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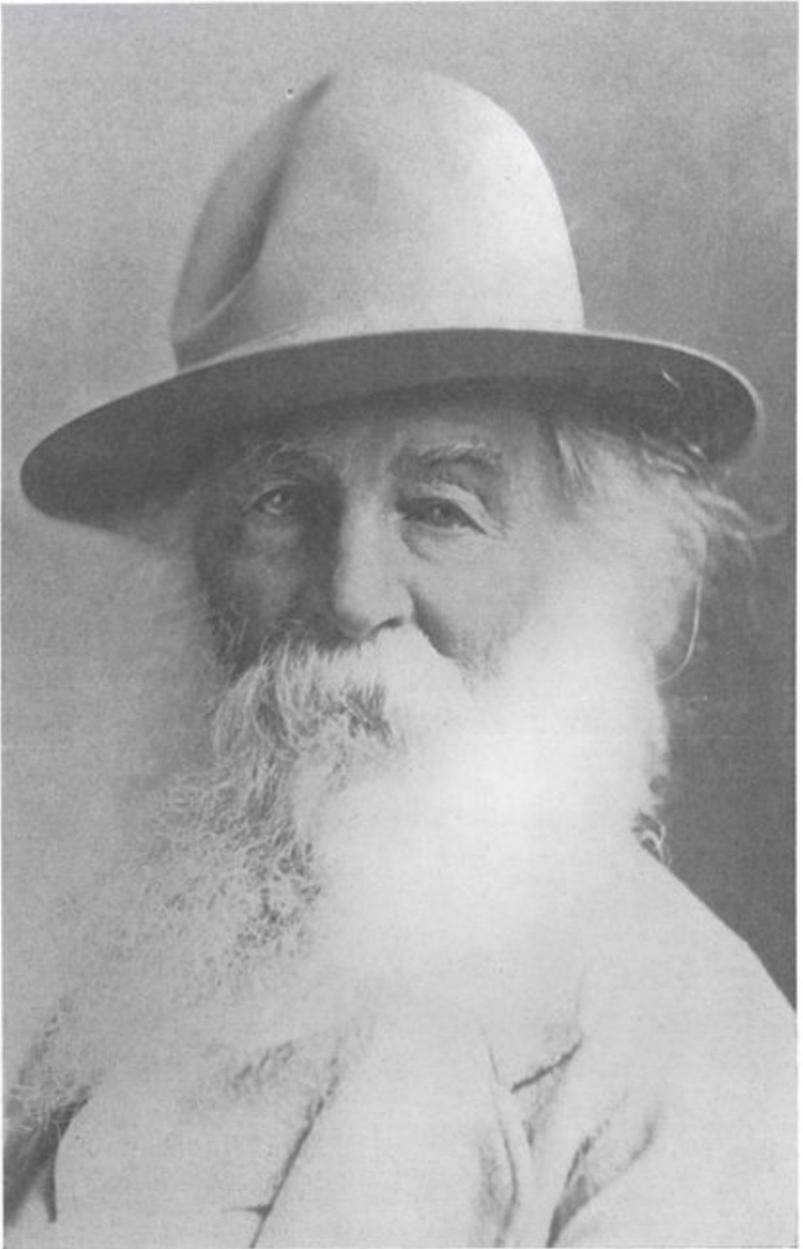
## WHITMAN *VS.* PARTON

By ORAL S. COAD

*Two years ago Dr. Coad published in The Journal a detailed account of a Walt Whitman manuscript which is in the Library. Since that time more Whitman materials have been acquired by the University. From a portion of this material Dr. Coad has been able to fill out the story of a much-debated controversy concerning a debt of Whitman.*

A MINOR episode in the career of Walt Whitman, which is sometimes omitted entirely by his biographers but which generated considerable heat in its day, is the Parton debt controversy. Probably the fullest report of the matter hitherto available is the brief statement, containing Whitman's own written summary, in Horace Traubel's *With Walt Whitman in Camden*. The Library of Rutgers University has recently acquired a set of manuscripts—mainly unpublished letters to and from William Sloane Kennedy, the poet's friend and champion—that gives a more complete record of the dispute than is to be found elsewhere. While the whole affair was little more than a tempest in a tea-pot, as one of the participants said, yet, since it concerned the character of a famous man who has always been something of a storm center, it may be of interest to get at the facts as nearly as possible.

