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## Audience Terminable and Interminable: Anne Gilchrist, Walt Whitman, and the Achieve- ment of Disinhibited Reading

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ANNE BURROWS GILCHRIST WAS INTRODUCED TO WALT WHITMAN'S POETRY IN 1869 by her friend William Michael Rossetti, and the effect was galvanic. She read him first in Rossetti's own expurgated *Poems of Walt Whitman* (1868) and subsequently in the complete 1867 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which Rossetti gave her. Her letters to Rossetti on Whitman so impressed him with their fervorous insight that he urged her to publish them as a counteractive to the squeamishness, outrage, and plain misunderstanding that so widely characterized the poet's early reception. Gilchrist's "A Woman's Estimate of Walt Whitman" appeared in the *Boston Radical* in 1870, and in 1871, with Rossetti's help, she initiated a correspondence with the poet himself. Widowed with four children, Gilchrist had discovered in Whitman's poetry the object of her desire, and she not only wanted him to know it, she wanted him. After five years of intimations, Gilchrist took action in 1876, announcing her imminent move across the Atlantic to be near him. Whitman, of course, balked at first ("I do not approve your American trans-settlement").<sup>1</sup> But, upon finding her behavior less than predatory, he warmed to her presence just as she quickly adjusted her comportment to his sexual unavailability, and their friendship lasted until her death, back in England, in 1885. Whitman was fond of being fond of her, measuring out heaps of preposthumous and posthumous praise to Traubel and others. At times his praise rings with some of the sad falsity of his later years (the rebuff of John Addington Symonds, the claims of illegitimate children, etc.), a falsity ravaged by later biographers and critics bent on retrospectively constructing for him a fundamentally heterosexual, if unfulfilled, life. But there is no doubting the genuineness of Whitman's affection for Gilchrist, or his appreciation of her critical acumen, especially with reference to his own poetry. Indeed, her disinhibited reading of the poems, and of the poet in the poems, called the serious bluff of addressivity central to the poet's own eroticism. In Gilchrist, Whitman had precisely not found

his "match." Instead, he found a reader willing and able to take seriously his ambivalent offers to rescind the fictionality of address.

"A Woman's Estimate of Walt Whitman" still reads as a marvelously unencumbered appreciation of Whitman at his best: his conviction of the debt poetry owes to the dignity of the common; the rhythmic sophistication of poetry that rewards, not the counting of syllables, but the ear willing to turn to new music; and especially his frank and fearless language of instinctual and bodily life in both men and women. Gilchrist's essay was a love letter, and—just in case Whitman had not noticed—she followed it up with more private avowals of the transformation wrought upon her by *Leaves of Grass*: "I never before dreamed what love meant," she writes in her first letter to Whitman in 1871 (*L*, p. 59). She tells him the story of her happy but erotically unsatisfying marriage to Alexander Gilchrist, and his death in 1861. Since then, she explains, she has had "much sweet tranquil happiness, much strenuous work and endeavour raising my darlings" (*L*, p. 60), without much sense of the loss of sexual love. But then:

In May, 1869, came the voice over the Atlantic to me—O, the voice of my Mate: it must be so—my love rises up out of the very depths of the grief & tramples upon despair. I can wait—any time, a lifetime, many lifetimes—I can suffer, I can dare, I can learn, grow, toil, but nothing in life or death can tear out of my heart the passionate belief that one day I shall hear that voice say to me, "My Mate. The one I so much want. Bride, Wife, indissoluble eternal!" It is not happiness I plead with God for—it is the very life of my Soul, my love is its life. Dear Walt. (*L*, pp. 60-61)

Three weeks went by, and, having heard nothing back from Whitman, Gilchrist wrote to him again:

I that have never set eyes upon thee, all the Atlantic flowing between us, yet cleave closer than those that stand nearest & dearest around thee—love thee day & night. . . . Do not say that I am forward, or that I lack pride because I tell this love to thee who have never sought or made sign of desiring to seek me. Oh, for all that, this love is my pride my glory. Source of sufferings and joys that cannot put themselves into words. Besides, it is not true thou hast not sought or loved me. For when I read the divine poems I feel all folded round in thy love.

