

Homework: Richard Powers, Walt Whitman, and the Poetry of the Commodity

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In a novel called *Gain* published in 1998 by the novelist Richard Powers, there is a passage in which the heroine, a 42-year-old mother and real estate broker named Laura who has just discovered she has cancer, tries to help her 13-year-old son with his homework. She finds him at the kitchen table, frustrated, cursing the poem in front of him (I warn you in advance that the language is realistic) and starting to cry. His assignment is a poem called “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” by the nineteenth-century poet American Walt Whitman. She asks him, “What are you supposed to do with it?” And he answers: “Supposed to say what it’s fucking about” (86). His mother has other things on her mind, as you might imagine, but she wants to keep up the pretense of normal life, so she offers to help. She looks at the poem, and we get bits of the poem juxtaposed with bits of her thoughts:

The certainty of others, the life, love, sight, hearing of others. Not exactly what Laura had bargained for. She was never very good with words. Always hated English, social studies, all those invented topics. She couldn’t wait to become an adult. When things would be real.

She stares at the commodity stretching across these pages. Somehow, she’s become a working adult. Somewhere, she’s learned: nobody makes a living. There are no other topics but these impenetrable, urgent fakes.

Others will see the shipping of Manhattan north and west ... Fifty years hence, she reads. She has to take the poet’s word for it. *It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not.*

She hasn’t the first clue. It’s like doing some kind of Martian archaeology. She’s in badly over her head. She looks at the page for something to say. Her son stares at her. (87)

This poetry homework seems painfully irrelevant, next to the thoughts of her diagnosis and prognosis and chemotherapy that are filling Laura's mind. In fact, the novel suggests, nothing could be more relevant to her situation, if only she could see it. But relevant in an extremely complex way. If there is any knowledge that might help her, or might have helped her, this poem may contain it.

Laura uses a strange word to describe the poem: she calls it a "commodity." The word is a kind of clue—the sort of clue Laura herself does not see. *Gain* is split almost exactly in half between two narratives. One narrative is the gradual decline of Laura, beginning with her diagnosis, continuing through her treatment and physical deterioration, and ending with her death. The other narrative is a rise: the rise of a pharmaceutical corporation named Clare. Clare begins as a tiny soap-making company run by two brothers in Boston in the early nineteenth century and ends up a huge multinational, selling all sorts of chemical products all over the world. The two stories, Laura's and Clare's, are linked: Laura lives in a small Illinois town where Clare is the largest employer, and it is strongly suggested, though never with absolute certainty, that her cancer is the result of the "commodities" that Clare produces. It is also suggested that she really didn't have any choice. Clare's chemical commodities and commodities just like them are all around her, and there seems no way to avoid using them. Little by little she comes to the realization that the world is all commodities, nothing but commodities. It is probably that realization that is starting to occur to her when she describes even a poem as a commodity.

But the content of the poem is also relevant here. Notice the first lines from the poem that are quoted: "The certainty of others, the life, love, sight, hearing of others." These are the others that Whitman sees as he crosses on the morning ferry from Brooklyn (which was then an independent city, not yet incorporated into New York) to Manhattan. He talks about "love" here, but these are not his "loved ones," his family or friends; they are people he doesn't know, strangers simply going to work in the morning. And one simple point of the poem, although also a strange point, maybe even a Martian point, is that strangers going to and from work exist on the same plane of "love" as the people at home.

They matter to you. Whitman refuses to recognize the usual line between how you care about what is private or intimate and how you care about what is public.

This is directly relevant to Laura because the error she has made, if one can speak in such a harsh way about a good woman who is condemned to die young, has been to respect the line between public and private and to believe that her real life is private, the intimate life at home with her children and her husband (now an ex-husband), as if that life could be separated off from the world of multinational corporations and commodities and political decisions she reads about in the newspapers, or rather doesn't really have time to read about, since she has so much to do just doing her job, shopping, cooking, taking care of her children, helping them with their homework. The "public" life she has ignored has been paying attention to her, even if she has not been paying attention to it; it has turned up in the herbicides and pesticides she has been using for years to kill the weeds and insects in her garden, in some ways the most "private" and most jealously guarded or intimate space in her life. She says or rather thinks that the poem is as strange and incomprehensible as if it were the archaeology of the planet Mars, which is a way of saying that she finds it very alien. But in a way it is no more "alien" than the public corporation whose headquarters are a few minutes away by car.

