



WALT WHITMAN ON SHAKESPEARE

by Paul A. Nelson

Born in West Hills, Long Island, May 31, 1819, Walt Whitman resided in Camden, New Jersey, from 1873, the time of his first paralytic stroke, until his death on March 26, 1892. Celebrated for introducing a new freedom of poetic style through his Leaves of Grass, Whitman exerted as profound an influence on modern American and English literature as did Homer, Dante and Shakespeare on literature of their respective countries and times. First published in 1855, Leaves of Grass went through repeated revisions with each of its nine editions during the author's life-time, culminating in the so-called deathbed, certified as "complete", edition of 1892. In 1855, within a few weeks of publication of the first edition, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote the author: "I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of Leaves of Grass. I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed....I have great joy in it. I find incomparable things said incomparably well, as they must be....I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start."

Often quoted is Whitman's comment in his November Boughs (1888) regarding William Shakespeare's historical plays:

Conceiv'd out of the fullest heat and pulse of European feudalism - personifying in unparallel'd ways the medieval aristocracy, its towering spirit of ruthless and gigantic caste, with its own peculiar air and arrogance (no mere imitation) - only one of the "wolfish aarls" so plenteous in the playa themselves, or some born descendant and knower, might seem to be the true author of those amazing works - works in some respects greater than anything else in recorded literature.

In this article the reader's attention on the other hand is directed to less well-known quotations by Walt Whitman concerning Shakespeare's works and the authorship controversy.

Shortly after settling on Mickle Street in Camden, Whitman became acquainted with Horace Logo Traubel (1858-1919), a young teenager, who soon was running errands for Walt and doing odd jobs for him. A strong father-son attachment developed between them which lasted until Whitman's death. Employed later on as a clerk in a local bank, Traubel visited Whitman frequently when Walt was in Camden, sometimes several times a day. Eventually, Traubel served Whitman as proofreader, editorial assistant, volunteer secretary, and even proxy. He was a great help especially in 1888 in the completion of November Boughs and also in 1891 of Goodbye, My Fancy. In Whitman's handwritten Last Will and Testament, dated June 29, 1888, together with Dr. Richard Bucke and Thomas Harned, Horace Traubel was listed as one of three persons eventually to be in "absolute charge of my books, publications and copyrights and to manage and control the same - and make such use as they decide on my literary property and copyrights." Without question, however, Traubel's greatest service to Whitman and to posterity was to record faithfully between 3/28/88 and 9/14/89 Whitman's conversations and many of the letters he had received. This material was carefully edited and subsequently published between 1906 and 1964 in five volumes, each consisting of approximately 500 pages and comprising altogether of more than

one million words. Walt instructed Traubel: "I want you to speak for me when I am dead. Be sure to write about me honest: whatever you do do not prettify me; include all the hells and damns."

The five volumes With Walt Whitman in Camden, compiled, edited and published by Horace Traubel, contain over one hundred references to works of William Shakespeare and the Francis Bacon/Shakespeare authorship controversy. The preeminent Americans figuring in this literary tempest were Delia Bacon, William O'Connor and Ignatius Donnelly. Whitman spoke frequently about each of them:

Delia Bacon - "The sweetest, eloquentist, grandest woman, I think, that America has so far produced - a woman rare among women, rare among the rare. Romanesque, -beautiful, not after the ideals of the fashion plates, but after Greek ideas... No, I never met her, but somehow I feel that I have known her, nevertheless...It was not surprising Emerson helped Delia Bacon. She was eminently attractive to serious minded persons, always. See how even Hawthorne sends out one of her books with a note bearing his name. Hawthorne, so chary of lending name or countenance to anything that savored of pretense. And she was poor, of course, very unworldly, just in all ways such a woman as was calculated to bring the whole literary pack down on her, the orthodox, cruel, stately, dainty, over-fed literary pack - worshiping tradition, unconscious of this day's honest sunlight."

William O'Connor - A great friend and frequent visitor to Whitman's home, O'Connor wrote a booklet entitled The Good Gray Poet, by which Walt soon was identified.

"William O'Connor was a storm blast for Bacon. I never saw anybody stand up against William when he really got going: he was like a flood: he was loaded with knowledge - yes, with knowledge and knowledge with William was never useless - he knew what to do with it....I am firm against Shaksper - I mean the Avon man, the actor: but as to Bacon, well, I don't know."

Ignatius Donnelly - "Have you noticed the dirty tricks to which Donnelly's enemies resort to discredit him? I put no faith in the stories of his political crookedness: his literary enemies make a lot of it: consider it a final adverse argument - though what that has to do with Shakespeare versus Bacon I don't see. The typical literary man is no more able to examine this question dispassionately than a priest is to pass on objections to the doctrine of the atonement, hell, heaven: not a bit more able: the scribblers are blind from the start: they are after effects, technique, what a thing looks like, not what it is: they don't read farther up or farther down than the surface of the ground they walk on."

