

Introduction

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Introduction

Where are you, Walt?
The Open Road goes to the used-car lot¹

A.

Whitman's place in the history of American poetry is unlike that of any other poet and this can be said to distinguish American poetry from all other poetries. American poets after Whitman have had to come to terms with him, one way or another. He is an immovable object and irresistible force, unavoidably in the way. Whitman's decision to discard all of the established poetic conventions of his time in favor of his "new free forms" makes him a permanent source of new ideas and techniques. He demonstrates that any form can be challenged. *Leaves of Grass* is a Declaration of Independence for all subsequent poets.

Pound, who both affirms the principle of innovation: "make it new" and is himself a major innovator, writes at the beginning of his career (1909) that Whitman is "the only one of the conventionally recognized 'American Poets' who is worth reading" (*Selected Prose* 115). Pound states that it was only in Europe that he was able to read Whitman for the first time and even then he is more than a little ambivalent:

He is America. His crudity is an exceeding great stench, but it is America . . .
He is disgusting. He is an exceedingly nauseating pill, but he accomplishes his mission. . . . As for Whitman, I read him (in many parts with acute pain), but when I write of certain things I find myself using his rhythms. (ibid)

Pound absorbs Whitman's rhythms unconsciously, almost in spite of himself. This is the true measure of an author's power and for all his love and knowledge of the old literature of Europe, Pound faces his affiliation squarely:

¹ Louis Simpson, "Walt Whitman at Bear Mountain," *Contemporary American Poetry*, ed. Donald Hall (Baltimore: Penguin, 1974), 119.

Personally I might be very glad to conceal my relationship to my spiritual father and brag about my more congenial ancestry – Dante, Shakespeare, Theocritus, Villon, but a bit difficult to establish. And, to be frank, Whitman is to my fatherland . . . what Dante is to Italy. . . . (116)

These feelings were so much a part of Pound and the relationship so important that they become a poem, published in *Poetry* in April 1913, and then collected in *Lustra*:

A Pact

I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman –
 I have detested you long enough.
 I come to you as a grown child
 Who has had a pig-headed father;
 I am old enough now to make friends.
 It was you that broke the new wood,
 Now is a time for carving.
 We have one sap and one root –
 Let there be commerce between us.

(*Collected Shorter Poems* 98)

This is a poem about growing up. The ambivalence is still there, but accepted, integrated in the image of “one sap and one root,” such that their unity is virtually indistinguishable from their individuality. That it is the pig-headed Pound who recognizes himself in Whitman is a perfect touch.

T.S. Eliot is less explicit in print about his own ambivalence to Whitman, in keeping with that dislike of showing his personal feelings that is manifest in “Tradition and Individual Talent” (1919). It emerges, however, in a review of Emory Holloway’s *Whitman: An Interpretation in Narrative* published in *The Nation and Athenaeum* (18 December 1926). Holloway’s book “has nothing to say – thank God! – about Whitman’s influence upon *vers libre* and contemporary verse,” he exclaims at the start of the review as if the whole subject is repugnant to him – as it almost certainly was. He, like Pound in his comments on Whitman in *Patria Mia* (1950), kept Whitman at a distance by saying he belongs to his time (who does not?). He also domesticates and comes to terms with Whitman by comparing him to Tennyson: “Between the ideas of the two men, or, rather, between the relations of the ideas of each to his place and time, between the ways in which each held his ideas, there is a fundamental resemblance.”

For Eliot, they are both conservatives who believed in progress and for whom, implicitly “progress consists in things remaining much as they are and both ‘make satisfaction almost magnificent.’” Eliot continues: “They had the faculty – Whitman perhaps more prodigiously than Tennyson – of transmitting the real into the ideal.” This extremely intelligent comment shows that Eliot’s reservations do not prevent him from seeing clearly, although he is obviously troubled by Whitman as a “man with a message” and the nature of that message. Nonetheless, Eliot concludes:

Beneath all the declamations there is another tone, and behind all the illusions there is another vision. When Whitman speaks of the lilacs of the mocking-bird, his theories and beliefs drop away like a needless pretext.

