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“COLLECT”

FROM THE WHITMAN CENTENNIAL ISSUE OF
THE CONSERVATOR (MAY 1919)

HORACE TRAUBEL



I know you can tell me how old Walt Whitman is this year. But how old are you? That's more important. How many years old or young are you? How many years sensible or senseless? How many years merciful or malignant? How many years illuminated or blind? It dont matter so much whether he served or not. Have you served? Are you serving? Can you really tell your own age? You think you've done enough when you've told about him. But you haven't. Not till you've told about yourself. You speak of honoring him with celebrations. You dont, you cant, honor him. You honor yourselves. His account is closed. Yours is still open. Tell your own story. Not mostly of what you've done. Chiefly of what you are. How old were you on your first birthday? Are you any older now? I hear the sayers say they've lived through so many noble years. How many noble years have the sayers lived through? He wasn't perfect. Nor are you or we. We'd be afraid of each other if we were. We dont have to romance about him or ourselves. The truth's good enough. Light enough and shadow enough. It's too late to pace him. Now we must pace ourselves. It's all right to indicate his loyalties. But what of our own? I've said at Whitman meetings: "We'll never have a real Whitman day till we come together to celebrate ourselves not him." I hear wonderful things said about him today by people who when he was alive greeted him with derision and deliberate venom. I dont say it's too late for them to see. It's never too late, of course. But it's some late, quite some. He toed the mark fairly well. Do we? None of us are any too remarkable at the best. Nor are any of us any too contemptible at the worst. We admit Walt. Do we admit ourselves? We can make this a year of years. A year for you and me as well as for Whitman.

Our year as well as his year or anybody's year. Whitman's a hundred years born this year. Well, I'm sixty. And you: what are you? They're just as significant in all cases if we've made them so. What have you made of your years? What have I made of mine? I've won my way to sixty years by an untraveled route and I've not had a free pass, either. You've made your years also suggestive. Suggestive of what? That's the test of it all. Not what Whitman was but what you are and what I am. One of us may precede the others for a while but all arrive just the same. Jesuses and Judases. We're always tempted to glorify big men when they reach to big names. But when they're just as big with little names we refuse to speak, except, perhaps, in scorn or skepticism. We say: "God, the father." And yet we rob the man next door. We say: "Whitman, the universal comrade." And yet we hate the alien. One of our most eloquent orators at the Brevoort Whitman meetings used to be continually talking of "the God damned Jews." Is your sense of fraternity parochial or international? Is it white or yellow or black or all three or none of them? Everything we say of Walt comes back to us. Good and bad. Wise and foolish. To paraphrase Walt himself: "Idolatry's to the idolater and comes back most to him." The initiatory lesson from Walt is to be stuck on yourself. Then there's another to go with it. That is, to let every other fellow be stuck on himself. Just as though all the stars were made for him, whoever he is. As though everybody was just for him and he was for everybody. The preacher priest class as a class (there were always exceptions) reprobated the theory of evolution till all culture and science as a class accepted it. Then they claimed it as their own. And when the time comes for the succeeding hypothesis they'll stand by evolution with their usual vehement anathema till the next step is safe. Then they'll take the next step. And say they always knew it was in order. And claim the new ground as they did the old. The literary class as a class (there were always exceptions) derided Whitman till Whitman became inevitable. There are a few feeble echoes of that derision yet. Now they're acclaiming him and possessing him. It's the same old story. When we pass to the next man they'll caustically and brutally defend Whitman against our new adventure. Walt said: "Greater than me will follow." What is the antecedent of life? Death. What is the antecedent of death? Life.

Always and always. Walt Whitman's a hundred years old this year. How old are you? A hundred years international. How many years international are you? am I? He's a hundred years democratic. How many years democratic are we? He's been a crowd man for a hundred years. A woman's man. A criminal's man. How long have you been that kind of people? He's a hundred years confirmed this year. How many years are we confirmed? I'm more curious to know how many years old and young you are, especially young, than how many years old and young he is. I know you can tell me how old Walt Whitman is this year.