(*L*, pp. 65-66)

Part Robert Browning to Whitman's Elizabeth Barrett ("I love your verses with all my heart"<sup>2</sup>), part Clytie to Whitman's Helios ("Not more do the things that grow want the sun" [*L*, p. 85]), Gilchrist not only snaps her fingers in

the face of contemporary interdictions against women's direct sexual pursuit of men, but also runs the risk—dangerous in any era—of acting on libidinal investments made in distant objects.

It is difficult to read without making such investments at least occasionally. One falls in love with a Gwendolen Harleth or a Tom Outland, or craves contact with a writer who seems to have some special insight into oneself. Gilchrist was neither the first nor the last to pursue Whitman with affectional designs. But few of his contemporary readers combined such critical acumen with such uncommon disinhibition and personal daring. It is no small measure of her insight as a reader of Whitman that her deployment of the often effusive conventions of romantic correspondence comport so well with his own prescriptions for the annihilation of distance through writing and reading—too well, indeed, for Whitman's perfect comfort. Some of her solicitations are as embarrassing to read now as they must have been frightening for Whitman to read then. For example, she tells him flatly in her second letter, "I am yet young enough to bear thee children, my darling" (*L*, p. 66). His response to this long letter is brief but gentle. It urges her to rest content with his poems:

My book is my best letter, my response, my truest explanation of all. In it I have put my body and spirit. You understand this better and fuller and clearer than any one else. And I too fully and clearly understand the loving letter it has evoked. Enough that there surely exists so beautiful and a delicate relation, accepted by both of us with joy. (*L*, p. 67)

Whitman says "my best letter, my response, my truest explanation" as if to say "my best defense" against a breakdown of the very protocols of decorous reading it has been his avowed project to dismantle. The "enough" is devastating to Gilchrist ("like a blow on the breast to me" [*L*, p. 70]), not only because it is a rebuff to her amorous advances, but also because it is an attempt to inhibit her way of reading—a way of reading she thought she had learned from Whitman.

Unlike the auditors in Shelley's "Defence of Poetry," "entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why," Gilchrist does know, and she continues to feel that she knows, despite Whitman's slightly panicky efforts to neutralize the ideas the conviction of such knowledge gives her.<sup>3</sup> In letter after letter she persists, not only in offering herself up quite literally as wife and prospective bearer of his children, but also, quite fairly, in calling him on his doctrine of poetic transubstantiation:

If it seems to you there must needs be something unreal, illusive, in a love that has grown up entirely without the basis of personal inter-

course, dear Friend, then you do not yourself realize your own power nor understand the full meaning of your own words, "whoso touches this, touches a man." (L, p. 77)

Is the book, or is it not, an embodiment? And if it is, then why is Whitman's program for contact with his reader so frequently subverted by forms of inhibition expressed as warnings? "You will hardly know who I am"<sup>4</sup>; "forever reject those who would expound me" (LG, 2:324); "I understand your anguish, but I cannot help you" (LG, 2:440); "I depart as air" (LG, 1:82); "To touch my person to some one else's is about as much as I can stand" (LG, 1:38); "I will certainly elude you" (LG, 2:369). It is not just because Gilchrist was a woman that her advances were frightening. On some level Gilchrist knew this, and in calling Whitman's bluff she may have experienced an enhancement of the erotic excitement of her pursuit of a man whose desires had yet to be clearly settled in relational terms.

Gilchrist's letters to Whitman between 1871 and 1876 are almost uniformly faithful to the rhetoric of unrequited love, holding intensely to that fine line between paranoia (she complains of feeling "restless, anxious, impatient" waiting for his replies to letters she fears he never received) and erotic entreaty ("above all, longing, longing so for you to come—to come & see if you feel happy beside me") (L, p. 72). She sometimes lapses unself-consciously into fantasies of being Whitman's mother, and she occasionally strikes a delusional note of omnipotence ("you will want me. You will not be able to help stretching out your hand & drawing me to you" [L, p. 92]). But the most pronounced tendencies, as the years pass, are the tempering of her libidinous designs (at one point she projects their consummation into the afterlife) and the compensatory plan to move to America with at least three of her children to be as close as possible to Whitman, in whatever loving capacity he will tolerate. Though never fulfilled in the way she hoped, Gilchrist's singular relationship with the poet speaks the more general desire both to take seriously and to critique seriously some of Whitman's more audacious claims about audience, and to evaluate poetry's role in overcoming both social and psychic constraints, not least because, to his surprise, Whitman's verse actually did have the seductive effect he claimed it might.

