In Defense of Freedom: Horace L. Traubel and the "Conservator."

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Philadelphia poet and journalist Horace L. Traubel's work as biographer of Walt Whitman has overshadowed his role as crusading editor. Traubel (1858-1919) devoted 30 years to publishing the "Conservator," a monthly newspaper that reflected its editor's idiosyncratic philosophy and crusaded persistently for libertarian principles. He made the "Conservator" a champion of academic and artistic freedom and attacked those who sought to constrain liberties. Although the "Conservator" had a limited circulation, its readers--and Traubel's followers--included a number of noteworthy individuals. Among them were Socialist leader Eugene V. Debs, soap magnate and reformer Joseph Fels, iconoclastic lecturer Robert G. Ingersoll, and William E. Walling, the reformer who helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Traubel and the "Conservator" deserve recognition for their contributions to the tradition of dissent in America. (Author/RR)
In Defense of Freedom: Horace L. Traubel and the Conservator

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Obscurity seemed to be the fate assigned Philadelphia editor Horace L. Traubel, and Traubel himself appeared resigned to it. In June, 1918, fifteen months before he died, Traubel looked back over his career but could find little noteworthy in his life. He realized that his reputation stemmed mainly from his association with Walt Whitman and from his authorship of *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, a Boswellian recording of the poet's last years. As to Traubel's own writing, he knew the followers of his monthly paper, the *Conservator*, numbered but a small coterie faithful to the journal's dual advocacy of Whitman and socialistic idealism. Referring to himself in the third person, Traubel wrote: "His own writing is either totally ignored or wholly despised. No magazine in America would print anything that he writes." And Traubel sensed that he was something of a puzzle. "Traubel," he admitted, "gets me all tangled up and confused. I can't make anything out of him. I should be prejudiced in his favor. But he often provokes me to the profoundest contempt."

Traubel was not the only one provoked by Traubel. William S. Kennedy, a biographer and intimate of Whitman and sometime contributor to the *Conservator*, came to find the editor's radical notions disturbing and intimated their appearance in the *Conservator* had damaged Whitman's reputation by association. Kennedy thought Traubel "lacking [in] taste and sense" and grumbled: "I glance at the *Conservator* . . . and throw it in the waste basket--never
What stirred Kennedy's wrath was the heterodox tone of the *Conservator*, the paper Traubel had founded in March, 1890, in an effort to provide an organ for the Ethical Culture movement. From its beginning the publication had also served as a vigorous proponent of Whitman, and it is for this advocacy of the poet that the *Conservator* is usually remembered. Yet it strived to be more than that. A close analysis of its editor's columns during the journal's first decade reveals that it was also the vehicle for Traubel's own persistent crusade for freedom and justice in many areas of American life. The *Conservator*, far from being simply an exponent of Whitman, was also a consistent and committed voice of dissent in fin de siècle America.

The future editor of this unusual paper was born December 19, 1858, in Camden, N.J. He was the fifth of seven children born to Maurice and Katherine Grunder Traubel. His father was a German-Jewish immigrant, his mother a Philadelphia girl of Christian background. As a youngster Traubel was diffident and studious. He reportedly had read Emerson, Spencer, Carlyle, Ruskin, and Whitman by his teens. At the age of 12 he left school and worked at various jobs. He gravitated to printing, his father's trade, and became, in turn, a printer's devil, a compositor for a Camden newspaper, and eventually a proofreader, reporter, and editorial writer. He also worked as a factory paymaster and as a clerk for a Philadelphia bank.
In March of 1888, exactly two years before he started the *Conservator*, Traubel began recording his daily conversations with his friend Walt Whitman. From those talks grew Traubel's best-known work, the five-volume *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, a minute account of the poet's last days. When Whitman died in 1892, Traubel was at his bedside, his hand holding that of the poet's.

