

Stained Glass Pragmatism

Sarah Wyman Whitman's

Lowell Window

at First Parish,

Brookline, Massachusetts

The crowning achievement by one of America's most distinctive artists stands in the North Transept of the Sanctuary of First Parish in Brookline, Massachusetts, little known to any outside the congregation. Sarah Wyman Whitman worked on her towering Lowell window from 1897 to 1902, completing it just two years before her death. Totaling some five hundred square feet of stained glass, the window was a technical triumph, in which she combined the diverse skills she had acquired as a designer of books and interiors, an Impressionist painter of portraits and scenes of natural splendor, as well as an admirer of the stained glass innovator John La Farge. In the final years of her life, Whitman focused her energies on the creation of a series of large architectural windows. Of these, Brookline's Lowell window is arguably her most important, because it gave definitive expression to her quintessentially American intellectual journey from Transcendentalism to Pragmatism, a journey that touched upon innumerable themes in American culture and society in the half-century between the Civil War and the First World War. Whitman's Lowell window reveals much about American strivings in a crucial era of transition from bucolic innocence and sturdy faith to our more troubled modern age.

Sarah Wyman Whitman (1842-1904) "knew everyone" in and around Boston at a time when Boston fancied itself the hub of the universe. Married to Henry Whitman, a prosperous wool merchant, she presided over a lively salon in her spacious townhouse near the crest of Beacon Hill. Her circle of acquaintances included the novelist Sarah Orne Jewett, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Senior and Junior, and William and Henry James, not to mention the donors of her Lowell window, among them the poet Amy Lowell, A. Lawrence Lowell, Harvard President from 1909-33, and the astronomer Percival Lowell, celebrated for his discovery of "canals" on Mars.

George Santayana described Sarah Whitman and Isabella Steward Gardner as Boston's two "leading ladies" at the beginning of the twentieth century. But Mrs. Gardner's objective, Santayana remarked astutely, "was to show Boston what it was missing" whereas Mrs. Whitman was "more in the spirit of Boston, more conscientious and troubled."¹ Mrs. Gardner, a New Yorker often at odds with the city she had married into, fulfilled her vocation of provocation by

importing antiquities from overseas (“what was missing”) and installing them in an inward-facing museum where she took up reclusive residence. In contrast, Mrs. Whitman sought to encourage Boston’s own best instincts. A bundle of outward-flowing beneficence, she sought to touch all ranks of the society in which she lived. She wanted her country to transcend the European past by innovating culturally and to make good on the American promise of equal opportunity. While Mrs. Gardner founded the private Museum that proudly bears her name, Mrs. Whitman was instrumental in the creation of several cultural and education institutions, but left the credit to others. Whitman helped establish Radcliffe College, the School of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and Boston’s Society of Arts and Crafts, and worked to improve the quality of America’s public schools, while all the time fashioning works of arts to grace the homes of private clients as well as for commercial use and public purposes.

Their different styles notwithstanding, Boston’s two “leading ladies” developed a good working relationship, beginning at least as early as 1878 when Mrs. Gardner bought one of Mrs. Whitman’s paintings.² As their acquaintance grew, Mrs. Gardner asked Mrs. Whitman to design her seal, with its celebrated motto *C’est Mon Plaisir*, and Whitman also designed the carved marble sign over the main entrance to the Gardner Museum.³ In January of 1902, months before her Museum was formally opened on December 31, 1902, Mrs. Gardner gave Mrs. Whitman a private tour.

A member of Boston’s Trinity Church, Sarah Whitman was a great admirer of Trinity’s minister Phillips Brooks. But Trinity’s structure was also important to her. Completed in 1877, this masterpiece of American architecture designed by H.H. Richardson was a brilliant synthesis of time-tested European themes and American technological innovations, most notably its big interior space unimpeded by supporting columns. Richardson’s synthesis perfectly suited Sarah Whitman’s cultural outlook. Additionally, Trinity was embellished by frescoes and stained glass by John La Farge, to whom Whitman eagerly apprenticed herself. In 1884, La Farge was instrumental in securing Whitman’s first large-scale commission, to design the interior of Worcester’s Congregational Church.