Ralph Waldo Emerson repeatedly called poets "liberating gods" at a time (the early 1840s) when there was a high degree of confidence in poetry's efficacy as an agent of social change.<sup>5</sup> The rise of associationism in antebellum America and the astonishing proliferation of reformist institutions helped to generate and disseminate widely the versifications of conscience, piety, grievance, smugness, sympathy, and rage that occupied writers of all sorts. Poetry itself became an object of reform, as more and more women, for example, commodified as well as diversified their literary output for periodicals, antholo-

gies, and annuals devoted in whole or in part to the plight of slaves, children, the ill, the laboring classes, and women themselves. But the question of just what sort of liberation poets might effect in their own and in their readers' lives not only remained open but grew sore as a wound in a literary culture that thrived on, even as it sought to combat, human misery. Emerson was not alone in casting an increasingly skeptical eye on the rate at which the publicity of such misery continued to outstrip the pace of the good that could be done. Nor was he alone in noting the perversity of Romantic celebrations (including his own) of an American landscape pocked and stained by the violence of individual greed and national rapacity. In 1848, the *annus mirabilis* and *horribilis* of its political era, Emerson lectured in Great Britain and Europe amid widespread unrest and uncertainty, while in America, too, the union of freedom with justice could seem either gloriously imminent or thoroughly chimerical depending on who you were and where you were, from Beacon Hill to Sutter's Mill, and from Seneca Falls to Guadalupe Hidalgo.

The victory over Mexico and the consequent ramping of sectional tensions over slavery, the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, "Bleeding Kansas," and other preliminaries to national collapse overtook and largely extinguished the brightness of reformist energy and turned the national literary project from one of melioration into one of mourning. Whitman's own exuberant version of a Hegelian-Emersonian faith in freedom as self-development gave way, in the atmosphere of the Washington hospitals especially, to a soberer view of the intimacies that could be expected to matter, in poetry and in life. Nevertheless, Whitman managed substantially to sustain the demanding and often flirtatious addressivity of *Leaves of Grass* through and beyond the Civil War, in successive editions—even in one that escaped his editorial control.

Rossetti based his *Poems of Walt Whitman* on the fourth edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1867). He was an early and highly sympathetic champion of Whitman in England and brought out this first English edition with the hope that a wider readership could be trained to see beyond what he acknowledged, on the basis of others' previous complaints, to be Whitman's "very serious faults" of crudeness and impropriety. "Whitman," Rossetti insisted, "is a poet who bears and needs to be read as a whole, and then the volume and torrent of his power carry the disfigurements along with it, and away."<sup>6</sup> Yet Rossetti did not think his English readers could swallow Whitman whole, so he expurgated *Leaves*, "omit[ting] entirely any poem which could with any tolerable fairness be deemed offensive to the feelings of morals or propriety in this peculiarly nervous age" (Rossetti, p. 20). The mechanisms of defense, that is, that Rossetti understands to be motivating his own falsifications of the text are social, rather than personal, in nature; these are the mechanisms that soon came to be called "Victorian" and that were mythologized under that name. The "peculiarly nervous age" in which he situates his editorial project

is, moreover, a spatial as well as temporal situation—the situation of England, specifically, as opposed to the situation of America. England, for Rossetti, represents an inhibiting force brought to bear on Whitman's uncensored humanistic avowals:

[Whitman] knows of no reason why what is universally seen and known, necessary and right, should not also be allowed and proclaimed in speech. That such a view of the matter is entitled to a great deal of weight, and at any rate to candid consideration and construction, appears to me not to admit of a doubt; neither is it dubious that the contrary view which a mealy-mouthed British nineteenth century admits as endurable, amounts to the condemnation of nearly every great or eminent literary work of past time. (p. 21)