The debt in question, although contracted late in 1856 or early in 1857, did not reach the controversial stage until after Whitman's death. In the *New England Magazine* for January, 1893, appeared an article on James Parton, the distinguished biographer, who had recently died. In the course of the article the author, Julius H. Ward, cited as evidence of Parton's gener-



WALT WHITMAN

*From a photograph in the Sharpe Collection in the Library*

osity a loan of \$200.00 to an "impecunious poet, since widely known to fame," which sum Parton had intended to spend on a trip to New Orleans to gather material for a life of Andrew Jackson. The unnamed poet, we are informed, assured Parton that he could make repayment whenever it was required, but "the money was never returned." On March 7, 1895, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who was never able to accept Whitman, wrote to Kennedy in defense of his aversion, offering as partial justification the poet's "want of personal honesty in business matters—as shown in the anecdote told of him by J. H. Ward in his paper on Parton in the N. E. Magazine—a fact told me by Parton himself, one of the most truthful men I ever knew."<sup>1</sup>

Kennedy lost no time in launching an investigation. On March 14, Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke of London, Ontario, who had brought out a biography of Whitman in 1883, replied to a letter he had just received from Kennedy and confirmed the latter's belief in the poet's honesty. To justify his faith in their friend Bucke wrote:

I first saw Whitman in '77—he undoubtedly looked upon me from the first as a well off man—in '79 when he was sick in St. Louis I asked leave to send him \$100.00 he declined saying that he had good friends and needed nothing. Later I pressed upon him \$200.00 meaning it as a gift but he took it as a loan—several times he spoke of repaying it but I always put the matter aside saying that he owed me nothing—(and as a matter of fact he did *not* owe me anything for his friendship had been a thousand times more to me than the money). Well in the end, a year before his death, in spite of my protestations, *Whitman paid me the two hundred dollars. . . .*

My dear boy the thing is out of the question—it was not *in* Walt to do anything of the kind. . . . Walt may not have been a saint but there is no manner of doubt that he was one of the loftiest minded, one of the proudest men that ever lived. If a thing seemed right to him he would probably do it though all the world condemned it, but a sneaky action like this he simply *could not have done. He could not have done it*—but I see no great difficulty in believing that some pharisee *lied about it*.

Bucke, in turn, addressed a query to Whitman's brother George, who replied under date of March 26 that he was "much surprised & pained to learn of the charges made against Walt, & as it is the first I ever heard a word in regard to either of them [presumably the two charges of not paying his debt and of lying about it] I will not believe them without strong proof

<sup>1</sup> This and all other letters and manuscripts referred to in this article are a part of the recently acquired Whitman collection.

of their truthfulness, and as at this late day I can see no way of disproving stories of that kind, no matter how devilish or contemptible they may be, it seems to me the better way would be to take no notice of them & let them die out."<sup>2</sup>

Taking no notice was far from Kennedy's intention, however. The next item in the series is a long letter dated February 10, 1897, in reply to a communication from Kennedy to Parton's widow. It was written by Ethel Parton, niece of the lender of the money, who had been her uncle's secretary for years. She declares the story to be unquestionably true and that only Mr. Parton's magnanimity had restrained him from "public attack upon a man who had victimized him." She illustrates his real feeling toward the poet in the following passage:

. . . I asked him, half-jesting, as he was dictating to me his polite declination of the request [to join in a testimonial to Whitman], why he did not give his very good reasons for declining. He replied laughing, "Why should I? The man is old, and very likely poor: I don't care to interfere with his receiving either cash or compliments after so many years. But he's a picturesque old scallywag with a dash of genius—that's all.—Good Gray Poet! Oh, Lord!"