The form and some of the rhetoric of *The Waste Land* (1922) and *Four Quartets* (1942) owe something to Whitman. The song of the hermit thrush and its function in *The Waste Land* is derived from the solitary thrush, a “hermit withdrawn to himself” in “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.” Moreover, Eliot picks up that distinctive word, *dooryard*, to use again with the smell of flowers at the start of “The Dry Salvages”: “In the rank ailanthus of the April dooryard” (I, 23) and “the river with its cargo of dead Negroes, cows and chicken coops” (II, 27) is pure Whitman.

William Carlos Williams recounts in his *Autobiography* (1951), how at the beginning of his poetic career he worked on a long poem in the style of Keats’ *Endymion*, but for his notebooks, he “reserved my Whitmanesque ‘thoughts,’ a sort of purgation and confessional to clear my head and my heart from turgid obsessions” (53), which suggests that to achieve the wonderfully spare and simple style of his lyrics, he had to pass through the elaborate and emotional rhetoric of Whitman. Wallace Stevens in his long poem “Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetary,” compares the autumn sun to “Walt Whitman walking along a ruddy shore” (150) and Hart Crane in the “Cape Hatteras” section of *The Bridge* (1930) has Whitman walking on the beach, near Paumanok. Crane also borrows in his way Whitman’s rhetoric as well as some notions of form from *Leaves of Grass*. He addresses Whitman several times in the section and closes:

— no never to let go
 My hand
 in yours,
 Walt Whitman —
 So — (95)

For poets writing in the wake of World War II and of the democratization of poetry enabled by the G.I. Bill, the bard's grip on American poetics appeared stronger than ever. Paraphrasing Harold Bloom, one can say that Whitman's poetry was more than ever America's answer to Europe. Young writers both male and female were drawn to its inclusiveness, its fresh language and its fearlessness in taking risks, but also, and unlike T.S. Eliot, to its subversive content. This subversiveness is what D.H. Lawrence calls, in his *Studies in Classic American Literature*, "the American heroic message." The home of the soul, Whitman tells us, is the "Open Road" (179).

Whitman's "heroic message" of course immediately brings to mind writers such as Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Cid Corman, Philip Whalen, or Gary Snyder. It is impossible to read any of "Howl" (1956) without hearing Whitman's voice and being aware of his form. Ginsberg's "A Supermarket in California" composed at the same time has Whitman as its protagonist. He is a "lonely old grubber poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eying the grocery boys," but also "dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher" (29-30). Like Crane, Ginsberg takes Whitman as a friend and guide and like Pound, explicitly as a father.

Gary Snyder read Whitman at seventeen in Portland and was immediately drawn to what he calls his "goofy openness of spirit."² In April 1958, Ginsberg wrote Snyder, then living in Japan, about the stifling conservatism back home: "Seems to me America's taking a fall i.e. all whitmanic freedom energy all fucked up in selfishness & exclusion like a big neurotic paranoid that's about to crack up."³ Snyder's response to Ginsberg's letter and to the paranoid situation in the United States was to get back to work on his early sections of *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, the long poem first conceived in 1956 and finally published forty years later.

² Cited by Gary Snyder in a graduate seminar on "The Making of the Long Poem," University of California at Davis, Spring 1996

³ Unpublished letter from Allen Ginsberg to Gary Snyder, 2 April 1958 (University of California at Davis, Special Collections).

As James E. Miller has shown, one of Whitman's most important influences was the creation of this new American literary form, the personal epic. Poets who have written personal long poems include Ginsberg and Snyder but also Charles Olson, John Berryman and Louis Zukofsky. While Williams or Pound are usually cited as their main precursors, the expansive, public voice of Whitman's poetry hovers in the background of all these poets, and is also reproduced in shorter ode-like lyrics such as Robert Creeley's "America": "America, you ode for reality! / Give back the people you took" (412).