Rossetti was, of course, aware that Whitman's reception in America had been anything but universally approving. Yet the author of what is, as he puts it, "incomparably the *largest* performance of our period in poetry" is also in his view "the founder of an *American* poetry rightly to be so called" (pp. 7, 11; italics in original). Rossetti's phrase "mealy-mouthed British nineteenth century" reviles the canon that the American Edmund Clarence Stedman would soon definitively establish as the very "course of British poetry during the present reign."<sup>7</sup> Not only does Rossetti stand Whitman, as an essentially American poet, in opposition to the "mealy-mouthed British" who will not speak of things openly and honestly, but he also implies that American poetry is fundamentally the work of a single poet. Stedman, in sharp contrast, characterizes Victorian poetry as the work of many hands. As Joseph Bristow observes, Stedman's *Victorian Poets* (1875) "remains one of the most inclusive pieces of research ever to map English poetry between the mid-1830s and mid-1870s."<sup>8</sup> Whitman stands apart from the aggregate of English poetry. But, according to Rossetti, he is "saved from isolation by the depth of his Americanism" (p. 7). It is an Americanism, moreover, that he predicts will trump the British Victorian enshrinement of what Bristow calls "the spatial ideologies of empire" (p. 90). "His voice," Rossetti says of Whitman,

will one day be potential or magisterial wherever the English language is spoken—that is to say, in the four corners of the earth; and, in his own American hemisphere, the uttermost avatars of democracy will confess him not more their announcer than their inspirer. (p. 27)

Democracy, in other words, means the domain in which everything is "allowed and proclaimed in speech," and that domain is invoked by Whitman—a voice not only singularly iconoclastic but also uniquely reviled in Rossetti's time by most of his American readers, yet which would paradoxically assume the

stewardship of freedom throughout a global imperium no longer British but American.

Rossetti saw his task in *Poems of Walt Whitman* as "paving the way towards the issue and unprejudiced reception of a complete edition of [*Leaves of Grass*] in England" (p. 23). Whitman, however, did not think the end justified the means. In 1871 he wrote to the London publisher F. S. Ellis proposing the publication of "a full edition of my poems, *Leaves of Grass*, in England under my sanction. . . . I make this proposition not only to get my poems before the British public, but more because I am annoyed at the horrible dismemberment of my book there already & of something worse."<sup>9</sup> Ellis did not think the time was ripe. But less than a month later Whitman received his first letter from Anne Gilchrist, who seemed ripe enough, offering not merely to love Whitman but to publicly sacrifice herself for him, to "joyfully bare her breast to wrest the blows aimed at her beloved." She told him she deeply regretted allowing Rossetti to convince her to publish "A Woman's Estimate of Walt Whitman" anonymously: "It has been very bitter & hateful to me this not standing to what I have said as it were, with my own personality" (L, p. 62). She wanted to say everything, not anonymously or to Whitman alone, but publicly—to speak from a place of disinhibition that would constitute not a retreat from social life, but rather an enhanced, more fully democratized sociability.

Gilchrist highly prized Whitman's poetics of disclosure and amplitude. In "A Woman's Estimate," she celebrates his "fearless and comprehensive dealing with reality," his "utmost faithful freedom of speech."<sup>10</sup> And in her letters to him she aspires to a linguistic transparency of her own: "I would if I could lay every thought and action and feeling of my whole life open to thee as it lies to the eye of God" (L, p. 63). Gilchrist's responsiveness to Whitman's poetry makes this wish more than a mere romantic convention. It turns such conventionalism into ethical aspiration. What indeed would the world be like if people could say everything to one another?

Disinhibition is the politico-linguistic project of *Leaves of Grass*. Its aim is to incite a rapport with its audience that will help further to disseminate both the poet's and the reader's affectional presence in the world. When Gilchrist picks up Whitman's book and finds this aim directed at her, her response is to fall in love and to imagine a life of erotic fulfillment that would not only be more than a matter of words, but would be the embodiment of democratic principle:

If the poet's heart were not "a measureless ocean of love" that seeks the lips and would quench the thirst of all, he were not the one we have waited for so long. Who but he could put at last the right meaning into that word "democracy," which has been made to bear such a burthen of incongruous notions?