Early issues of Traubel's *Conservator* extolled Whitman and Ethical Culture and appeared innocuous enough not to offend anyone. There were inklings, however, that Traubel intended to use his paper to discuss pertinent issues of the day. Intimations of this came in the *Conservator's* second number, when Traubel gathered several items on the work of ethical societies under the heading of the "Collect." This column was to become a regular feature and the most important outlet for Traubel's demands for freedom. At first the Collects consisted of short, unrelated paragraphs; as Traubel became surer of himself, the Collects grew longer, more pointed, and more topical. In his first Collect Traubel indicated his interest in society's problems by charging that reform sentiment had not yet gone far enough to meet real needs. "The present rage for civil service and other minor remedies for social evils attest [sic] more for our instincts than for any well directed grasp of the situation," Traubel wrote.

Gradually Traubel used the Collect to introduce controversial ideas. He had, for example, strong feelings
about the roles of the sexes. "Men restrict the life of women," Traubel declared in 1892. "They do so in the interest of the children. But how can you expect a slave mother to produce or raise free children?" Suffrage, he wrote in 1894, would provide testimony to women's growing status, but voting was not the ultimate solution to making women free. "The ballot may be a key," Traubel thought. "It is not the door or the temple."

Traubel's columns began to rankle some of his fellow ethicists, who apparently found his dual emphases on social problems and Whitmanesque thought somewhat distasteful. Howard B. Radest, a historian of the ethical movement, suggests that Traubel's advocacy of some of Whitman's philosophy, including the idea of free love, may have turned the ethicists against the Conservator. A study of the paper's first years, however, provides no evidence that Traubel ever advocated free love in the pages of the Conservator, though the paper did carry a number of articles and book reviews on the relationships between men and women. What displeased the ethicists, more likely, was Traubel's independence and his inability to satisfy various factions of the Ethical Society. Some members apparently felt Traubel was obliged to print whatever they sent him, and when he began exercising his editor's prerogative and rejected their contributions, dissatisfaction resulted. Further, Traubel's own opinion about the ethicists gradually shifted during the first years of the Conservator's publication. He came to
feel that the Ethical Culture movement had betrayed its original promise of unorthodoxy and was becoming as staid and smug as the various churches from which the organization had sprung. David Karsner has characterized some members of the Philadelphia society as dilettantes willing to discuss reform but not to act. Traubel, according to Karsner, wanted to follow more closely than his fellow ethicists Felix Adler's ideal of deed instead of creed and to put reform into action not only in religion but also in everyday life.

The gulf between Traubel and the ethicists widened. Finally, in 1892, the Society tried, according to Karsner, to "muzzle" the editor. Traubel reacted by withdrawing from the Philadelphia Society and, with twenty followers, forming his own ethical organization. The split from Ethical Culture left Traubel free to pursue his own ideals. Although the Conservator continued to carry news of ethical organizations, Traubel's Collects increasingly reflected his own eclectic philosophy of socialism, libertarianism, and idiosyncratic idealism. Above all, Traubel showed vital concern about freedom. For him freedom meant the right to teach, the right to speak, the right to artistic expression, and the right of workers to a better life.

Of the many subjects Traubel touched upon in his columns, nearly all shared the common theme of freedom. One sector where freedom faced threats in the 1890's was the university. Among the major challenges were the trial of University of Wisconsin economist Richard
T. Ely (1894), the persecution of Ely's student Edward W. Bemis at the University of Chicago (1895), and the attacks on President E. Benjamin Andrews of Brown University (1897). Traubel commented on all three cases.

The *Conservator* editor, who was deeply suspicious of the ties of capitalists to the universities, found hope in Ely's exoneration on charges of economic and social heresy. The outcome at Madison, Traubel wrote, indicated the possibility that some institutions might permit academic freedom, and he felt it vital that the liberty to teach be protected. "Education is comparison," Traubel said. "If comparison is under ban education barely escapes with its life."