The word "archaeology" also suggests that this strangeness is the result of distance in time. And it seems clear that Whitman can accomplish the strange feat of seeing strangers as loved ones in part because, unlike Laura, he does not feel disheartened by this distance, does not feel so restricted in time. The passage goes on: "*Others will see the shipping of Manhattan north and west . . . Fifty years hence*, she reads. She has to take the poet's word for it. *It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not*" (87). The reference to "fifty years hence" and what others will see then is of course also an indirect reference to the possibility that, like Whitman, Laura herself will not be there in fifty years. The poem confronts her with the difficult prospect of caring about things she will not be there to see, whether because they come after or because they are far away. Whitman himself seems supremely confident that this does not matter,

that he can care perfectly well about things from which he is distanced in time and place: “It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not.” Laura has trouble making sense of the poem in part because of the distance in time and space between it and her own life, and partly because she has trouble in general caring about anything distanced from her own private life, her own home. This is a lesson the novel will teach her. She is told at a certain point about a law-suit being brought against the Clare corporation by others who are also suffering from cancer. She has no patience for such things and resists getting involved. But as her condition gets worse and worse, she changes her mind. And after she is dead, the money from Clare’s out-of-court settlement will serve to finance her son’s apparently successful effort to find a cure for cancer. In this sense the novel’s ending supports the poem’s enterprise of caring at a distance, caring beyond the narrow circle of home and family.

This is one sense in which the poem might be described, metaphorically as well as literally, as a form of homework. Literally, homework is schoolwork that happens at home rather than at school. But metaphorically, you could say that this piece of homework, the Whitman poem, is work aimed at the home, work that takes the home as its object or target, that tries to induce us to think of ourselves as not really “at home” when we think we are, or (the two senses are not really contradictory) as potentially “at home” in much larger stretches of the world than merely the apartment or house, the village or city, where we live: “At home” in ever-expanding circles of the world. I could not make this case about any and all poetry, but I would certainly make it about Whitman.

Whitman in this sense is interestingly characteristic of a great deal of American poetry and American culture generally—which is probably why he is the closest thing America has to a national poet. In the preface to *Leaves of Grass*, the larger poem that contains “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” Walt Whitman wrote: “The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetic nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem” (5).

This was patriotic boasting, but it had the virtue of celebrating a new democratic diversity within the nation. Calling himself “an American,” the poet was also claiming to be “a kosmos [spelled with a Greek k in-

stead of the usual c], one of the roughs”—not just a Wordsworthian man among men, but a poet whose mission was to include those seen as actively dangerous to official versions of the nation, such as the urban crowd of immigrants, prostitutes, and homosexuals.

Largely self-educated, from a family of modest means but strong intellectual interests, Whitman spent his early life as a schoolteacher on rural Long Island and a printer in Brooklyn. Some have seen his distinctive long lines as expressing a professional printer's view of poetry, based on making the most of available space. He was also a political journalist; in 1847 he was fired from the newspaper where he worked, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, for his opposition to the extension of slavery into western territories. A Bohemian life in New York suited both his homosexuality and his urge to think of himself as the nation incarnate, large enough to embrace everyone and everything, whether literally or figuratively. “Do I contradict myself?” he famously asked. “Very well then I contradict myself,/ I am large, I contain multitudes.” Nothing was too prosaic for his lines, rhymeless and suspiciously close to prose, to see, hear, and feel as part of some larger rhythm—a rhythm reminiscent at once of the industrial city and of the King James Bible. The revolutionary freshness and sensuality of Whitman's language, frank about the bodily functions and exploding with present participles that force us to experience reality as instant-by-instant process, sometimes leave the impression that Whitman himself is ready to leap off the page and into the reader's arms. Poets around the world have testified to the power of his voice to liberate them from conventions gone stale.