"By God! I will have nothing that all cannot have their counterpart  
of on the same terms!"

flashing it forth like a banner, making it draw the instant allegiance of  
every man and woman who loves justice. (p. 352; L, p. 11)

For Gilchrist as for Whitman, the terms of the rapport of democracy are erotic terms ("heart," "love," "lips," "thirst"), and thus they resound with the many senses of the word "term" itself, which Whitman plays with promiscuously: the spatial and the temporal, the gestational and the necrotic, the relational and the linguistic, the measured and the immeasurable. "For me," he boasts in "Starting from Paumanok," "an audience interminable":

With firm and regular step they wend, they never stop,  
Successions of men, Americanos, a hundred millions,  
One generation playing its part and passing on,  
Another generation playing its part and passing on in its turn,  
With faces turn'd sideways or backward towards me to listen,  
With eyes retrospective towards me. (LG, 2:275)

Prognosticating literary immortality is a game any author can play more or less anxiously with himself. But when the terms of this prediction are understood to be ontogenetic rather than phylogenetic, the game has two players and the stakes go up enormously.

Generations to come may, in some attenuated sense, continue as an "audience" to harken back to Whitman. His poems may survive as texts and be read by certain individuals from time to time. Discursive traditions may continue to reflect the influence of his works well beyond the point of identifiability. But when it comes to the individual reader, continuity of audience is far more precarious. Is it desirable or even possible to prolong the experience of reading into something interminable? How much good can reading Whitman do you, and how do you know when you have exhausted the possibilities?

Whitman's singular practice of revision and edition makes these important questions, not only about reception, but also about revisionary technique—that is, about the way Whitman seeks to (re)make himself intelligible to others. He subjects himself to a long-term task called *Leaves of Grass* that invites readers to do the same. Part of the lure is the thrilling prospect of competition over who will have final control over the resolution (or abandonment) of that task. Gilchrist's "A Woman's Estimate of Walt Whitman," her later essay on Whitman, called "A Confession of Faith" (1885), and the other artifacts of their correspondence (not just letters but also books, pictures, newspapers, a ring, etc.) constitute the record of one such competitive alliance, an alliance that survives Gilchrist's erotic disappointment but is therefore also constituted



by the traumatic alienation of her desire.

Gilchrist never exhibited an inclination to stop reading Whitman. Her letters to him refer to his books—often “the Book”—as being always with her. But if it is, as she at one point claims, “an effort to me to turn to any other reading,” it is not because she has found satisfaction in reading him. “And if you say, ‘Read my books, & be content—you have me in them,’ I say, it is because I read them so that I am not content” (L, p. 80). Born of frustration, this language is also deeply playful. Does “I read them so” mean “I read them because I *do* have you in them”? Or does “so” mean “to such a great extent”? Or does “so that” mean “in order to feel that”? In her ambivalence, Gilchrist understood “the Book” to be the form in which her alienated demand (her desire for Whitman himself) returned to her, and would keep returning, again and again.

Gilchrist’s letters to Whitman from the point of her 1879 move back to England to her death in 1885 include one that she wrote shortly after obtaining a copy of the 1881-82 edition of *Leaves* from British publisher David Bogue. Like everyone else, Gilchrist had strong views on Whitman’s new arrangement of the poems:

I find a few new friends [that is, poems] to love—perhaps I have not yet found them all out. But you must not expect me to take kindly to any changes in the titles or arrangement of the old beloved friends. I love them too dearly—every word & *look* of them—for that. For instance, I want “Walt Whitman” instead of “Myself” at the top of the page. Also my own longing is always for a chronological arrangement, if change at all there is to be; for that at once makes biography of the best kind. What deaths, dear Friend! (L, p. 207; italics in original)

At the end of this passage, Gilchrist is still talking about poems. The “deaths” are the effect of new revisions and arrangements that have taken from her some of her “beloved friends.” But she also means the accumulating deaths of her human friends and contemporaries: Darwin, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Carpenter’s father, and especially her daughter Beatrice, who killed herself in 1881. And she is anticipating her own death:

As for me, my heart is already gone over to the other side of the river, so that sometimes I feel a kind of rejoicing in the swelling of the ranks of the great company there. (L, p. 207)

She longs, as she puts it in “A Confession of Faith,” to be “going somewhere.” This phrase, which she adopts from the openly atheistic mathematician and philosopher William Kingdon Clifford, assumes importance not only in “A Confession,” where it is repeated and celebrated as “the meaning . . . of all

our perplexities," but also as the title of Whitman's 1887 elegy for her.

