as progressive as Whitman’s equalization of Body and Soul, flew under the social radar. *Adventures*

of *Huckleberry Finn*, probably the most socially subversive novel in nineteenth-century America, was seen mainly as a “boy’s book”—the sequel, as it was originally intended by the author, to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Moreover, Mark Twain was welcome in high American literary society because he was also Samuel Langhorne Clemens, while Walt Whitman had only a binomial name and was no better off as Walter Whitman, the hack journalist and author of second-rate novels and tales. Socially, Twain/Clemens split his personality and maintained both sides, while Walter/Walt underwent a transformation, discarding one for the other.

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So went the celebration of Walt Whitman’s seventieth birthday, the two-hundredth of which we celebrate today. There were ghosts in the room that night one-hundred-and-thirty years ago—not only the ghost of Emerson, but the ghost of Hawthorne, the ghosts of the New England Fireside poets, and the ghosts of Whitman’s yet-to-be-incarnated “poets to come.” But they would soon arrive, those poets to come, and they continue to arrive, even in these troubled times. In celebrating Walt Whitman, we celebrate ourselves and our democracy, even despite today’s challenges. “I celebrate myself, and sing myself,” the poet proclaimed, “And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.” It’s vintage Whitman, all the way down to the use of “good” as an adverb instead of an adjective.

*Texas A&M University*  
j-loving@tamu.edu

## NOTES

1. *Camden's Compliment to Walt Whitman, May 31, 1889: Notes, Addresses, Letters, Telegrams*, ed. Horace Traubel (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1889). Gilder's letter appears on page 67. Hereafter *Camden's Compliment*.
2. *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 5:248. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* (Whitmanarchive.org).
3. *Camden's Compliment*, 26.
4. *WWC* 5:250.
5. *WWC* 5:248.
6. *Camden's Compliment*, 23.
7. *Camden's Compliment*, 27-29.
8. Edward Waldo Emerson. *Emerson in Concord: A Memoir Written for the "Social Circle" in Concord, Massachusetts* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1889), 228; see also *WWC* 5:175-176.
9. *Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Eleanor M. Tilton. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 8:445; and *Camden's Compliment*, 30.
10. *Camden's Compliment*, 38-39.
11. *Camden's Compliment*, 39.
12. *Camden's Compliment*, 40.
13. *WWC* 5:250.
14. Gary Scharnhorst, "I Didn't Like His Books': Julian Hawthorne on Whitman," *WWQR*, vol. 26 number 3 (Winter, 2009), 151-56.
15. "Walt Whitman," *Pasadena Star-News* (October 28, 1925), 8.
16. *Camden's Compliment*, 64-65.
17. Jerome Loving, *Mark Twain: The Adventures of Samuel L. Clemens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 222-230, 252-255; see also "The Walt Whitman Controversy: A Lost Document," ed. Ed Folsom and Jerome Loving, *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 83 (Spring, 2007), 123-138.