Miss Parton reports the transaction in some detail, explaining that the money was lent on the distinct assurance that by a specified date Whitman would have received for a literary task that was nearly completed a sum more than sufficient to meet the obligation. When, after several postponements, it became evident that the money was not to be forthcoming, "an indignant legal acquaintance," whose name, as we later learn, was Oliver Dyer, asked permission to handle the affair, and Mr. Parton consented, telling him to "keep for his pains anything he could extract from Whitman." Investigation having proved, according to the writer, that "Whitman's tale of his literary enterprise and promised payment was untrue," the creditor was free from any qualms in the matter. She admits that Whitman offered "a few books and cheap pictures" toward a settlement; whether the lawyer took them she is unable to say, but declares that Parton "never received his money or anything else." The letter ends with the assertion that Parton "never ceased to resent what seemed to him so peculiarly base an ex-

<sup>2</sup> This letter is represented in the collection by a penciled copy of the portion quoted above, in Kennedy's handwriting.

tortion under false pretenses," and that thereafter he held Whitman "in complete contempt."

A second letter from Miss Parton, dated February 15, 1897, in answer to a "fair and kind" one from Kennedy, insists that the bad faith of Whitman, which puzzled Kennedy so much, was the whole ground of Mr. Parton's bitterness. The alleged literary work was an "entire fabrication" and that was the unpardonable thing in her uncle's eyes. This letter called out another from Kennedy that impressed Miss Parton as being neither fair nor kind. Replying on March 19, with an asperity obviously prompted by his, she exclaims that "Whitman is to me simply a formless literary monster and a poor sort of human being, and I am not in the least concerned for his reputation in either capacity."

The opinions so forcefully expressed by Miss Parton in this correspondence would seem to have shaken Kennedy's faith, if we may judge by a communication of March 19 from Thomas B. Harned, attorney-at-law. Replying to a very recent letter from Kennedy, he makes it clear that he and the other executors of Whitman's estate had absolutely no legal authority to pay the Parton debt, as apparently Kennedy had urged them to do. (Kennedy here inserted the marginal comment, "D—n yr law!") Harned goes on to declare: "For twenty years I was brought in personal contact with Whitman almost daily. I never heard his veracity impeached, nor do I believe he was capable of committing a dishonorable act." (Below this statement Kennedy penciled the retort, "v. his poems, he admits some himself.")

Other friends of the poet were less disturbed. On March 8, 1897, Whitman's Boswell, Horace Traubel, wrote to Mrs. Elizabeth Fairchild:

Harned has heard from the Partons & has replied to them in strong terms. There seems to be no scrap of paper or written record of any kind in this matter & the transaction is charged as having been made nearly 40 years ago. There is nothing beside the hearsay. Walt was when we knew him of strictest, severest, temper as affecting obligations of this sort. There seems no foothold for this story anywhere.

When Colonel Higginson, in the *American Co-operative News* (Cambridge, Mass.) of February, 1897, publicly accused Whitman of "leaving his debts unpaid and constructing for himself

a stately tomb at the cemetery,"<sup>3</sup> Kennedy prepared a long statement for the press (unpublished, so far as I have discovered) under the title "Did Walt Whitman Leave a Debt Unpaid?" While questioning Higginson's plural, he admits that the poet seemingly left one debt unpaid, but doubts that he lied about it and tries to find extenuation for the non-payment in Parton's "telling all over New York to many members of the literary circle that said poet has borrowed money of him & is a rascal & liar," as well as in his loosing "the hounds of the law on him giving them carte blanche to worry & bait him to their hearts' content." At this point Kennedy hazards the conjecture that the lawyers may have got the money without ever reporting the fact to Parton. Throughout this document there runs a strain of troubled loyalty, which, while admitting that "Walt Whitman apparently did a wrong act early in life," and that he "had in him a Jekyll & a Hyde," insists that "A man is great in proportion as he subdues the bad & fosters the good in his nature. . . . Whitman's life must be pronounced victorious, on the whole."