Whitman composed this elegy on the back of a letter from newspaper editor Charles Marseilles, who had written to ask when and where Whitman's "recent oration on Lincoln" would be published.<sup>11</sup> Whitman drew a canceling line through the letter and turned over the paper to write his poem. Thus the artifact seems to make the poem into a kind of countersign of national mourning, lending the phrase "going somewhere" the attractiveness of a password out of the dispirited, static memorialism of the postwar years, to which the aged Whitman himself was an influential contributor. Though it is not a particularly fine poem, the manuscript version differs sufficiently from the Variorum printing as to warrant its reproduction here:

"Going Somewhere"

My science-friend—my noblest woman friend,  
 (Now buried in an English grave—and this a memory-leaf for dear  
 love's sake,)  
 Ended our talk—"The amount and sum of all we know—of old or  
 modern learning, intuitions deep,  
 Of all the Histories, Geologies—of all Astronomy—of Evolution,  
 Metaphysics all,  
 Is, that we are bounding, speeding slowly, surely,  
 Life, life an endless march, an endless army,  
 The world, the race, the soul, the universe,  
 All onward bound—all surely going somewhere."

The poignancy of this elegy has less to do with the occasion of Gilchrist's death than with the opportunity Whitman makes of her disappearance for shoring up, through the figure of prosopopoeia, the fictionality of address Gilchrist had worked so hard, and had desired so strongly, to prove that Whitman had rescinded.

Yet one can still share some of the exhilaration drawn by Gilchrist and undoubtedly by Whitman too from the Clifford passage:

Suppose all moving things to be suddenly stopped at some instant, and that we could be brought fresh, without any previous knowledge, to look at the petrified scene. The spectacle would be immensely absurd. Crowds of people would be senselessly standing on one leg in the street looking at one another's backs; others would be wasting their time by sitting in a train in a place difficult to get at, nearly all with their mouths open, and their bodies in some contorted, unrestful posture. Clocks would stand with their pendulums on one side. Everything would be disorderly, conflicting, in its wrong place. But

once remember that the world is in motion, is going somewhere, and everything will be accounted for and found just as it should be. Just so great a change of view, just so complete an explanation is given to us when we recognize that the nature of man and beast and of all the world is *going somewhere*. (*L*, p. 33, italics in original)<sup>12</sup>

In this allegory of disinhibition, all functioning is lowered to the point of total cessation so that the meaning of the world can be revealed as a diametrical opposition to everything remaining where and as it is. The frustration of aim renders the world not only frozen but "absurd," without order, without value. No object aimed at can be extrapolated from the frozen view; the goals and destinations of the people of the crowds are as unintelligible as they must be manifold. Just where all this is going is irrelevant. What matters, Gilchrist exults, is the going itself:

"Going somewhere!" That is the meaning then of all our perplexities! That changes a mystery which stultified and contradicted the best we knew into a mystery which teaches, allures, elevates; which harmonizes what we know with what we hope. . . .

. . . Going somewhere! And if it is impossible for us to see whither, as in the nature of things it must be, how can we be adequate judges of the way? how can we but often grope and be full of perplexity? But we know that a smooth path, a paradise of a world, could only nurture fools, cowards, sluggards. (*L*, pp. 33, 41)

It is hard not to discern in these effusions the trace of Gilchrist's erotic disappointment in her relationship with Whitman. For one thing, the colloquialism "going somewhere" is so evocative of romantic proposition ("So, is this going somewhere?"). And one can readily imagine the perplexities endured by a passionate female pursuer of Whitman—public champion of female disinhibition but not its private encourager. Whitman himself must have seemed, finally, a way "full of perplexity" for her, and what is truly remarkable, and exemplary, about her reading of Whitman is its affirmative, indeed generative, engagement with the remoteness of his allure.