If Traubel found some encouragement in the acquittal of Ely, the editor's hope was dashed in less than a year. The University of Chicago's dismissal of Edward W. Bemis for advocating anti-monopoly views evoked dismay from Traubel. He devoted most of his October, 1895, Collect to the Bemis case and characterized the affair as a representative incursion upon the freedom to teach. He saw in Bemis' removal evidence of "how hopelessly all colleges and universities are tangled up with invested interests" and thought he discerned the influence of John D. Rockefeller behind the professor's firing. In a further comment on Bemis' case, Traubel suggested that if millionaires were needed to support universities, then perhaps it might be better to have no universities at all.
Opinions favorable to free silver got President E. Benjamin Andrews of Brown University into trouble in 1897 and led eventually to his resignation. The incident did not surprise Traubel. "An unfashionable economic tenet can no more expect hospitality in a conservative university than it could expect an invitation to the parlors of the four hundred," Traubel declared. The Andrews case strengthened the editor's conviction that the university was the creature of the wealthy class and was dedicated to preserving privilege. Traubel doubted there could be genuine academic freedom unless the university were open to all ideas and to all classes.

The editor was as devoted to artistic liberty as he was to academic freedom. As early as the sixth issue of the Conservator Traubel attacked those who would limit the right to read. What prompted his remarks was the decision by postal officials that passages of Tolstoy's Kreutzer Sonata were obscene and that a paper which had been serializing the story ought to be prohibited from mailing the offensive portions. Books, Traubel commented, were vital to freedom, and literature ought not be suppressed. In a similar incident in 1897 the Philadelphia Board of Education questioned the suitability of Hugo's Les Miserables as a text for the girls' high school. Traubel viewed the case as a challenge to the students. He wrote: "If there is a girl to whom Les Miserables is not familiar who does not now straightway get the book and more diligently apply herself to it than to any text
book whose virtue her guardians could approve, then girls are not what they have been and what they must be to be wholesome and brave, then the Edenic apple was eaten in vain . . . ."

Traubel also scorned those who tried to censor paintings and the study of art. When a group of women objected in 1891 to nude subjects in a Pennsylvania Academy of Design exhibition, Traubel said that Christian culture had "robbed in filth that which of right should stand clean and free in any eye or thought." Several years later, when artist-photographer Thomas Eakins was dismissed from the Drexel Institute for posing a nude male model, Traubel came to his defense. The editor had met the artist when Eakins had visited Camden to paint and photograph Whitman, so Traubel probably felt some personal involvement in Eakins' case. As he had in his defense of the Academy show, Traubel interpreted the shocked reaction to Eakins' nude model as the unhealthy symptom of a culture that had despoiled the sacredness of the body. "The fact that any youth of either sex should be prepared for such a demonstration of horror," Traubel wrote, "only shows the depth and degradation at which our sophisticated current morals have kept the teaching of the schools." Art, Traubel declared, could be valuable only when it was linked with nature, and the human body was part of nature. Some day, Traubel predicted, Eakins' method of teaching art through nature would become the
At a journalist of radical leanings, Traubel felt particularly sensitive to threats against the press. When Michigan Congressman Thomas A. E. Weedock proposed legislation to restrain press criticism, Traubel chided "this over-zealous legislator" and pointed to the dangers inherent in a society where free expression is regulated.

Traubel espoused, especially, the yellow press, which he regarded as freer than more traditional journals. While he conceded that the sensational newspapers had their failings, he felt their devotion to freedom and contempt for privilege more than justified their existence. In January, 1899, Traubel focused his entire column on the newspaper and, in particular, on the yellow press as the epitome of American journalism. The yellow press, Traubel said, combined both the best and the worst in journalism. It often distorted events or told outright lies, invaded privacy, succumbed to vulgarity, and blew stories out of proportion. It published misinformed or malicious editorials, it was sometimes brutal, and its zeal led to errors. Despite these shortcomings, the press in general and the yellow press in particular were vital to society's progress, Traubel felt. He lauded contemporary journalism for its attempts to give the important news of the day and for its avoidance of didacticism. He concluded by comparing traditional journalism with the yellow journalism of the day: "The old journalism treats with the people condescendingly, superciliously, saying,
Let me teach. The new journalism confronts the people on the ground, saying: Let us learn.