It was not long before Kennedy felt his loyalty had been vindicated in a very satisfactory way, as is seen in an undated copy of an apparently unpublished letter he wrote to the editor of the *Boston Evening Transcript*, entitled "Walt Whitman Pays a Debt."<sup>4</sup> As this communication explains, Kennedy had recently learned of new evidence in the case which he hoped would bring to an end an affair that had occasioned "a great deal of heart-burning, fierce charges, temporarily cooled friendships and all sorts of misunderstandings." The new evidence was in the form of certain papers that had been found by the former wife of Whitman's friend, William Douglas O'Connor, indicating, so Kennedy asserts, that Whitman had

<sup>3</sup> This accusation was made in an article entitled "The Good Word Equality." In it Higginson asserts that the final test of unselfishness is willingness to sacrifice personal fame for service to humanity and that many heroes, authors, and philanthropists are found wanting when this test is applied. Whitman is mentioned as an example of authorial self-seeking. The *American Co-operative News* was a monthly periodical "devoted to the Rochdale plan of co-operation." A complete file is to be found in the Library of the Department of Labor, Washington, D. C.

<sup>4</sup> I have carefully searched the files of the *Transcript* for the years 1897 and 1898, but I find no indication that this letter was ever printed. It must have been written after his reply to Higginson's charge in the *American Co-operative News* and before his letter of October 22, 1898, discussed below.

fully discharged the debt.<sup>5</sup> But Mr. Parton naturally believed the debt still unpaid, "For the wily lawyer evidently pocketed what he got & said nothing." Kennedy also declares his belief that the guilt of deceiving Parton in the matter should rest partly with his first wife, a popular novelist who wrote under the name of Fanny Fern. "The latter is said to have had an unquenchable spite against Whitman. The cause of the first Mrs. Parton's hatred has been given confidentially to friends of the poet by the wife of a high government official but is of too private a nature to be published here. I will only say that Whitman's honor is untouched by it; rather is it increased." Above the word "nature" Kennedy wrote in pencil the rather disingenuous parenthesis, "(see Potiphar story of Bible—K)."

The final pertinent item in the Rutgers collection, a letter written by Kennedy to Traubel, Harned, and another friend on October 22, 1898, and labeled "Some Cool After-Thoughts on Whitman vs Parton," restates the case a little less confidently than does the communication prepared for the *Transcript*. The payment, it develops, was made in property, not money, and the difference between the two factions was partly a matter of valuation. Kennedy summarizes the situation thus:

The Partons distorting everything diabolically . . . claim . . . that the property turned over was of no worth or of a trifling worth; Whitman claims [in the letter to O'Connor] that it was worth *more* than the debt. Ethel Parton writes to me that P. gave Dyer the debt for squeezing out of it what he cd, & claims that what was squoze was not worth shucks. It of course looks from a legal point of view . . . as if Dyer had signed a receipt in full, at Walt's valuation, & without a protest, in order to secure the booty given him by Parton. This he evidently did, & if he ever mentioned it to Parton or Fanny, belittled it or lied about it.

But, adds Kennedy, who was too honest to shut his eyes to his old friend's faults, "I still think, knowing Walt's inherited habit of occasional lying, that there were some too sanguine promises on his part of repayment, and too satisfied acquiescence in his own valuations."

As one reviews the evidence in the case, one inclines to a substantial acceptance of Kennedy's verdict with, perhaps, a reservation in respect to Fanny Fern, of whose ill conduct

<sup>5</sup> These papers consisted of duplicate receipts, dated June 17, 1857, and signed by Oliver Dyer, and a letter from Whitman to O'Connor, dated September 28, 1869. They were published in Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (1914), III, 237-239.