La Farge was among the earliest artists to experiment with the new kinds of “opalescent” glass, which had been developed initially for mundane commercial purposes. The label “opalescent” was applied to a wide range of translucent glass-based materials involving multiple additives, surface textures, thicknesses and color gradations. Many designers were stimulated to try to produce church windows using such malleable materials, and sometimes achieved ludicrous results. This provoked scorn from those who could see only vulgarity in any departure from traditional methods.

Traditional stained glass windows of great elegance, made in ways that had been evolving slowly for centuries, were still being fabricated. Refined windows of this type were produced by the English firm Clayton and Bell for both Trinity Church, Boston, and First Parish, Brookline, where they are still much admired. Meanwhile other stained glass artists strove for more individual artistic expression. One group was associated with the Pre-Raphaelites and developed a bold style, based on a self-conscious revival of what they perceived as a medieval ethos. They created stained glass windows that combined archaic elements with strong painterly mannerisms in an effort to revive spirituality and counter the materialism of the new age of mass production. Boston’s Trinity Church installed superb stained glass windows designed in this

ambitious new style by the nineteenth century British artists William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones. A few decades later, Brookline's First Parish installed several windows by American artists who extended this style into the twentieth century, including work by such latter-day Neo-Medievalists as Harry Elkins Goodhue and Charles Connick.

The point of departure for an aspiring nineteenth century stained glass artist was study of the historic windows of the great European cathedrals. John La Farge, an American-born Catholic of French ancestry, led his friends to Chartres and other medieval cathedral towns, stirring the imaginations of American historians and intellectuals such as Henry Adams as well as practicing artists. When introduced by La Farge to the cultural milieu of medieval Catholicism, Henry Adams moved away from his family's New England roots and produced his magnificent tribute volume *Mont-Saint Michel and Chartres*. Artistically, Sarah Whitman followed La Farge even further than Henry Adams, but then moved beyond La Farge to merge centuries-old stained glass traditions with the spiritual concerns of nineteenth century New England. Whitman like La Farge was of French ancestry, her full name being Sarah de St. Prix Wyman Whitman. But La Farge was born and died a Catholic, whereas Whitman's ancestors were Protestant Huguenots, and she remained throughout her life an independent, restless spirit. Whitman was happy to think of herself as extending and expanding upon the innovations of La Farge. Her most elaborate stained glass works are all clearly indebted to La Farge in technique, color aesthetics and architectural approach to design. But her stained glass also moved well beyond La Farge in its spiritual and philosophical dimensions, ultimately becoming a deeply personal statement that set her work apart from the comparative formality of the stained glass commissions of La Farge.⁴

Whitman enjoyed climbing tall ladders to come face-to-face with Europe's medieval masterpieces, and candidly confessed how deeply moved she had been upon first entering Rheims Cathedral in the summer of 1894, when she encountered "qualities of color and tone wholly indescribable. No one had ever told me," she confided to a friend, "that the stained glass was all in the clerestory, whereby the vaults are like twilight and the apse has a soft violet gloom which is of most amazing loveliness."⁵ Four years later, as she began work on her Lowell window for Brookline's First Parish, the memory remained powerful. In 1898 she remarked to Sarah Orne Jewett that at Rheims "color bloomed for me on the Gothic stem; for there...it is in the clerestory that they put (as in no other) the rainbow; leaving the lower windows pale....I entered to find that violet twilight lying all above and to be overwhelmed by it."⁶

Whitman also found merit in the work of contemporary artists with figures "sustained within severe lines" in the medieval manner, and "kept very flat." She thought the use by modern-day artists of the ancient techniques of "crosshatching, stippling or matting" could be effective, and singled out for particular praise Edward Burne-Jones's window in the Baptistery of Boston's Trinity Church, portraying Solomon instructing David with faces "drawn in the semi-mystical manner."⁷

But stylistically Whitman was determined to follow La Farge in exploring the alternative path opened up by the development of new materials, and joined wholeheartedly with her mentor in defending the artistic and spiritual legitimacy of opalescent experimentation. Instead of reviving medieval traditions and employing heavy "semi-Gothic" outlines in lead reinforced by almost equally heavy brush work in representing everything from garments to human faces,

Whitman reveled in the naturalism attainable by using opalescent glass. She was also excited by new techniques for introducing depth perspective into stained glass, which she thought an improvement over medieval two-dimensionality. But Whitman endorsed the criticisms leveled against the excesses of many opalescent artists who failed to recognize the constraints inherent in creating windows that subserved the purpose of the building in which they were installed. Enthralled by opalescent naturalism, some designers had produced windows that pretended to be pictures hanging on a wall rather than integral elements of the structural space in which they were installed.