Walt was ushered into heaven with the ribald noise of brass bands. Yes. Especially brass. As long as he could be denied he remained an outlaw. Schools, customs, rejected him. Scholarship, fashion, professionalism and professorialism, church and state, in the dubious measures of their silences and laughters, treated him as a negligible claimant. But he stayed round till they melted. He wasn't scared off by bad weather. He wore out the patience of thousands of hells. They gave in. He didn't. Of course he had only the usual steering chart to go by. Every man, derelict or divine, has this and no more. He took his medicine as they take theirs. With mingled emotions of gladness and sorrow. He was as capable of being way down as of being way up. He didn't like being cursed and denounced any more than you or I do. You see, Jesus needed his Judas. Whitman needed his persecutors. We all need something. Our poverty. Our misfortune. Even our ignominy. Malignity plays its part with mercy. I never complain for Whitman. I rather complain for his traducers. He didn't lose. They lost. They paid for all postponements and delays. Just as in our average life the system pays for all the sufferings of its victims. Who paid the cost of hanging John Brown? Tradition says Brown did. But we know that America, civilization, did. The shadow of affliction gives the proper accent to every portrait. I never resent the interrogation. For that's what it is. Make good, we're told. Our claims are all met with that "why." We cant escape with the goods unquestioned. After all the questions are answered there are more questions. There seems to be no end to the historic questionings. You cant be so little as to be missed. Nor can you be big enough to be feared. There's a no for every yes. A black