Walt Whitman

(Pencil sketch by Sidney H. Morse (1887)  
Sketch at the request of the U.S. Kennedy

there appears to be no positive proof.<sup>6</sup> Dyer certainly seems to have been guilty of chicanery, since, on the testimony of Miss Parton, the creditor "never received his money or anything else," yet the lawyer signed a receipt for books and pictures at a valuation of \$181.00.<sup>7</sup> Whether the property was worth that sum or not, Parton, a man of the highest integrity, evidently never knew that his lawyer had accepted it at any such figure; consequently he went through the rest of his life cherishing a bitter animosity against the man who, he believed, had deliberately robbed him of his small savings at a time when he needed them sorely.

On the other hand Whitman's conduct in the affair is not wholly above reproach. If the literary project on the strength of which he promised early repayment was not "an entire fabrication," as Miss Parton declared it to be, it must have been an undertaking he was engaged on some months before Dyer signed the receipt in June, 1857. This would point to the second (1856) edition of *Leaves of Grass*. But the first (1855) edition had been a complete failure; according to Dr. Bucke "it is doubtful if fifty copies were sold in the first year after publication," and according to the poet himself, "I don't think one copy was sold—not a copy."<sup>8</sup> This would scarcely justify the assumption of substantial returns from a second edition—Kennedy's remark about "too sanguine promises" would certainly appear to have been in order. Furthermore the letter to O'Connor and the duplicate receipts leave one incompletely satisfied. The letter protests that Dyer took not only \$181.00 worth of goods for which receipt was given, but also other property which upon more deliberate examination proved to be so acceptable that Dyer promised a receipt in full for the loan, plus costs of the suit at \$16.00. "On meeting him afterwards . . . , once or twice [according to this letter], I mentioned the matter of a receipt in full, but never pressed it—never procured such receipt, nor the original note either."

<sup>6</sup> There is, however, some evidence that she was strongly attracted by Whitman and that he failed to respond in kind. See Emory Holloway and Vernolian Schwarz, *I Sit and Look Out* (1932), p. 211; and Emory Holloway and Ralph Adimari, *New York Dissected* (1936), pp. 152, 153.

<sup>7</sup> This receipt is reproduced in Traubel, *op. cit.* III, 238.

<sup>8</sup> Introduction by C. J. Furness to reproduction of first edition of *Leaves of Grass* by Facsimile Text Society (1939), pp. xiv, xv.

Why? Possibly the answer is found in a memorandum on the reverse of one of the receipts:

Mr. Dyer also took Jefferson's works and Carlyle's *Cromwell* at \$9 (if he keeps them)—which would then leave \$26. due as the Judgment or claim  
June 17, '57 W. W.<sup>9</sup>

So far as the records show no other payment was ever made; hence it is difficult to understand how Whitman could write in the O'Connor letter, "I consider the debt *paid*," but it may be that an uneasy conscience is revealed in the next words, "(though if I had wealth, today, I should certainly pay it over again, in cash)."

From this involved accumulation of data at least three conclusions concerning the Good Gray Poet emerge: first, without dishonest intentions he could be lamentably casual in money matters; second, he sometimes showed a tendency to reconstruct his past to his own advantage; and third, both in life and after death he always possessed the faculty, of which only dynamic personalities are capable, of engendering ardent enemies and equally ardent defenders.

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For the sake of completeness it should be said that the controversy broke out again, and in a more public way, in 1906 when Bliss Perry published his *Walt Whitman*, containing a short but unfavorable version of the Parton debt affair. Traubel and others sprang to the poet's defense in the *Conservator* of November, 1906, and several subsequent issues. Traubel's publication of the letter to O'Connor and the receipts in 1914 pretty effectively precluded any further controversy, but the quarrel can be seen in its entirety only with the aid of the Rutgers manuscripts.

<sup>9</sup> Traubel, *op. cit.*, III, 239.