In July of 1903, the stained glass artist Harry Elkins Goodhue (who would later design a Sir Galahad window for Brookline's First Parish) published an article in *Handicraft* entitled "Stained Glass" in which he denounced what he considered the cheapening of churches by inappropriate opalescent glass. Why, he asked, weren't stained glass designers content to follow the tried and true guidelines set down by their twelfth century French precursors?

Two months later, the same magazine published a second article also entitled "Stained Glass" – written by Sarah Whitman. Like La Farge, Whitman believed that, if properly used, the new opalescent glass could advance an architect's agenda even more effectively than time-honored medieval glass. In answering Goodhue's charges, she explained that she too admired the glass of medieval French cathedrals, which she praised as "the glorious fulfillment of the supreme decorative impulse of a great nation inspired by a universal religious impulse." But did it make sense to compare windows that were the culmination of "many hundred years" of artistic evolution to windows produced amidst the "the beginnings and strivings with a new element of beauty in an alien air"? After all, the opalescent excesses Goodhue decried were initial experiments with materials that had been available for scarcely two decades. Should the ultimate potential of a new medium be hastily prejudged?

Whitman conceded that opalescent innovators were bound to fail if they ignored certain inescapable constants in the design of large church windows well-known to both medieval and modern practitioners. Central among these constants was a "hard constructive line" connecting the inherent delicacy of stained glass to the bulk of a large building, and able to reinforce "the value of the glass by contrast and by stability." Iron bars and heavy outlines in lead typically provided structure to a stained glass window, while lighter lead gave secondary definition, and paint supplied the more delicate effects. Vainly disregarding such constants doomed modernists enamored with the idea of placing in window openings naturalistic scenes that failed to take into account a building's formal structure and purpose.

Whitman insisted nonetheless that new kinds of glass could potentially do more to enhance a structure than the best of traditional efforts, confined as they were to a limited range of effects. Opalescent glass enabled "the designer to work with a fuller palette, and thus to reach more subtle and enduring results." Greater "purity of tone" was attainable because "variation of shade" was "a quality in the glass" rather than an effect achieved by paint in the medieval manner. Moreover, non-opalescent windows were subject to startling variations, for example when sunlight burst through clouds. In contrast, a good opalescent window glowed softly even when hit by full sun and at night never darkened entirely. Viewed from inside at night, she pointed out, an old-style, heavily painted window was a blank, dead space whereas an opalescent

window, because it reflected internal light, dimmed but remained readable by interior candlelight, producing a soft impression rather like that of a fresco.

Notwithstanding her success as a portrait painter and book designer, Whitman was strongly attracted to the challenge of creating didactic art for public spaces. Shortly after accepting the commission to design Brookline's Lowell window, she attended the unveiling of Augustus Saint-Gaudens' bronze relief honoring the Civil War service of the African American Regiment from Massachusetts led by Robert Gould Shaw. As she reported to a friend on June 1, 1897, this event had elicited

the display of more pure feeling than often happens...At the dedication, yesterday, walked the survivors of the 54th Massachusetts Colored, with their tattered battle flag, and later, in the Music Hall, after the oration by William James, came one by Booker Washington – a wonderful speech which lifted up the hearts of all who heard him. And the veil was lifted from the monument, and now the memory of Shaw and of the cause of freedom are set in imperishable form.⁸

Whitman hoped others might be moved by comparable “pure feeling” when they encountered the works she created. She was then at work on her own Civil War Memorial, a stained glass window entitled Peace and Honor for Harvard's Memorial Hall, commissioned in 1896 and unveiled in 1900.⁹

When asked in 1897 to produce a design for the largest window in First Parish's new structure, completed only four years earlier, Whitman had an opportunity to make a formative contribution reminiscent of that made by La Farge in the 1870s and 1880s to the embellishment of the newly constructed Trinity Church. When Whitman began work at First Parish, a set of seven small stained glass windows by Tiffany had already been placed in the Chancel, but only one section of one window – Clayton and Bell's Peace Angel – had as yet been installed elsewhere.