Other poets, the majority perhaps, have been drawn to the more private intensities of *Leaves of Grass*. In starkly different ways, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Frank O'Hara and, more recently, Sharon Olds, develop Whitman's disarming mixture of the confessional and conversational modes. Others, such as James Wright, Denise Levertov, Charles Wright or Mary Oliver, seek the same freshness of experience, that epiphanic quality that Whitman explicitly tries to verbalize in section 50 of "Song of Myself" (1881) and which he shows again and again so splendidly in shorter lyrics such as the previously cited "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking":

Once Paumanok,
When the lilac-scent was in the air and Fifth-month grass was growing,
Up this seashore in some briers,
Two feather'd guests from Alabama, two together,

And their nest, and four light-green spotted with brown,
And every day the he-bird to and fro near at hand,
And every day the she-bird crouch'd on her nest, silent, with bright eyes,
And every day I, a curious boy, never too close, never disturbing them,
Cautiously peering, absorbing, translating. (388-389)

It is too early to evaluate Whitman's legacy among more recent poets. Finding a direct relation between Whitman and avant-garde groups such as the self-appointed "Language poets," for example, or writers who make ethnicity or gender the mainstay of their work, can seem problematic. Poets today are nevertheless variously drawn to Whitman's linguistic experimentation, his "multicultural" inclusiveness or his homosexuality. By showing how "the United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem" (1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass* 15) and seeking to give "vista" to all aspects of the American experience, Whitman's poetry enables what a recent television series has labeled the "United States of

Poetry." Whitman concludes the 1855 Preface in bold fashion: "the proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it" (26). If anything, we hope this collection of essays will attest to the truth, and prescience of his famous statement.

B.

Whitman's originality, like everyone's, happened in the particular context of his time. Looking at notebook entries and letters as well as the published works, Louis Kern traces the development of the central ideas of *Democratic Vistas* from Whitman's almost immediate reply to Carlyle's attack on democracy in *Shooting Niagara: And After?* to show the tension between Whitman's ideas about democracy and his ideas about selfhood. William Dow is also concerned with how Whitman's political views get into his poetry. He examines Whitman's views on labor, property and the American society of his time and the use Whitman makes of the "New York Roughs" and how this becomes a theory of language.

The changes in American poetry begun by Whitman are consolidated and developed by Pound. All the poetry of the last hundred years or so is marked by him. Pound remembered Whitman when writing *The Pisan Cantos* where he stands for the tradition ("Hier wohnt the tradition as per Whitman in Camden," 80/86) and where his European reputation is contrasted with his American:

"Fvy! in Tdaenmarck efen dh'besantz gnow him,"

meaning Whitman, exotic, still suspect

four miles from Camden

"O troubled reflections

O throat, O throbbing heart"

(80/104)

That Whitman, who lived in Camden at the end of his life, was still exotic and suspect is, for Pound, an example of the decadence of American culture and the opposition that confronts great writers. The remark about Whitman's popularity in Denmark was made by Pound's German instructor at the University of Pennsylvania, Richard Riethmuller, an indication of how far back Pound's involvement with Whitman went. Whitman was also brought to mind by *The Pocket Book of Verse: Great*

English and American Poems, edited by M.E. Speare which Pound found in the latrine at the DTC in Pisa. The other quotation is from "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," one of the poems in Speare which contains eighteen pages of poetry by Whitman. Nonetheless, it is significant that of the many poets in the anthology Whitman is one of the small number quoted. Pound sees Whitman in an analogous situation to himself, exotic, suspect and at "the gates of death" (80/91), but he is also remembering Whitman the man who lived at the end of his life in Camden and who "liked oysters / at least I think it was oysters" (80/73).

Ron Bush examines Pound's drafts and notes for "The Pisan Cantos" and the contemporary Italian newspapers to recreate the political content in which Pound composed what are generally regarded as his finest cantos. The Italian newspapers' accounts of allied bombing, not all of which were true, dramatized for Pound the destruction of European culture and became associated with what is lost by being forgotten. Mike Malm is concerned with the structure of *The Cantos* and identifies what he sees as "*partial* coherences" within the individual sections, using *The Fifth Decad* (1937) as an example. He examines the different types of repetition and relates Pound's techniques to ideas of collage which developed between 1910 and 1914. Pound's and Eliot's sense of history and tradition is Viorica Patea's subject. Both confronted the old philological tradition. Pound develops a system of correspondence between different cultures and eras, Eliot, from a theory of tradition to a theory of culture. Both emphasized tradition as an open and dynamic system founded on re-lived experience.