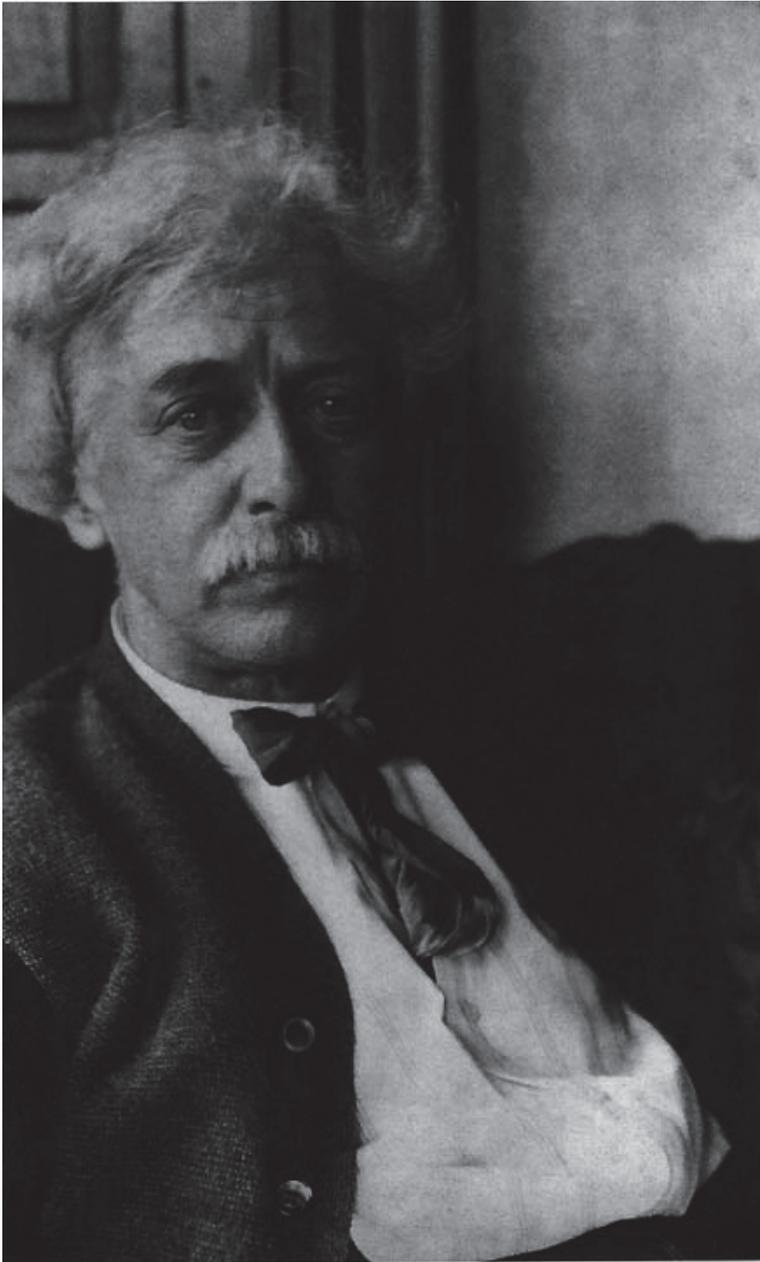
for every white. A discord for every harmony. Walt was called out in the usual way. He told us who he was. Where he came from. Where he was going. The world questioned all. It permitted no angle to go unexamined. Dagger thrusts. Thwartings of will. Confessions of dereliction. Erratic crimes of intention. Nothing avoided its vigilant eyes. That was the proof of the pudding. Natural, inevitable and welcome. He emerged from the great darkness. The tests are universal. They compass the range of all benevolence and malevolence. They subject us to all the petticroisisms of intrigue and pettifoggery. Things are flung in the road to trip us up at every step. Friends go back on us. Promises are broken. Notes defaulted. Death, even with murder, complicates the issue. Fifty hold back for one who rushes on. Chaos. Bedlam. Hoots and howls. Warnings. Threatenings. There are no two ways. There's truly only one way. For bootblack and bard. The other day Gompers was thrown out of an auto. The chauffeur was also chucked on his head. The chauffeur was dismissed with a line. Gompers got a column. No one seemed to care what happened to the chauffeur. Whether he lived or died. But Gompers? In the perspective of eternity one was as important as the other. There's no big or little in the final analysis. No Whitmans and the men who cant read and write. No saviors and no lost. That's the reason Walt to his very last day was concerned lest he hadn't made, as he said, his fellowship for the criminals, outcasts, unpopulars, unmentionables, sufficiently unmistakable. He craved no isolated eminence. He in fact craved no eminence. He was a real crowd man though he didn't call himself such in my terms. He recognized his intimacy with those social classes who are not qualified on the lists. With the forgotten. With those who if they're ever named at all are only included apologetically. The and-so-forths. The oh-yeses that we never invite in unless someone shames us into hospitality. He knew the situation. The pro and con of the divine economy. He was near the farthest off. He descended below the lowest. He passed over the heads of the Christs. Not because he was better than anybody. Rather because he was the neighbor of everybody. He went fearlessly into the jungled wilderness. He shrank from no encounter with the mysterious. Just as anybody does. Just as anybody must. With everybody. Admitting no inferiority or supremacy. The law of one is the law

of all. He objected to being denounced. But not because he wanted to be lauded. He didn't want anybody denounced. He intrepidly accepted the decrees of fate. They were not exceptional for him at the worst. Others had worse. Worse than the worst. He declined to believe himself one exceptional for blessedness or punishment. Dark as the darkest night was it wasn't too dark for him to endure. Or light as the lightest day was it wasn't too light for him to enjoy. He often told that story of the old woman who comforted herself in the midst of her physical miseries by the exclamation: "And to think! there are some who suffer more than I do!" He much preferred to be the nearest of men than to be the only man. "It's deadly black today," he said to me once, "but I guess the shadow's proper for my light." So you see the brass bands wont hurt his feelings now. Not even the brass. The most tragic of the experiences he was subjected to were the vital accompaniments of his exaltation. As they also are of yours and mine. With the after brass and all.