In creating her large, multi-part Lowell window for Brookline's new structure, Whitman was also comparatively free from the constraints under which artists customarily labor in designing works of art for religious institutions, and was thus able to produce a window that articulated fully her aspirations as a public artist and woman of faith. Her Lowell window demonstrated what Whitman (along with La Farge) considered the optimal relationship of stained glass to architecture, while also departing radically from La Farge to articulate her own Pragmatic spirituality.

La Farge's 1883 Christ in Majesty window at Trinity Church had demonstrated decisively that modern stained glass could be used in an architecturally sensitive way, and even achieve specifically architectural effects unattainable in other styles. La Farge placed narrow columns of marbled glass in his window's two formally-designed side panels, creating a structured setting for the large image of Christ filling the window's central panel. Whitman adopted this overall plan for her own three-panel Lowell window. Elegant marbled glass columns evocative of La Farge's at Trinity serve as an aesthetic bridge between First Parish's heavy stone exterior and the delicacy of Whitman's stained glass. But in her central panel she

placed a far more muted image remote from La Farge's forward-looking, piercing-eyed Christ in Majesty.

Like most La Farge church windows, his Christ in Majesty is lavishly detailed and richly colored, but also stylistically uniform from top to bottom, conveying an impression of dignity and control. In contrast, Whitman's goal for her Lowell window was to provide the viewer with a more intuitive spiritual experience. Whitman sought first to delight the observer with lustrous surfaces, delicate leaves and flowers, sumptuous textiles and tactile feathers and then to draw appreciative onlookers into a gradually deepening contemplative mood. The viewer's attention ranges upward from lush green vegetation underfoot to a purple stratosphere studded with ruby fire meant to recall the glorious "gloom" Whitman had encountered in the clerestory of Rheims Cathedral. At the window's center however are three subdued, indirectly perceived countenances. In contrast to the dignified formality of LaFarge's Christ in Majesty, Whitman's three young angels look away from the viewer. Their features are remote, tantalizing the viewer to reach out to them, so as to understand them better.

Whitman's Lowell window had been commissioned as a memorial to three young Lowells: Olivia who died at age sixteen in 1870, Mary who died at age twenty-four in 1882 and George who died at age twenty-two in 1884. As a sought-after painter of portraits in oils on canvas, Whitman could skillfully render fully realized likenesses of individuals. But when painting the stained glass faces of the three Lowell siblings, Whitman sought to transcend individuality. Although respectful of the feelings of the Lowell family, Whitman sought here to create images that were, as she put it in a separate context, "both individual and typical."

What was called individualism has come to an end, I fancy, by a natural limit, the result of pursuing an exclusive method. To be a man at all, every man must be all the other men. Else he will fail to fulfill his true nature. Pushed to its extreme the individual proves to be but a slender personage, lacking the large typical quality. This is as true in Art as in Life. All good Art work has as its very foundation, the establishment of attributes which are both individual and typical. The individual qualities alone can give no completeness; the object is left un-related, and is that curiosity in thought, a specimen, not a type.¹⁰

Of only slightly differentiated age and gender, her three youthful angels are depicted with countenances that at first glance may seem to have been left unfinished. Stained glass faces rendered in soft watercolor-like washes were her unique addition to the array of techniques she had learned from LaFarge.

This mode of representation was congenial to Whitman because of its resonance with her spiritual outlook. Whitman spoke often of a "dream" that departed loved ones, even if only dimly discernible, remained actively present in one's everyday life. As she put it,

In a deeper place, a place where weakness cannot enter, I do indeed believe with my whole heart that those beloved and majestic ones whose 'spirits have passed beyond this earth's control' are near our spirits, enter into our yearning hearts, comfort, sustain and teach us....As 'the Spirit witnesseth with our Spirit,' in like manner do those just ones made perfect take on the freer conditions of spiritual life and minister, we cannot know how largely, to the necessities of those they love.¹¹

This “dream” was clearly meaningful to Whitman, and was beautifully expressed in her poem “To SGT”:

Spirit of dear delight, and heart of fire,
In stainless garments of the sky arrayed,
I see thee walking where thou didst aspire,
Beautiful, eager, free, and unafraid.

Was the earth alien that thou couldst not brook
Longer delay within its cabined air?
Was thy soul ready for the larger look
Through other worlds more ample and more fair?