Free speech was another ideal Traubel championed. Although the editor's friend, iconoclastic lecturer Robert G. Ingersoll, had warned Traubel in 1893 against printing reflections about Ingersoll in the Conservator for fear the paper would get into trouble, two years later Traubel felt compelled to come to Ingersoll's defense when a group of Hoboken ministers tried to forestall Ingersoll from speaking in their town. Arguing in broad terms for free speech, the editor pleaded for open forums that would bring differences between adversaries into the open. "Nothing sacred was ever really defended by the sacrilege of oppression," Traubel said.

Traubel's socialism is reflected in his comments on the industrial turmoil of the 1890's. He pictured the struggle between labor and capital in sharply polarized terms, visualizing the oppressed people of the earth battling for their freedom against the "interests" of the corporations and the landowners. An unquenchable optimism pervaded Traubel's thoughts, for he was convinced that the workers would eventually triumph. Even the failure of the Homestead strike of 1892 did not shake his faith in the ultimate outcome of the struggle. Homestead, Traubel thought, was not a loss because it had made many more people aware of the problems workers faced. Even a losing strike, he suggested, could serve the workers by kindling new strength and resolution.
to continue the campaign for industrial justice.

Serious labor violence erupted in Pennsylvania in 1897, when sheriff's officers fired into a group of striking miners near Hazelton, killing more than twenty and wounding forty. Traubel, reflecting on the bloodshed, felt the deaths of the miners indicated that men's lives were less highly regarded than property. The editor reported the strikers had not been armed, had offered no resistance to the officers, and that many had been shot in the back while attempting to flee. "If murder has meaning here was murder," Traubel thundered. "If lawlessness ever went forth in daylight it flashed from the barrels of these rifles."

Professional patriots and the jingoism of the 1890's worried Traubel. He questioned America's ability to bring freedom to other countries when oppression of workers and attempts to censor artists and intellectuals suggested to him that Americans ought first to secure domestic liberties. United States saber rattling during the Venezuelan boundary dispute of 1895-96 impelled Traubel to make patriotism the subject of one of his Collects. A person's nationality, he wrote, was an accident, and someone's place of birth should not mean that an individual owed more to a particular bit of ground than to international harmony and goodwill. If allegiance to a nation meant violence, then some individuals, Traubel suggested, would prefer not to be bound to nationalism. Man owed more feality to the universal than to any particular state, Traubel contended. He said that professional patriots
had a limited, mole-like view of the world and that, for himself, he preferred a broader vision.

Commenting in February, 1898, on the sinking of the battleship Maine, Traubel called the deed "foul and treacherous" and said the Cubans were entitled to freedom. While he endorsed Cuban liberation, Traubel hoped that America would not forget her domestic problems. Oppression was not yet vanquished in the United States and would remain even after Cuba had been freed, Traubel wrote. "It is easy to evoke sympathy for the alien wrong and hard to get it for the domestic transgression," Traubel said. Later he reiterated that a Cuba freed from Spain would still be enslaved to the same industrialism that shackled the United States. Nevertheless, if one had to choose between governance by Spain and by the United States, there was little doubt as to which Traubel would select. He saw in Spain "a drift into medievalism," while the United States, at any rate, seemed headed into the future.

Traubel posed much the same kinds of questions about the United States' presence in the Philippines as he had about America's role in Cuba. He felt the Philippines, like Cuba, would fare better under American rule than under that of Spain, but he was troubled about the prospect of American colonialism. He wondered whether America would bring freedom to the Philippines or would merely take over where Spain had left off and impel a subject people to revolution. Traubel continued to question America's right of stewardship over other peoples.
He repeated the argument that America had not been successful in insuring domestic freedom and that this failure created serious doubts about the imposition of American rule overseas. The quick success of the war against Spain had surprised the American people, Traubel wrote, and they had not been consulted about the course the nation should take in regard to the liberated territories. President McKinley, Traubel felt, seemed more interested in heeding the wishes of politicians than in listening to the people. The editor kept stressing his contention that America's domestic record ill-fitted the country for the governance of others. He pointed particularly to the mistreatment of Indians and Negroes, saying that superior men would not break treaties or lynch people. Colonial powers such as America, Traubel said, were too busy pillaging inferior races overseas and not enough concerned about insuring domestic freedom. Finally, Traubel intimated that United States hegemony in the Philippines might portend the destruction of a vital part of the American dream.

