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IS THERE A TEXT IN THIS GRASS ?

C. CARROLL HOLLIS

MARK BAUERLEIN'S ARTICLE concerns the recent emphasis on "orality" in Whitman's poetry, specifically in "Song of Myself," as treated by three critics, Calvin Bedient, John Irwin, and myself. *WWQR*'s editors have asked me for a comment, but I do not feel comfortable in speaking *of* or *for* Bedient or Irwin. However, the last third of the article does concern the third chapter of a book of mine. To that I want to respond, for it bears on the larger and on-going debate on mediation in poetry. But first let me point out how "Speech Acts and *Leaves of Grass*" came about.

I had been teaching Whitman for many years and had long felt that no one had quite explained what characterized his writing. In the late 1970s I had lots of free time, so began what might be called a pragmatic stylistic analysis of *Leaves*. I was looking for recurring patterns, ways of writing that could be checked as "style markers"—thus negation, journalistic language, the "cursus," metonymy, and one I'm now working on, deixis. But I didn't even know what a speech act was until two years after I had already gathered some few hundred specimens of "modes of speaking" that I didn't know how to categorize.

Indeed this particular group might have remained just that until I hit on the Speech Act concept, which gave me a way of classifying and commenting on that mass of quotations collected under the awkward label of ADDRESS. Perhaps in my satisfaction and relief at finding how to handle that particular file, my account may sound more triumphant than need be. But it wasn't a question of whether Whitman should or could be using "Speech Acts." The fact was that they were there, and all I wanted to do was to classify them and work out the implications on his style. Bauerlein thinks I "openly revere" Whitman's illocutionary poetry, something of an overstatement. I'm not much on reverence of any sort and think Whitman much more of a shrewd, crafty rhetorician than do most of my colleagues.

As I tried to show in those two chapters preceding my Speech Act treatment, Whitman wanted to be a public speaker. True, he never became one, but a helpful way of getting a handle on the style of many of the early poems (the "platform poems") is to approach them as speeches. After finishing the book, I had a lucky break in discovering more support for my hunch that these platform poems were meant to be spoken. It was written up in the article Bauerlein lists in note #6, and it considers the "rhetorical dots" and "orotund voice" of the first edition. I assume he accepts the speech origins of these early poems, since he doesn't say otherwise, but he objects to the implication that the printing of a speech carries any of the illocutionary force of the original.

That part of his essay which is specifically directed to me begins with four quotations, two from “Song of Myself” and two from Emerson’s “The Poet.” These passages are certainly appropriate to a discussion of poetry but do not have much bearing on speech acts that I can see. There is, however, one reading on which I will digress a moment in order to offer a different version. The first line quoted is one of those I quoted on p. 70 of my book as an example of an Assertive Speech Act, but here it is used literally as a statement of Whitman’s stance. The line is in Section 47, line 1247:

And I swear I will never translate myself at all, only to him or her
who privately stays with me in the open air.

The second quotation is from Section 48, ll. 1279–1280, but I provide a few previous lines to give the sense of the passage (with my italics for emphasis):

And I call to mankind, *Be not curious about God*, (l. 1271)

.....

I hear and behold God in every object, yet I understand God not in the least, (l. 1274)

.....

I see something of God each hour of the twenty four, and each moment then,
In the faces of men and women *I see God*, and *in my own face* in the glass;
I find letters from God dropped in the street, and every one is *signed by God’s name*,
And I leave them where they are, for I know that others will punctually come
forever and ever. (ll. 1277–1280)

Now Bauerlein sees the “letters from God” as some sort of arcane knowledge available to Whitman (as prophet, I presume) which he will decipher (“translate”) for those who will join him “in the open air” (i.e., turn away from schools, libraries, scripture, churches). But what the poet is saying in the passage providing the context for the “letters from God” is that we all waste too much time and spiritual energy searching for God, for something beyond life, instead of participating and enjoying life itself, where God is revealed in everything we experience, low as well as high, common as well as rare, vulgar as well as refined.

Now it is true that “letters from God” have never been explicated. Indeed, in our motorized society, few readers have any idea what Whitman is talking about. But if we could join Whitman “in the open air,” he would surely tell us they were “horse-droppings.” I can “translate” this line from a range of experience that only a few older Whitman readers can still recall: the horse-drawn carriages and stage-coaches of Broadway and other by-ways of the poet’s time and a few decades thereafter. Such “letters” were a fact of life, not pretty perhaps, but not necessarily repulsive either, known to all but never mentioned in the polite society of Victorian America—which, of course, is just why Whitman would make such a figure of speech. His horse-bun theology was doubtless meant to be a shocker to the sanctimonious, and

it still makes for a rather surprising opening for a debate on Whitman's speech acts.