O empty questions! Let us rather dare
Behold thy life as one resistless whole,
Dwelling with Love and Beauty unaware,
Majestic comrades for a matchless soul.

Thyself forgot, the stars remembered thee,
And shone with quenchless ray before thy feet:
Thou serving others, angels bent to thee
On wings of joy to do thee service sweet.

So Heaven was in thee as thou art in Heaven,
Uplifting thee to know the Perfect Will;
And in the peace which God through thee has given,
Our hearts with thine are free, and strong, and still. (Letters 254-55)

Whitman’s “dream” can be characterized as an idiosyncratic version of Swedenborgianism, itself a variant of Platonism. Orthodox Swedenborgians believed far more literally in the possibility of communication between those living on earth and those who were thought to have moved only just beyond earth. Whitman had imbibed far too much of the skeptical, sensory-bounded Pragmatism of her soul-mate William James to be more than tempted by Swedenborgian ideas, but she did find them helpful as a practical stimulus to carrying on her endeavors.

William James was himself steeped in Swedenborgianism because his father Henry James, Senior, had been a prominent Swedenborgian theologian. William James once confessed to his brother, the novelist Henry James, that reading their father’s books caused him severe embarrassment. But the elder James’s portrait occupied a place of honor in William James’s library, and William James’s own philosophy of Pragmatism could even be termed a response to his father’s ideas. William James addressed many of the same topics that had obsessed his father, though the younger James came to radically different conclusions. Most pertinently, William James developed as a general philosophical proposition the theory that people needed to believe in something, even though there was no way for them to verify it. Independently, Sarah Whitman developed a personal creed that worked for her, which might be termed Pragmatic

Swedenborgianism. How could the skeptic William James resist someone who rephrased his beloved father's eccentric theology in functional, subjective terms?

George Santayana, William James's colleague in the Harvard Philosophy Department, expressed mild amusement at the convention-bending closeness of James and Whitman, who remained faithfully (if not especially happily) married – to others. “Mrs. Whitman was a great friend of William James,” Santayana recorded. “They had similar impetuous perceptions and emotions, a similar unrest, and a similar desire to penetrate to the hidden facts, the submerged classes, the neglected ideas, unpleasing to the official world.”¹² Although Santayana accurately discerned how much Whitman and James meant to each other, he was mistaken in thinking of them as two of a kind. They were drawn to each other more by complementarity than similarity. Whitman learned from James to be less impulsive and more precisely analytical. The temperamentally dour and withdrawn James learned from Whitman to be more hopeful about America's future, and consequently more willing to enter into the fray and take unpopular positions on controversial issues. Whitman once confided to James, “I can't help thinking that in some future air it may be given to me to sit upon a slope of...Thibet, and know the joys of contemplation. But not now.”¹³ For his part, James confessed to Whitman

It does me good to hear from you, and to come in contact with the spirit with which you 'chuck' yourself at life. It is medicinal in a way which it would probably both surprise and please you to know, and helps to make me ashamed of those pusillanimities and self-contempts which are the bane of my temperament and against which I have to carry on my lifelong struggle. Enough! As for you...absorb the autumn colors of the land and sea, mix the crimson and the opal fire in the glass, charm everyone you come in contact with by your humanity and amiability; in short, *continue*.¹⁴

As James intimated here, colors observable in the natural world were what most reliably nurtured Sarah Whitman's creative spirit. For Whitman, colors were the language of inspiration. The facts that all other colors are contained within the color white and that rainbows silently reveal this were for her endlessly absorbing. Thus, when she spoke of finding a “rainbow” in the clerestory at Rheims, she was bestowing her highest aesthetic praise. Instead of trying like so many of her peers to emulate medieval stained glass, Whitman went for inspiration directly to nature. For Whitman, a rainbow was the natural world's ultimate demonstration of the mind-expanding potential of color, and therefore the standard by which she judged a stained glass window's success, whether one of her own or a centuries-old cathedral window glistening “on the Gothic stem.”

In most of the world, rainbows were evanescent. But rainbows were an almost daily occurrence at Niagara Falls. So whenever Whitman felt a particular need for inspiration, she sped to Niagara Falls. On one such trip, she wrote to a friend that as she was gazing at the Falls, a rainbow “came and 'stood round about the throne.’”¹⁵ The “throne” that she sensed amidst the white intensity of Niagara became an “altar” in her poem entitled “Sursum Corda” which can be translated as “My Heart Leaps Up.”

