

Linda Freedman, "Teaching through the Lens of the Fortnightly Review"

*Teaching Transatlanticism*

1. "The points of contact and sides of likeness between William Blake and Walt Whitman are so many and so grave, as to afford some ground of reason to those who preach the transition of souls or transfusion of spirits ... A sound as of a sweeping wind; a prospect as over drawing continents at the fiery instant of a sudden sunrise; a splendour now of stars and now of storms; an expanse and exultation of wing across strange spaces of air and above shoreless stretches of sea; a resolute and reflective love of liberty in all times and in all things where it should be; a depth of sympathy and a height of scorn which complete and explain each other, as tender and bitter as Dante's; a power, intense and infallible, of pictorial concentration and absorption, most rare when combined with the sense and enjoyment of the widest and the highest things; an exquisite and lyrical excellence of form when the subject is well in keeping with the poet's tone of feeling; a strength and security of touch in small sweet sketches of colour and outline, which bring before the eyes of their student a clear glimpse of the thing designed – some little inlet of sky lighted by moon or star, some dim reach of windy water or gentle growth of meadow-land or wood; these are qualities common to the work of either ... Whitman has seldom struck a note of thought and speech so just and so profound as Blake has now and then touched upon; but his work is generally more frank and fresh, smelling of sweeter air, and readier to expound or expose its message, than this of the prophetic books."

From: Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Essay on William Blake* (1868)

2. 'An important event in 1855 was the appearance of Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass". Emerson spoke of the book at his house, and suggested that I should call on the new poet. I read the poem with joy. Democracy had at length its epic. It was prophetic of the good time coming when the vulgar herd should be transformed into noblemen. The portrait in the book was of a working man and if one labourer could so flower, genius was potential in all. That Walt was posing as one of the class to which he did not belong was not realised by me even after his own intimation of it.' From Moncure Conway, *Autobiography* (1904), vol.1, p.189.
3. 'Whitman – as I have known these many years – knew as little of the working-class practically as I did. He had gone about among them in the disguise of their own dress, and was perfectly honest in his supposition that he had entered into their inmost nature. The Quaker training tends to such illusion; it was so in the case of Thomas

Paine, who wrote transcendental politics and labelled it “Common Sense”. With our eagerness to believe in the masses – our masters – we credited them with the idealism which Walt Whitman had imaginatively projected into them and said “Unto Democracy a child is born! This is America’s answer to Carlyle!” Somebody, probably the author himself, sent the book to Carlyle, who once said to me, “The main burden of “Leaves of Grass” seems to be “I’m a big man because I live in such a big country!” But I know of great men who lived in small corners of the world.’ The working-men did not read Whitman’s book, and fewer of them than he supposed cared about him personally.

My enthusiasm for L of G (the only work of Whitman that I ever carried about) was a sign and symptom that the weight of the world had begun to roll on me. In Methodism my burden had been metaphysical – a bundle of dogmas, The world at large was not then mine; for its woes and wrongs I was not at all responsible; they were far from me, and no one ever taught me that the earth was to be healed except at the millennium. The only evils were particular ones ... When I escaped from the dogmatic burden, and took the pleasant rationalistic Christ on my shoulder, he was light as the babe St Christopher undertook to carry across the river. But the new Christ became Jesus, was human, and all humanity came with him – the world-woe, the temporal evil and wrong. I was committed to deal with actual, visible, present hells instead of an invisible one in a possible future. Such was now my contract, and to bear the increasing load there was no divine vicar. Jesus was no sacrifice but an exemplar of self-sacrifice.’ From Moncure Conway, Autobiography (1904), vol.1. pp.192-3

4. Dear Mr Conway, - The heroic struggle in your native land is at an end. Ought it not to be the beginning of a new era in American life?

The life of a great nation is twofold; inward and outward. A nation is a mission – a function in the development of mankind – or nothing. A nation has a task to fulfil in the world for the good of all, a principle it represents in a mighty struggle which constitutes history, a flag to hoist in the giant battle – to which all local battles are episodes – going on in the earth between justice and injustice, liberty and tyranny, equality and arbitrary privilege, God and the devil. The non-interference doctrine is an atheistic one. To abstain is to deny the oneness of God and of mankind.

There is a time, a period, during which the implement must be fitted up, the *power* for action organised. That period requires abstention. You have gone through that period. It was right that the founders of the United States should say to them: “Abstain from all European concerns.” It would be mere selfism if they took that rule as a permanent one. You are now powerful with a *tested* power. You have asserted your *self*. You have by the abolition of slavery linked yourselves with the condition of Europe. The four years’ list of noble deeds achieved by you all *must* be a christening to the mission of which I speak. You have shown yourselves great: you have, therefore, great duties to perform.

You must represent the republican principle, which is your life, not only within your boundaries but everywhere, whenever it is possible to do so.

Europe – the republican Europe – expects you to do so. You *can* be a leading power amongst us; therefore, you *ought* to be such a power.

All this is far higher than any consideration of safety, still even that consideration is something. What you have done, and the applause of all struggling countries, have alarmed all European monarchs. Depend upon it, they will not leave you at rest [...]

A sum of fifty thousand, of thirty thousand dollars, a steam-frigate sent – of course, not officially – at our orders will enable us to ensure triumph not only for ourselves but for yourselves too.

[...]

I write these things to you, because you have friends in the United States, to whom you may, perhaps, communicate these ideas, and who may find it advisable to embody them into facts. If so the transaction ought to take place secretly and quickly.

Ever faithfully yours,

Joseph Mazzini

Letter from Joseph Mazzini to Moncure Conway (1865), included in Moncure Conway, Autobiography (1904) vol.2, p.55.