At the end of Bauerlein's comment on the Whitman-Emerson passages, he asks: "How does the visionary prophet consecrate his language and accumulate an assenting audience who credits his inspiration?" This is a confusing question for we don't know whether it refers to a true prophet (say, a Biblical prophet) or a poet who wishes to sound like one (who would be rejected by the Emerson passages). But to set the record straight, the true prophet never tries to "consecrate his language" for God does that. Nor does he contrive to "accumulate an assenting audience" to credit his inspiration. I expand on this situation on pages 80-81 of my book, and I wish Bauerlein had indicated he understood my position. To make sure, let me pull another example from my anecdote, this time about the nearest thing to a prophet I've ever encountered.

Shortly after coming to Chapel Hill we were exploring the countryside one Saturday afternoon, came through a little town, spotted an open-air farmers' market, and stopped to get some apples. Twenty yards down the road a man in overalls was standing on the back of his pick-up shouting at the passers-by. At first I thought he was drunk or making sport, but soon heard something to the effect, "And you sinners think the Lord will forgive you, but when His wrath comes. . . ." I made some query to the farmer picking out my apples, and he told me the county prophet came in town on Saturdays and spoke his piece while his wife and sister were doing their shopping, that he went on until his voice wore down or his family came back, that he had never done anyone any harm, and (handing me the apples) that'll be a dollar and a half. My New England boyhood, plus college and teaching in the Midwest, had not prepared me for country prophets, and a few days later I was telling some colleagues about this pathetic little Flannery-Faulkner episode, how depressed the poor prophet must have felt with all his shouting and warning and nobody paying any attention. But a wiser colleague (and a native) interrupted, "Depressed? Not a bit of it. Those people pretending not to hear him just prove his point—to him. They're all sinners and he and the Lord know it." It was a true eye-opener to me, and I think of it every time I hear Whitman called a prophet. That country prophet might have been a little far out from my secular point of view, but he wasn't adjusting his manner to please me. Believing that the townpeople's scorn or my own tolerant pity was nothing more than the sin of pride inviting the divine wrath, he would be confirmed in his view by our pointed ignoring of his warning.

Now, wacky or not, that country prophet had what all prophets have—complete confidence and sincerity in their role. That characteristic inner conviction may also be found in William Blake and Christopher Smart, I think, but clearly not in Whitman. Although Walt admired the passionate directness and intensity of Elias Hicks and Rev. Edward Taylor (Melville's Father Mapple), he wanted to imitate their outward illocutionary style and not their

inward convictions. I find nothing in Whitman's life to indicate that he was a true prophet. But there is much, both in the workbooks and in the poetry, to show that he wanted to sound like one.

Three-quarters of the way through his essay, Bauerlein summarizes my position on Speech Acts and Illocution. The summary is accurate, although I don't think I actually said that "What makes Whitman's language so effectively oracular" is "its illocutionary force." Also, as an inveterate anti-royalist, I had a lady senator, not the queen, christening that ship. But he does explain Austin's speech acts, summarizing information I had previously presented on pp. 66–74 of *Language and Style*. He points out (as I did on p. 76) Austin's rejection of illocution in literature, and also we both point out Ohmann's acknowledgment that there cannot be *actual* illocutionary force in literature but only *mimetic*. All this I had agreed with on pp. 76–78. In fact all the references Bauerlein uses I had already quoted (plus three more, including that most important article of Samuel Levin), and I am curious why he didn't say so. By not saying so, he implies that I am not *au courant* on the key scholarship in this major area. Nevertheless, he finally does acknowledge that "with this qualification (illocutionary force as mimetic) speech act theory can be applied to literature and Hollis's implementation of it is justified." Since that is all I claimed in the first place, I've wondered why he is so alarmed. As I wrote in conclusion to my own summary of Austin, Ohmann, and the Speech Act controversy, my "only concern is with the persona's speech acts as a stylistic feature of the poetry" (p. 78).

After agreeing that my use of the speech act theory is justified, Bauerlein then says, "But representing an illocutionary act brings about the mitigation of its original illocutionary force." Yes, of course! How could one not accept the inevitable, almost necessary mitigation? But to *mitigate* is to *lessen*, to *moderate*, to make *milder*—yet never to *destroy* or *wipe out*. I make this point emphatically here, for he continues on his final page to knock out of literature forever even that mimetic illocution he has earlier accepted. He now insists that illocutionary force exists only in a real and actual live situation in which a speaker confronts a qualified listener in a personal encounter: "Without a 'real' natural context . . . illocutionary force, in literature, becomes merely an empty, impotent abstraction." There are, then, no degrees of illocutionary force, no remaining mitigated force; it is 100% or nothing.