Behold an altar radiantly fair
Lit with white flames drawn from the heart of things!

Here pour oblations of majestic springs
 Fed by the sky in some wide upland air;
 Here rises incense warm with scent of dawn.
 Gold with the sunset, purple with the night,
 Here shines a snowy pavement dazzling bright
 For saints and little children and the worn
 Footsteps of martyrs who have gained their palm.
 O God! Of Thee alone this splendor tells.
 In power, in continuity, in calm;
 In air ineffable where color dwells,
 Or in still voices where are borne along
 Strains of an incommunicable song.¹⁶

On one visit to Niagara, she “studied and sketched and wondered every minute.... And some secrets I seemed to learn...of that divine white passion...when the rainbow floods all that soft tumult into rosy fire.” On leaving Niagara, she resolved to “make many pilgrimages there.”¹⁷

Rainbows at Niagara Falls could not be surpassed. But Whitman also responded to rainbow-tinged moments in humbler places. Even a barren pasture in late winter might resonate with mystery. “Such a landscape of rainbows as there is today, I have almost never beheld,” Whitman wrote to a friend in February of 1890: “stretches of snowy fields with little winding rivers black with slow water, the tawny grasses and reddening shrubs, or violet distances of amazing loveliness. It makes me wonder afresh over the mystical meanings, the unraveled secrets of what we call color, and I long to understand it better that I may use it more nobly.” On a brighter day, Whitman wrote of a sky “all deep azure and gold and garnet, and the night...like a purple cup, oh, wonderful! So you see there’s a window in this day’s house of life, which is the great point.”¹⁸

Santayana suggested mischievously that Whitman’s aesthetic could be summed up in the words, “Art is green” and hinted that she might have been guilty of Nature Worship.¹⁹ But Whitman had learned Pragmatism from William James too well to describe her confessedly mystical communion with color as Nature Worship. That charge might have been fairly leveled against an earlier generation of Emersonian Transcendentalists, but as James put it,

we of the nineteenth century, with our evolutionary theories and our mechanical philosophies, already know nature too impartially and too well to worship unreservedly any god of whose character she can be an adequate expression. Truly all we know of good and beauty proceeds from nature, but none the less so all we know of evil. Visible nature is all plasticity and indifference, a moral multiverse, as one might call it, and not a moral universe. To such a harlot we owe no allegiance; with her as a whole we can establish no moral communion...Either there is no spirit revealed in nature, or else it is inadequately revealed there; and (as all the higher religions have assumed) what we call visible nature, or *this* world, must be but a veil and surface-show whose full meaning resides in a supplementary unseen or *other* world.²⁰

James believed that people should position themselves firmly within the time-bound material world, and try to learn about it as best they can by processing the immediate testimony of their own physical senses. But James accepted religious aspiration as inevitable – indeed desirable – and cited Whitman as both a personal inspiration and observed evidence of the beneficence of faith in spiritual promptings penetrating one’s senses from the vast beyond.

From James’s skeptical Pragmatism, Whitman imbibed not resignation but rather a willingness to trust her own best instincts when refined by contemplation. Though earth-based, Whitman’s spirituality was also heaven-seeking. For people open to inspiration, she believed the natural world could almost literally open a *window* onto mystical experience conducing to moral determination to act. Having become convinced that stained glass could capture and hold some of the natural world’s elusive majesty, she aspired to create tangible windows opening onto intangible mystical experience, windows designed, as she put it in unabashedly Jamesian terms, to facilitate acquisition of “courage anew for those who must stand upon the little foothold of the naked human Will, and ‘yearn upward’ according to the conditions of that Will’s higher necessities.”²¹

After nearly a year of failing health, Sarah Whitman died on June 24, 1904. For her funeral three days later, Isabella Stewart Gardner helped decorate Boston’s Trinity Church in a manner that honored Sarah Whitman’s aesthetic preferences. The front of the Church was “one mass of flowers, beautifully composed, green in the angles of the steps...quite in S.W.’s own taste.” Later, at Mount Auburn Cemetery, her coffin was “covered with lilies, and hung with big laurel wreaths like those she was so fond of.”²²