Yet there is also a problem with this capacious embrace of the world, this impulse to make the reader feel at home not just “at” home, but in his or her city, his or her country, anywhere at all in the world. And one might say that the problem too is characteristic of American culture generally. It is the problem I think of under the heading “cosmopolitanism.” Going back both to Whitman and to the philosophy of ancient Greece, the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum has helped resuscitate the ideal of cosmopolitanism and turn it into a critique of present political reality. In her 1994 essay entitled “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism,” Nussbaum refused a call by Richard Rorty for American academics to

forget their divisive insistence on racial and ethnic identity and join together with their fellow Americans in an “emotion of national pride.” Nussbaum asserted on the contrary that our “primary allegiance” is to “the worldwide community of human beings.” I quote:

When Diogenes the Cynic replied, ‘I am a citizen of the world,’ he meant, apparently, that he refused to be defined by his local origins and group memberships, so central to the self-image of the conventional Greek male; instead, he defined himself in terms of more universal aspirations and concerns. The Stoics, who followed his lead, further developed his image of the *kosmou politês* (world citizen), arguing that each of us dwells, in effect, in two communities—the local community of our birth, and the community of human argument and aspiration that ‘is truly great and truly common, in which we look neither to this corner nor to that, but measure the boundaries of our nation by the sun.’ . . . It is this community that is, fundamentally, the source of our moral obligations. (Nussbaum 7)

And she quotes Plutarch: “We should regard all human beings as our fellow citizens and neighbors” (7). The problem for Nussbaum is not how little sense of unity Americans have with each other, but how little sense of unity they have with the rest of the world—a world on which their actions and inactions impinge violently and massively, if mainly unconsciously. Nussbaum is gentle but firm: “What are Americans to make of the fact that the high living standard we enjoy is one that very likely cannot be universalized, at least given the present costs of pollution and the present economic situation of developing nations, without ecological disaster?” (12-13). If life-expectancy at birth is 78.2 years in Sweden and 39 years in Sierra Leone, then “we are all going to have to do some tough thinking about the luck of birth and the morality of transfers of wealth from richer to poorer nations” (135). Moving from the economic and environmental to the political, she and many of her allies have enlisted her cosmopolitan standard—the good of the human species—against America’s history of abusive interventions in the affairs of other countries. So for example in *New Left Review* Daniele Archibugi

has recently turned to cosmopolitanism in an effort to find moral and legal leverage that would condemn the NATO bombing of the former Yugoslavia and help stop future interventions of the same kind. Other examples are not difficult to think of.

For Nussbaum's critics, however—and there are many of them—her version of cosmopolitanism makes itself *too* much at home in the world. To quote Timothy Brennan's book *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now*, Nussbaum's cosmopolitanism is "calculated to preserve the primary requisites of U.S. citizenship." It pays too little attention to "the rights of small nations—patriotism and all." I quote again: "Cosmopolitanism is the way in which a kind of American patriotism is today being expressed" (25). In other words, cosmopolitanism is really a disguised form of American imperialism. The critics have a point, and you can see that point in Walt Whitman. Nussbaum takes Whitman to be a voice of democracy, democracy based on love and on the recognition of one's own mortality. She praises Whitman for linking "the overcoming of hatred with the attainment of an inclusive and impartial love" (671). There is no hint of criticism when she quotes Whitman's idea of democracy as "cheer[ing] up slaves and horrif[ying] foreign despots" (645). Horrifying foreign despots? That sounds a lot like what the US has been doing lately in Iraq, in the face of an overwhelming public opinion set against it all around the world. What Nussbaum does not seem to see, in her overwhelmingly positive reading of Whitman, is the *danger* Whitman also represents, the danger of a democratic ideal that can become grounds for intervening in the affairs of other nations.¹

Consider another poem of Whitman's from *Leaves of Grass*, called "Salut au Monde." "Salut au Monde" (or Salute to the World) extends Whitman's claim to inclusiveness to the whole world; putting the title in French, which he did not actually know very well, emphasizes the point. The poem begins: "O take my hand Walt Whitman!" And taking his own hand, if such a thing is imaginable, the poet begins an epic listing of the world's peoples and places, all laid out below him as if he were looking down from an airplane or a space station.