"The one thing I have against Donnelly - if I have anything against him - is that he is a searcher after things out of the normal: not abnormal - I should not say that: but out of the normal: a man who likes to go about showing us how we have made mistakes - put a wrong twist into facts: that Judas was a pretty good fellow, of some use, after all: that Caesar was not thus and so, but thus and so: that there was no William Tell - that the William Tell Story was wholly a myth....This sort of thing inheres in modern criticism: it demonstrates the temper of the age. I do not complain of it - indeed, welcome it: the arguments are at bottom irrefutable: but the letter of destructive criticism must not be pushed too far - it tends to render a man unfit to build."

After a pleasant ride out in the country with his friend, Dr. Bucke, on Sunday, Walt returned home in fine spirits. Sunday, June 3, 1888, Horace Traubel visited 328 Michel Street and found Whitman lying on the sofa in the parlor surrounded by concerned friends. Apparently, Sunday evening he had attempted to give himself a sponge bath alone in his upstairs bedroom and had fallen to the floor where he had lain helpless for perhaps several hours.

Nevertheless, Walt Whitman's animated conversations continued on for four more years, his mind remaining clear and cogent. In December 1888 he confided to Horace Traubel:

"I am disposed to trust myself more and more to your younger body and spirit, knowing, as I do, that you love me, that you will not betray me - more than that (and in a way better than that) that you understand me and can be depended upon to represent me not only vehemently but with authority."

Whitman read extensively: Goethe, Voltaire, Homer and Keats to mention a few. His comments reveal a penetrating, critical mind, both sensitive and perceptive. The following illustrates the range of his recorded conversations.

"Goethe suggests books - carries the aroma of books about with him - seems to be a great man with books, by books, from books. Now, whatever Shakespeare was or was not, he was not that sort of man: he came, with all his scholarship, direct from nature. To me that means oh! as much - to come straight from life - to be rooted in an immediate fact."

Talked of Voltaire. "Now there was a great man, too," said W.: "an emancipator - a shining spiritual light; a miraculous man whose ridicule did more for justice than the battles of armies. Voltaire never was of a mind to condone Shakespeare: Shake-speare's crudities were offensive to him: there was something crude, powerful, drastic in the Shake-speare plays: Voltaire could not reconcile his nerves to their brutal might. But you cannot shift such luminaries from their orbit by a sneer - by an adjective. Do you think Leaves of Grass was ever really hurt by the people who went at it with a club?"

W. resuming: "The Shakespeare plays are essentially the plays of an aristocracy: they are in fact not as nearly in touch with the spirit of our modern democracy as the plays of the Greeks - as the Homeric stories in particular. Look at the Homeric disregard for power, place: notice the freedom of the Greeks - their frank criticism of their nabobs, rulers, the elect. You find the Greeks speaking of 'the divine hog-keeper', 'keeper of the hogs' - saying things like that - very convincing things - which prove that they had some recognition of the dignity of the common people - of the dignity of labor - of the honor that resides in the average life of the race. Do you find such things in the Shakespeare plays? I do not - no, nothing of the kind: on the contrary everything possible is done in the Shakespeare plays to make the common people seem common - very common indeed. Although, as I say, I do not admit Bacon, this is an argument which may go to the Bacon side.

"But, after all, Shakespeare, the author Shakespeare, whoever he was, was a great man: much was summed up in him - much - yes, a whole age and more: he gave reflection to a certain social estate quite important enough to be studied: he was a master artist, in a way - not in all ways, for he often fell down in his own wreckage: but taking him for all in all he is one of the fixed figures - will always have to be reckoned with. It is remarkable how little is known of Shaksper the actor as a person and how much less is known of the person Shakespeare of the plays. The record is almost a blank - it has no substance whatever: scarcely anything that is said of him is authorized. Did you ever notice - how much the law is involved with the plays? Long before I heard of any characteristic turns, the sure touch, the invisible potent hand, of the lawyer - of a lawyer, yes: not a mere attorney-at-law but a mind capable of taking the law in its largest scope, penetrating even its origins: not a pettifogger, perhaps even technically in its detail defective-- but a big intellect of great grasp....I go with you fellows when you say no to Shaksper: that's about as far as I have got. As to Bacon, well, we'll see, we'll see."

Walt Whitman once wrote: "In estimating my volumes, the world's current times and deeds, and their spirit, must be first profoundly estimated. The poet fails if he does not flood himself with the immediate age as with vast oceanic tides...and if he be not himself the age transfigured." Four hundred years ago in his plays and Sonnets Shakespeare eloquently epitomized Elizabethan England on the verge of a literary and cultural renaissance, although the country was constantly threatened by Spanish invasions and replacement of Elizabeth on the throne by Mary of Scotland. In a similar way Whitman, through his Leaves of Grass, this optimistic prose and thoughtful critiques, epitomized the love of freedom and pride in honest labor possessed by average nineteenth century Americans living amidst calamitous social realities. The influence of each of these savants profoundly affected the future development of literature and culture both in his country and the world.

Referance

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