The dual legacy of Whitman and Pound in the development of modern American poetry serves as a reminder that one of the central functions of modern poetry is to re-organize fragments of experience, objects, ideas or language into aesthetic wholes. This organizing function or practice makes the presence of an anthropologist among our poets less surprising than one might expect. Philipp Schweighauser's essay, "An Anthropologist at Work: Ruth Benedict's Poetry," introduces us to a little known facet of modern literature. Writing under the pen name Anne Singleton, Benedict belonged to a second generation of poets in the twentieth century, including Louise Bogan and Edna St. Vincent Millay, whose writing was less experimental, more conventionally lyric. As in her groundbreaking anthropological work, Benedict explores issues of cultural otherness in her verse, but also what Schweighauser

labels “poetic alterity,” the awareness of literary language’s power of defamiliarization.

Whereas Benedict goes mining for experience in other cultures, Frank O’Hara finds it in ordinary events and things such as his lunch hour. In “Naming Things: Frank O’Hara and ‘The Day Lady Died,’” Micah Mattix analyzes one of O’Hara’s best known and loved poems to argue that O’Hara’s distinctive naming of things is not simply a reaction to conventional poetic language, but an elegiac response to meaninglessness and death as well. Mattix argues that by choosing the objects and experiences he wishes to write about, and naming things familiar to a community of readers, the poet can gain control over his own temporality. Abigail Lang makes a similar argument in “How to End a Lifework: Louis Zukofsky’s Indexes,” which explores the defamiliarization produced by an index “as a text in its own right.” Lang’s essay looks at the role of the index in Zukofsky’s poetics and argues that indexes serve as a “graph of culture,” helping to organize or “file” history so as to help ward off death.

In his essay on the California art scene of the 1950s and early 1960s, and in particular on the production of a group of artists working around Wallace Berman’s *Semina* project, Stephen Fredman shows that the most avant-garde, creative work in post-war American poetry took place far away from East Coast cultural centers such as Boston and New York. Combining Surrealism, associated here with Mexico, with the spiritual practices of the Kabbalah, artists such as Robert Duncan, Wallace Berman, Jack Hirschman and David Meltzer organized and incorporated their eclectic materials into richly improvisational compositions juxtaposing collage with poetry. Matilde Martín González also looks at a series of avant-garde poets, this time from a gendered point of view. In “Gender Politics and the Making of Anthologies: Towards a Theory of Women’s Poetry,” Martín González usefully asks why some women poets, including Hilda Morley and Joanne Kyger, have been left out of leading poetry anthologies. Given that anthologies have played such a key role in shaping literary history, her question raises crucial questions about the organization of culture into affiliations or movements, easy categorizations that women have often chosen to ignore.

In the final essay, Erika Scheidegger examines how Lorna Dee Cervantes, a much-anthologized Chicana poet, surmounts the problem of writing in English, a language the author claims was imposed on her as a child. Focusing on several poems in her best-known collection, *Emplu-*

mada, Scheidegger shows how the poet's use of code-switching, or frequent crossing over from English to Spanish and vice versa, forces her readers to "apprehend her specific worldview and language," and therefore to experience cultural hybridity and the trauma of language death. Poetry here organizes experiences of otherness into a form that ultimately challenges readers to question the hegemony of their own "mother tongue." We have chosen to close this collection of essays with a selection of work by two contemporary American poets, Robert Rehder and Wesley McNair, to suggest that despite critical talk of influences, schools or identity, the work of poetry continues unperturbed. In these scenes from American life, filled with humor and wit but also pathos, we are reminded not only of Walt Whitman's injunction that "the United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem," but also the extent to which that "poem" has changed in the last one hundred and fifty years.

Robert Rehder, Fribourg
Patrick Vincent, Neuchâtel

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