I see plenteous waters,
I see mountain peaks, I see the sierras of the Andes where they
 range,
I see plainly the Himalayas, Chian Shahs, Altays, Ghauts,
I see the giant pinnacles of Elbruz, Kazbek, Bazardjusi,
I see the Styrian Alps, and the Karnac Alps,
I see the Pyrenees, Balks, Carpathians, and to the north the
 Dofrafields, and of at sea mount Heda,
I see Vesuvius and Etna, the mountains of the Moon, and the
 Red mountains of Madagascar,
I see the Lybian, Arabian, and Asiatic deserts . . . (289)

And so on—there is a lot more that he sees, pages more. It is clear that here, as in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” Whitman’s theme is a sort of absolute inclusiveness, taking in everyone with no exceptions. “I see ranks, colors, barbarisms, civilizations, I go among them, I mix indiscriminately, / And I salute all the inhabitants of the earth” (294) — as in the title. Whitman recognizes the world. “Each of us inevitable, / each of us limitless—each of us with his or her right upon the earth [let me underline the “his or her,” something that Whitman was unusually serious about], / . . . Each of us as divinely as any is here” (296). Yet there is also a sort of colonial condescension:

You Caffre, Berber, Soudanese!
You haggard, uncouth, untutor’d Bedowee!
You plague-swarms in Madras, Nankin, Kaubul, Cairo!
. . . I do not prefer others so much before you either,
I do not say one word against you, away back there where you
 stand,
(You will come forward in due time to my side.) (296)

This is a little frightening. It sounds just a little bit like George Bush. When Whitman ends the poem by saying that he salutes all these, and the whole world, “in America’s name,” there is a distinct implication that there was no connection among all these peoples without Whitman or America, and that only Whitman and America occupy the aerial or bird’s-eye-view that enables them to be collected together. The subject who seems to deserve the highest praise in all these inclusive

lists is the subject who does the including, let us call him the Includer, and the Includer occupies a unique, almost inhuman position of superiority, or at least potential superiority. This quiet assumption that one reaches out to the world from a position that is also outside and above the world, in that sense superior to the world—that assumption is distinctly American, alas, and distinctly visible today in the behavior of the American government. There are rules, and you must obey them—but we who made them are outside of them and do not have to obey them.

One of the wonderful things about the Richard Powers novel and its reading of Walt Whitman is that it makes this danger visible. The ending of the novel, as I described it a minute ago, presented a kind of positive resolution in which the money paid by the Clare corporation in its out-of-court settlement to the cancer victims went on to finance a cure for cancer, so that Laura's dying endorsement of Whitman's moral, joining the lawsuit and thus caring for those who will come after her, those outside her home that she does not know or will not live to see, is triumphantly justified. This may sound to you like too simple or too happy an ending, and it is, both for the novel and for the poem. For one thing, because the novel has suggested that the real villain here is the corporation, or the corporate form, and the last line of the novel—in fact the last word—suggests that in order to fight cancer, the son (the same 13-year-old we saw struggling with Whitman, now grown up) will have to incorporate, to become a corporation. For another thing, the literary form of the novel helps suggest that this is not entirely a bad thing.

As I said, the novel cuts back and forth between the story of Laura's decline and the corporation's rise. As Laura goes through more and more hell, both from the disease and from the chemotherapy, it is more and more of a *relief* for the reader to switch to the story of the corporation. We may think the corporation is responsible for Laura's illness, but it is still a much happier story to read about. And it is also on a much larger time-scale. Laura is diagnosed and dies within one year. The Clare corporation rises gradually over almost two centuries. Its founders grow old and are replaced and die, and those replacements are themselves re-

placed, but the corporation itself survives, living on as if it were immortal, at any rate living on a much vaster time-scale than the mortal life. And there is a certain pleasure in this transcendence of the individual life span. In fact, much the same sort of pleasure that Walt Whitman offers with his “fifty years hence.” The poem, like the corporation, helps us and encourages us to stretch ourselves, imaginatively, beyond the little bit of life each of us is allotted. And this is both an important fact (about the novel, and in general) and a difficult fact, a politically confusing fact. We thought the corporation was our enemy. But Richard Powers will not let us get away with so easy a moral. The corporation is also a lot like a poem, or at least like a Whitman poem.