"Imperialism's flag is black," Traubel wrote. "It has all the panoplia [sic] of piracy. We may win the Philippines. So far we have been licked. But, winning the Philippines, must we lose America?"

Threats to civil rights at home and the imperialistic thrust abroad were not the only dangers Traubel sensed. He had a special contempt for traditional religion and liked to call attention to the way churches tended to support the status quo. To Traubel churches seemed to
emphasize materialism and to promote hypocrisy. "The frequenters of churches are the owners of tenements, the monopolizers of land, the accumulators of unearned increments," Traubel charged.

Traubel was not always insensitive to the criticism his notions provoked. In 1896 he decided to answer charges that his iconoclasm was aimed at breaking down traditional culture. He maintained that he was not against culture in general but felt that America's culture was lacking because of its emphasis on the trappings of education and its avoidance of the real world of social problems. He voiced suspicion of the limitations that academic scholarship tried to impose on culture.

Just how broad Traubel's conception of freedom was may be seen in his remarks on compulsory vaccination. While he admitted that vaccination seemed justified on medical grounds, he questioned it on libertarian ones. He felt compulsory vaccination provided evidence of the way in which law had become superior to man. "On the whole liberty is more important than vaccination," Traubel declared. "I believe in liberty first and vaccination afterwards, or liberty first and vaccination not at all."

During the first ten years of the Conservator Traubel found more to criticize than to commend. Yet when he was positive, it was in keeping with his libertarian persuasion. He applauded events that seemed to increase freedom and to widen horizons. In 1897 he thrilled at reports of the Klondike gold rush and the
ill-fated attempt of Swedish explorer Salomon A. Andrée to reach the North Pole by balloon. Such adventures convinced Traubel there was hope for humanity. "With men still ready when the inspiration is sufficient to give all for success, for freedom, for outlets of appetite and opportunity, anything is possible," Traubel maintained.

If Traubel found little to applaud, he offered even less in the way of solutions to the problems of which he wrote. While he was eager to attack the excesses of industrialism, jingoism, and censorship, Traubel was not programmatic. He did advocate social security on grounds that it was both logical and "sentimentally fine." He realized that many would oppose his suggestion of pensions for the masses but argued that the rich provided themselves with pensions and endowments, and he called for such a system to be extended to all. A program of universal social security would, Traubel predicted, level society and increase democracy. Pensions for the masses would, he declared, "endow every child with immense opportunity and continue opportunity to the oldest age." Traubel did not, however, explain how such a plan was to be financed and administered.

By the turn of the century Traubel's Conservator had established its style. It continued its dual advocacy of Whitman and freedom. In World War I the paper urged pacifism. The Conservator probably never made much money, and its circulation hovered at around a thousand. Shortly before its editor's death the paper was running
a deficit large enough to cause Traubel to appeal to subscribers for help in sustaining the publication.

Though Traubel addressed only a limited audience through his *Conservator*, there were some notables among his adherents. Besides Robert Ingersoll, there was Joseph Fels, the Philadelphia soap magnate and social reformer, who supported Traubel's paper with consistent ads throughout its first decade. Another friend was Socialist leader Eugene V. Debs, who once referred to Traubel as "dear, beautiful, wonderful Horace!" William E. Walling, the reformer and one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, also admired Traubel. Like others in the small group who praised Traubel's work, Walling acknowledged Whitman's influence on Traubel but argued that the editor had surpassed the poet. Not only did Traubel share Whitman's suspicion of institutions and systems, but Traubel was also wary of ideals and ideas. Yet Walling could also argue that Traubel's writing sprang wholly from socialism. The seeming contradiction in Walling's analysis becomes understandable given Traubel's own catholic viewpoint. Traubel was certainly a socialist, a Whitmanite, and an ethicist—but Traubel was mostly himself, an individual of eclectic disposition whose greatest allegiance was always to freedom.