William James served as one of her pall-bearers. His anguish in subsequent days was palpable. To her friend Frances Parker Parkman, James wrote of Whitman’s “outreaching friendliness and trust in life – and the answer the Universe makes!” In a more subdued mood, James confided to his brother Henry,

An extraordinary and indefinable creature! I used often to feel coldly towards her on account of her way of taking people as a great society “business” proceeding, but now that her agitated life of tip-toe reaching in so many directions, of genuine amiability, is over, pure tenderness asserts its own....She was a most peculiar person. I wish that you had known her whole life here more intimately, and understood its significance. You might then write a worthy article about her. For me, it is impossible to define her. She leaves a dreadful vacuum in Boston. I have often wondered whether I should survive her – and here it has come in the night, without the sound of a footstep, and the same world is here – but without her as its witness.²³

Sarah Whitman left behind countless friends who would long remember her in the inspiriting way she had herself been motivated by departed loves ones. In addition, she left numerous legacies: the institutions she had helped establish, bequests in her will to Tuskegee Institute and Berea College to continue their work in interracial education. There remained as well her works of art, of which her public art in stained glass done near the end of her life may well stand pre-eminent. Of her large windows, William James remarked simply, “Her success with some of those was unique.”²⁴ This success resulted from her way of joining technical skill

to intense visions of social betterment and spiritual grace. Among her large stained glass commissions, her Lowell window for First Parish, Brookline allowed her the greatest scope to produce a defining personal expression of faith, and therefore may be considered her most fulfilling artistic achievement.

¹ George Santayana, *Persons and Places, The Middle Span*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1945, 2:123-24, 126. See also Erica E. Hirshler, "Women Artists at Trinity: Sarah Wyman Whitman and Margaret Redmond," in James F. O'Gorman, ed., *The Makers of Trinity Church in the City of Boston*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004, 152-173.

² Morris Carter, *Isabella Stewart Gardner and Fenway Court*, Boston: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 1963, 54.

³ Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston: Drawing for Crest. Ink.

⁴ Regarding La Farge's use of traditional Catholic imagery in his stained glass, see Virginia C. Raguin, "Decorator: John La Farge," in James F. O'Gorman, ed., *The Makers of Trinity Church in the City of Boston*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004, 188-137. Sarah Whitman's career parallels in several respects that of Esther Dudley, the heroine of Henry Adams' 1884 novel *Esther*. An independent-minded woman with unorthodox religious views, Esther works at decorating a church much like Trinity under the direction of a designer much like La Farge, before traveling to Niagara Falls for unmediated inspiration. Adams knew Whitman but several other women (including Adams' wife Clover) presumably also helped shape his fictional Esther Dudley.

⁵ Sarah Whitman, *Letters*, Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1907, 113.

⁶ SW Letters, July 17, 1898.

⁷ Sarah Whitman, "Stained Glass," *Handicraft* 2:6, Sept. 1903.

⁸ SW Letters, to Mrs. Richard Morris Hunt, June 1, 1897. This monument stands today on Boston Common opposite the Massachusetts State House.

⁹ See Virginia Raguin, "Memorial Hall Windows Designed by Sarah Wyman Whitman," *Harvard Library Bulletin*, New Series 11:1, Spring 2000.

¹⁰ SW Letters 222-3; 1885. One instance in which Whitman did portray an individual in stained glass was her whimsical portrayal of her moustachioed friend Martin Brimmer wearing the armor of Chevalier Bayard. For details regarding her Brimmer window, see Raguin, "Memorial Hall Windows...."

¹¹ SW Letters 121, 164-5.

¹² Santayana 127-28

¹³ SW Letters 199.

¹⁴ William James, *Letters*, Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920, 1:303 Oct 15, 1890.

¹⁵ SW Letters 71-2.

¹⁶ SW Letters 71-72. "Sursum Corda" are the only words on her gravestone at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

¹⁷ SW Letters 99-100.

¹⁸ SW Letters 31 February, 1890; 133.

¹⁹ Santayana 126.

²⁰ William James, *Is Life Worth Living?* 25-27.

²¹ SW Letters 117.

²² June 27, 1904, WJ to his wife Alice Howe Gibbens James, *Correspondence of William James*, ed. Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 10:422.

²³ WJ Corr 10:429, 3:273.

²⁴ WJ to Frances Parkman, June 30, 1904, WJ Corr 10:429.