The passage about Whitman as homework continues. After a couple of pages, there comes a moment where Laura realizes that Whitman is looking forward to the reality of the world after his own death, and that this is absolutely relevant to her own suffering. But when she tries to explain, she does not do very well; she struggles much the way teacher and students may struggle on a bad day in poetry class. Laura tells her son, “He seems . . . He’s trying to talk with everyone who is ever going to be taking this boat. The boat he’s taking. People fifty years later” (88). “Well, what’s up with that?” . . . “This ferry in New York, in eighteen-fifty-something. Six. He’s trying to imagine . . . all these lives. All these different times. All occupying the same place” (88). And her son says, “Why?” She thinks, “Why? She flips back through the poem. Her end-of-term exam” (88). You understand what she is thinking when she thinks “end-of-term exam”—that this is the end of her term on earth, that she is going to die. She sees the lines describing the ships in New York harbor, flying “*the flags of all nations*” (88), and then the lines asking the reader of the future what it matters that there are “*hundreds of years between us*” (89). And she thinks something else she cannot say to her son: “His teacher cannot possibly know what the poem means. Not unless his teacher is already sick. Unless she, too, already has the aerial view. Her own tumor” (89). No one can understand this poem, no one can adopt its “aerial view,” unless she or he has taken with unusual seriousness the idea of being absent from the scene, of being terminally ill.

And having thought of the poem from the perspective of her cancer, having made the rather nice connection between the view from above and the knowledge that one may be dying, she goes on to notice some more unpleasant aspects of the poem. First, after noting Whitman's enthusiasm for the morning commuters of the future, she also cites Whitman's uncritical, equally enthusiastic embrace of factories and industry: "*Burn high your fires, foundry chimneys! . . .*" (89). In effect, it is those burning fires that have killed her. And then she cites the way the objects produced by industry get inside us, and even become us: "*We use you, you objects, and do not cast you aside—we plant you permanently within us*" (89). This is precisely what she has done with the objects she bought from Clare and that are now, it seems, permanently planted within her in the form of the fatal cancer. Now that it is too late, she knows, or at least she is starting to know, where this wonderfully enthusiastic American inclusiveness can lead.

It is clear that Whitman's embrace of democratic inclusiveness, both nationally and internationally, represents a dangerous impulse within American culture at the same time that it also represents a real virtue of that culture. That may be enough of a moral for today. One reason why I do not want to say it is just a danger is that at the present moment, cosmopolitanism is a very important line of defense against the unilateralism of the American government. The critics of Nussbaum I quote were all writing before the American invasion of Iraq, which simply ignored all universal norms and rules. Suddenly, universal rules and norms look less like an expression of American hegemony than like a way of stopping it or at least protesting it.

Let me go back in conclusion to *Gain*. Some critics have accused Richard Powers of making a crude and single-minded assault on multinationals and on the capitalist system. Other critics have accused him of dehumanizing his characters in exactly the same way the multinational corporation does. These two criticisms would seem completely contradictory. Yet there is also a sense in which they are both correct: a sense in which Powers, like Whitman, contradicts himself in order to contain a more multitudinous and contradictory truth.

What Richard Powers has learned from Walt Whitman is visible, or audible, in a long passage at the end of the novel that marks the heroine's death, is his way of announcing the heroine's death. A sort of prose poem about the making of a disposable camera, with long lists of seemingly unpoetic nouns—geographical, chemical, mechanical nouns—that ought to remind you of Whitman.

It all starts in the sun. The cardboard case, the instantly pitched packaging: a sunny upland stand of southern yellow pines. A thing that once lived for light.

Somewhere on the coast of British Columbia, machines receive these trees. Pulper, bleacher, recovery plant, and mill synchronize a staggering ballet, juggling inventory, from calcium hypochlorite to nitrogen tetroxide, substances ranging from Georgia clays to the South Pacific guano.