Personally, Traubel was a short man whose chief features were a shock of unruly white hair and a brushy mustache. He had large blue eyes and is reported to have had an "alive[,] mobile face." In a photograph made three
years before his death Traubel bears a striking resemblance to Albert Einstein. Traubel is reported to have been something of a practical joker, but his major attribute was a warm and vibrant concern for people. He was a sports fan and especially enjoyed baseball, football, and boxing. He did not smoke, and he preferred buttermilk to whiskey.

It was Traubel's habit to leave his home in Camden and to take the ferry across the Delaware River to Philadelphia each day around noon. He would arrive at the Conservator office about 1 p.m. There, in the cluttered garret of a four-story building at 1631 Chestnut Street, Traubel clipped exchanges, prepared copy, and often, when he lacked money for a compositor, set his own type. Traubel ordinarily worked late at his office. He would then take another ferry back to Camden, where he would often read until 5 or 6 a.m. He usually arose again around 10 a.m. to begin another working day.

After the turn of the century Traubel found time to produce the first volumes of *With Walt Whitman in Camden* and several other books. In 1900 he edited *The Dollar or the Man?*, a collection of cartoons by Homer C. Davenport. In 1904 Traubel's *Chants Communal*, comprised of prose poems written originally for the *Worker*, a New York Socialist paper, appeared. It was followed in 1910 by *Optimos*, a book of poems, and in 1915 by a gathering of his *Collect* columns. Some of the titles from *Optimos* indicate the book's general theme: "The bread line trails its clouded way into my sunny heart," "Come, O you pinched
starved outcasts," and "I hear the laugh of the unfed children."

A serious bout of rheumatic fever damaged Traubel's heart in 1914. In June, 1917, he suffered a heart attack that left him chronically ill for the remainder of his life, though he continued to publish the Conservator until nearly the end. In May, 1919, Traubel and his wife, Anne Montgomerie Traubel, moved to the New York home of Traubel's friend and biographer, David Karsner, who lived not far from the home of the Traubels' only surviving child, Mrs. Gertrude Traubel Aalholm (the Traubels' son, Wallace, died in 1938 at the age of 4). On a trip to a resort at Bon Echo, Ontario, Traubel died September 8, 1919, at the age of 61. He was buried in Harleigh Cemetery in Camden.

Perhaps J. F. Bozard came closest to capturing the essence of the man when he described Traubel as a reformer whose urge for social change found its inspiration in Whitman's creed of equality, fraternity, and democracy. And Bozard also suggested the measure of Traubel's courage when he noted that the editor had championed socialism in an era when such a course meant almost sure pariahdom.

But being an outcast seemed to hold no terror for the editor of the Conservator. His life and his journalism exemplified an almost studied contempt for what others thought. He once told David Karsner: "To be anything at all a man's got to be an ass in the
popular esteem. I've always been for the asses of the human race. You'll see. Wait till I'm gone. If I'm talked about at all it will be with a shrug of the shoulder, or a solemn shake of the head . . . .

Traubel's prediction has turned out to be highly accurate. If remembered at all, it is for his association with Whitman and seldom on his own account. History may have shrugged off Horace Traubel because his eccentric outlook makes the man difficult to fit into a neat category. Although Traubel would probably have resisted any attempt to place him in a particular context, perhaps he would object least to being called a libertarian. He and his paper always stood ready to defend those threatened by censorship or by industrialism's excesses. For their zealous devotion to freedom Traubel and his Conservator deserve rescue from the shadows of obscurity to which they have formerly been consigned.
NOTES


6. *Conservator*, April, 1890.

7. Ibid., August, 1892; June, 1894.


13. Ibid., October, November, 1895.


15. Ibid., August, 1890.

16. Ibid., October, 1897.
17. Ibid., March, 1891.


20. Ibid., March, 1898.


23. Conservator, November, 1892.

24. Ibid., September, 1897.

25. Ibid., April, 1896.

26. Ibid., February, April, 1898.

27. Ibid., December, 1898; March, May, 1899.

28. Ibid., August, 1899.

29. Ibid., June, 1895.

30. Ibid., March, 1896.

31. Ibid., March, 1895.

32. Ibid., July, 1897.

33. Ibid., February, 1899.

34. Pollock, pp. 10-11; DAB.