Well, boys, girls, everybody, we can tell each other how old old Walt was when he died and how old he'd be if he was still with us in the flesh. We all know all about that. But let's take a more immediate account. How old or dear are you to me and us? How many years to the good or how many years to the bad? Walt did his stunt. And on the whole did it handsomely. Have you done your stunt? Have I done mine? Let's see. I dont ask you to limit yourselves in talking of Walt or to withdraw anything you've said. But what of yourselves? Where have you stood? Where have I stood and where do I stand? Have we been faithful or have we defaulted? Has the present crisis found us contemporary? Or are we, have we been, laggards? We, some of us, cry, Whitman, Whitman, just as some pious people cry, God, God, or Jesus, Jesus. It means nothing because it never gets beyond God, Jesus and Whitman. Never circulates as the current coin of immediate performance. Every big man is useful if he makes us better acquainted with ourselves. But the big names are useless, even in the way, if they only take us back to their dead pastures. Big men die in themselves and live in their successors. They are kept momentous rather than ominous only in their power to stir the race to constantly expanding influences. This is a good time for Whitmanites to confess.

Not to the authority of a priest. Not even to the authority of Walt. But to the impressive authority of the self. Every one of us. Have we gone to jail with the innocent? Or have we backed water at the jail door? Whittier once wrote to a young man: "Ally yourself with some unpopular cause." Have we done that? Hugo said: "Fear the popular high roads. Take to the wilderness." Have we taken to the wilderness? Zola warned authors: "The way of the academy is the way of death." Have we avoided the way of the academy? When we play with the game the game plays us. Walt one day said to me when his enemies were particularly active: "Let them howl: we'll outdo them with silence." Have we proved capable of meeting public clamor in that spirit? "Let's listen to all they have to say: every word: let's not refuse to hear the worst with the best: then let's go on doing our own job in our own way." Have we always been openeared for the people who said things we didn't like? And have we stuck to our own convictions through thick and thin? Especially thick? Honest, now: have we? If we have, all right. But if we haven't, all wrong. Let's admit it. Have we been afraid of the fellow or the thing around the corner? Or haven't we cared who or what was around the corner? We unite in calling Walt great now after the tests of wear and tear. But are we equal to knowing the greatness of still obscured men and women? After people tell us Walt is great we assent in an echoing chorus. But what capacity have we for discovering a great man for ourselves? We agree in lauding established reputations. But how many of us are brave enough to undergo the ridicule that attends a contemporary decision? Are we ready and willing to pick a man out of the gutter and set him on a throne? All comes at last to that. All Whitmanism as all Christianity. All Tolstoyism as all any-ism. How many years old are we? In adventure and daring? In independence and joy? In all the things we greet in another as evidences of nobility? How old are we in timorous social assent or brave social rebellion? How old in insight or opacity? How old in service or selfishness? It all comes to that. That's our Whitman in figures as well as in rhetoric. It's just as well our Leninism or anything else we celebrate in round numbers. Have we put Walt into a cabinet for observation or into the flesh and blood of our virile living activity? Is he an oil painting on a wall? Or

is he the outcast of some slandered password of revolution? Is he a volume of poem words or the flaming tissue of a challenging reform? Has he become a book of reference or a way of life? He has said to himself that he dont teach a lesson but rather takes down the bars to a lesson. He takes down the bars. We are the lesson. He says again that he's best understood in the lesson by which he's himself destroyed. He dont take us as a possession. He leaves us to our own ownerships. We're to find out how many years worth while we are not how many years illustrious he is. He used to say that when you got his meaning *Leaves of Grass* was no longer "I, Walt Whitman, of Manhattan the son," but just as much "I, Horace Traubel, of Camden the son," or I, anybody, man or woman, of anywhere, the son or daughter.



Horace Traubel, 1919. From *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, volume 9 (Oregon House, CA: W L BENTLEY, 1996.)