Timber, scrap, and straw cook together in the maws of enormous chemical vats. Black liquors and white liquors—spent and new infusions of caustic soda and sodium sulfide—swirl the raw chips downward into the continuous digesters. Screened and washed of sodium brews, the pulp proceeds to beating. Micro-adjustable blades tease out the fibers. Calcium carbonate, aluminum sulfate, aluminum silicate, titanium dioxide [the list goes on] . . . combine to make any kind of paper the world wants made. (345)

The passage goes on for another paragraph, followed by “All this for the box, the throwaway.” Then it starts up again for the cardboard display that is part of the packaging. Another paragraph. Then a longer section on the camera itself, with its plastics and dyes, its flash and its battery, and a long list of the places on earth that gather together in order for this object to lie in your hands:

Silver halide, metal salts, dye couplers, bleach fixatives, ingredients gathered from Russia, Arizona, Brazil, and underwater seabeds, before being decanted in the former DDR [East Germany]. Camera in a pouch, the true multinational: trees

from the Pacific Northwest and the southeastern coastal plain. Straw and recovered wood scrap from Canada. Synthetic adhesive from Korea. Bauxite from Australia, Jamaica, Guinea. Oil from the Gulf of Mexico or North Sea Brent Blend, turned to plastic in the Republic of China before being shipped to its mortal enemies on the Mainland for molding. Cinnabar from Spain. Nickel and titanium from South Africa. [. . .] Assembled and shipped from that address in California by a merchant fleet beyond description, completing the most heavily choreographed conference in existence. (347-348)

As I said, this description takes the place of Powers's account of his heroine's death. We are told that she is dead indirectly, within the account of how film works: The "waste energy" of electrons "flashes for a second" and "bounces off the lines of a *grieving* face and back into the hole of the aperture" (347). Then we are told again: "The instant camera lies forgotten in a drawer by the side of a hospital bed . . . A nurse's aide throws it out, prior to the next occupant" (348). To juxtapose the throwing out of the camera with the end of a human life is clearly heavy with irony. But there is more than one irony. On the one hand, this industrial process stands for exactly the sort of chemical poisoning that has led to the heroine's death. The paragraph with the grieving face ends with "Years from now, metal from the flash battery will leach into runoff and gather in the fat of fish, then the bigger fish will eat them" (347). He leaves the next stage unexpressed: and we will eat the bigger fish. And we too will be poisoned. On the other hand, like Whitman, and perhaps like most Americans, Powers finds a genuine beauty, a genuine poetry in these invisible components of a great global dance. And thus one do not know quite how to take the finale, which brings the disposable camera and the disposable woman back together:

Such a wonder has to be cheap enough to jettison. You cannot have a single-use camera except at a repeatable price. Buy it; shoot it; toss it. As mundane as any breakthrough that seemed our whole salvation once. A disposable miracle, no less than the least of us. (348)

This line asks us to think of ourselves, like the heroine of the book and like the disposable camera by the side of her hospital bed, as disposable miracles. What would it mean to do so? It would mean first of all that each of us, though we may think of ourselves as miracles, is only mortal trash to be thrown away by some huge nameless god-like entity. But it would also mean that each of us is *like* that nameless god-like entity each time we hold in our hand something like a disposable camera. The phrase and the camera are reminders that we have it in our power to bring together the raw materials, the people, the products of the world, even if up till now we have used this power only in order to make a disposable camera. And this is a genuine miracle. The disposable camera is a terrible idea, an ecological disaster—but it is also a miracle, in spite of the consequences that people all around the world are currently suffering. So let us dispose of it and instead take it as a poetic metaphor, a metaphor that stands for how the nations of the world might join together in some other way than via the profits of the American multinationals, and what we might do with each other, and for each other, if we could. This would also mean changing ourselves: in stretching to become conscious of our interdependence with the rest of the world, stretching to adapt to the ways in which we are already connected to the rest of the world, we must expect to seem different, a bit “inhuman” even to ourselves; we must expect that our homes will come to seem a bit *unheimlich*, a bit alien. The best of American poetry, whether in Whitman or in Powers, helps us do the work of getting out of our homes in order to see that the world is already in our homes, and that our homes are very much in the world.

Notes

- 1 Nussbaum comments, “One need not have the unrealistic fantasy that America could ever lack hate and disgust completely, in order to join Whitman in the project of pushing it back, a little, every day” (676). The passage ends “realizing that we cannot make ourselves or our nation immortal, we can, and must, try for the available goal of making it equal and free” (677).

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