In January 1889, almost four years after Gilchrist's death, Whitman asked Traubel to read aloud a copy of his first letter to her—the letter that, in responding to her sexual aggressivity, attempted to establish their epistolary relationship on other terms, to say for them both what would be "enough." After Traubel finished, Whitman launched into a lengthy meditation, with eyes closed, on his life's many enemies ("the worst enemies that ever were") and his relatively few but glorious friends. It was his turn to be effusive: "when I turn about and look at my friends—the friends I have had: how sacred, stern, noble, they have been: the few of them: When I have thought of them I have

realized the intrinsic immensity of the human spirit and felt as if I lived environed by gods." "They don't need to be named to you," he tells Traubel. Yet he names a handful anyway, all men: Edward Dowden, John Addington Symonds, William O'Connor, John Burroughs, John Swinton, William Michael Rossetti, Thomas Harned, T. W. Rolleston. "Then," says Traubel, "he referred to his letter to Mrs. Gilchrist: 'The substance of that letter—its feel: what it starts out to say to her: oh! with a few words taken out and put in—it would do for any one of you!'"<sup>13</sup>

The combination here of plangency and ruthlessness is startling. This is one of those innumerable places in *With Walt Whitman in Camden* where one would give almost anything to see the expression on Traubel's face. (It is, of course, Traubel's great gift to Whitman's readers that we almost never can.) With nearly the same breath, Whitman delivers an impromptu ode to some of his closest friends, names them, does not forget to imply that Traubel is one of them, and then wipes away their individuality like water over sand. Perhaps he has suddenly been struck by the impression that he is their audience, that he is the one now "turn[ing] about" to look back at his friends with the "eyes retrospective" he imagined the future would be turning on him. What assurances does he crave here from his (particular, yet to him interchangeable) friends that might in some way be like the assurances we desire from Whitman as his (embodied, yet to him anonymous) readers? Does the shared desire to receive assurances from one another exhaust the possibilities of disinhibited reading? If we could speak to Whitman now, what assurances would we want most to give him? That the social and psychic constraints we have learned from him to deplore have been overcome? Or that an unrelinquished commitment to the mythology of Victorianism, known to us still by the resistances that accompany our most ardent hankerings after the experience of transformation, promises him an audience without end?

### Notes

Thanks to John Pollack and Daniel Traister for their help with the Gilchrist and Whitman collections at the University of Pennsylvania Library, and to Virginia Jackson and Matthew Parr for giving me ideas.

- 1 Walt Whitman to Anne Gilchrist, March 1876, in *The Letters of Anne Gilchrist and Walt Whitman*, ed. Thomas Harned (Garden City: Doubleday, Page, 1918), p. 145; italics in original. Subsequent citations of this edition, designated *L*, are made parenthetically within the text.
- 2 Robert Browning to Elizabeth Barrett, January 10, 1845, *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1845-1846*, ed. Elvan Kintner, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1969), 1:3.
- 3 Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), p. 516.

- 4 Walt Whitman, "Starting from Paumanok," *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum of the Printed Poems*, ed. Sculley Bradley, Harold W. Blodgett, et al., 3 vols. (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1980), 1:83. Subsequent citations of this edition, designated LG, are made parenthetically within the text.
- 5 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet" (1844), in *Essays and Poems*, ed. Joel Porte, Harold Bloom, and Paul Kane (New York: Library of America, 1996), pp. 461, 462.
- 6 William Michael Rossetti, "Prefatory Notice," *Poems of Walt Whitman* (London, 1868), pp. 4-5.
- 7 Edmund Clarence Stedman, *Victorian Poets* (1875), rev. ed. (Boston, 1887), p. xiii.
- 8 Joseph Bristow, "Whether 'Victorian' Poetry: A Genre and Its Period," *VP* 42, no. 1 (2004): 91.
- 9 Walt Whitman, *The Correspondence, Volume II: 1868-1875*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1961), p. 133.
- 10 [Anne Gilchrist], "A Woman's Estimate of Walt Whitman," *The Radical* 7, no. 5 (May 1870): 349, 355; this essay is also included in *The Letters of Anne Gilchrist and Walt Whitman*.
- 11 Charles Marseilles to Walt Whitman, April 18, 1887, in the Walt Whitman Collection, Ms. Coll 190, box 2, folder 53, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania Library.
- 12 Gilchrist introduces some minor transcription errors into this passage from William Kingdon Clifford's "Cosmic Emotion" (*The Nineteenth Century* 2, no. 8 [October 1877]: 422).
- 13 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. 3 (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914), pp. 513-514.