The problem as to illocutionary force after the original utterance is as old as the history of our civilization. The original utterance of the prophet is presumably a speech act of the highest sort since the words have the force "as from God." God spoke to Moses and Moses spoke to the Israelites—surely the utterance of the Ten Commandments was the pre-eminent Speech Act. But why, then, did God engrave them on stone? The complicated and endless argument about the efficacy of (and degrees thereof) of speech and/or script has been treated by Plato in *Phaedrus* and by many others all the way up to Derrida, with whom and after whom the argument has been intense.

It's great fun to argue, and Whitman (always hungering for attention of whatever sort) would certainly be delighted to be argued about. But at the pragmatic level on which we all exist, in our literature classes as well as in our daily lives, we acknowledge the mediation and then forget it and go on about our teaching.

Truly, can you imagine a re-orientation of our teaching of Whitman to insist that students understand the "empty, impotent abstraction" of his speech acts? We would take the first of the classes that our syllabus allots to Whitman to explain away for our students the speech acts in the opening lines of "Song of Myself": We would point out that Whitman doesn't celebrate himself because he is dead; we are reading his poem to illustrate how print often fools the everyday reader because of the elevated attention our culture gives to what we call poetry; the one thing we must all be careful not to assume is what he tells us we shall assume, for as the third line demonstrates he is just trying to get our good will by that rhetorical device of asserting our sharing in the created world. After explaining away all present tense, for writing itself is always after the event, we triumphantly point to the questions at ll. 22-24: "Have you reckoned . . .? Have you practiced so long to learn to read? Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?" How empty these lines are, we smile, for we cannot hear him and he couldn't even know we existed. So, we say, we won't stop that day and night with a long dead poet, and you can go back to your dorms, where you surely won't possess the origin of all poems (chuckle, chuckle). So we dismiss the class half an hour early, after wisely cautioning them against any "willing suspension of disbelief" that may be lingering around campus. And at the next class we quietly dismiss from our conscience those who have dropped the course, those bourgeois types who now decide ROTC is a better deal, and those others who have to take another English course, so take Business English instead.

But I have been carried away by my own rhetoric, and apologize. Still, there is a serious omission in Bauerlein's treatment that must be pointed out. We must remember that Austin started the speech act controversy, but he didn't finish it. Since his death the discussion of illocutionary acts has occasioned a bibliography of its own, with hundreds of articles, many books, and a continuing debate among those concerned. It was recognized early on that the rules Austin tentatively asserted as applying only to oral speech could also include many written acts. There is no argument or difference on the literal consequences of putting spoken language in written form. We all agree that the mediation involved inevitably brings about some change. But the milkman accepts the note I leave, just as he would respond if I were at the door, to tell him to deliver only "One quart today." The same principle applies to the Magna Carta at Runnymede, and one didn't have to be present to benefit from it, not did it make any difference whether it was spoken first or not. Austin himself inadvertently includes one such act, "I bequeath my

watch to my brother,” which would normally be in a will or testament, not in speech.

Proposals, promises, bequests, treaties, mortgages, copyrights, leases, games, contracts, expressions of grief, anger, love, joy, remorse, all such communications may share in the illocutionary act if the same conditions are present (the felicity conditions Austin speaks of), except there is a delay until both parties agree, by phone call, letter, witnessed document, and so on. The very vexing problem of “mortmain” (literally “dead hand,” i.e., power beyond the grave) is endlessly argued in the courts, but it has a very real application in and to literature that has not yet been adequately explored—for instance, Whitman’s right to change his poetry once it has been published.

The written illocutionary act is not as dramatic as those Austin mentions, to be sure, but it is undeniably present. Whitman himself was well aware of the concomitant strengths and virtues of speech and script: speech dies even as it is uttered (so, no speech as speech is ever literature unless put in permanent form), and writing cannot but lose the values of voice, rhythm, tonal variations, gesture. I was checking back in some old Whitman notes of mine a few days ago for other purposes (to check the extent to which he knew about Platonic love) and found this note to himself: “In *Phaedrus*, Socrates is presented as making light of written discourse in comparison with the speech of the live and learned speaker.” But then, two entries later, he resolves the problem as far as he is concerned by making up one of those self-reviews of his own work:

Personality in Poetic Expression

“ ? Put in that

No writer has so put personality into poetic expression, not at two or three removes, but direct face to face - the object of the writer seems to be from the first page to the last, to give whoever peruses him, the effects not of literary art but of vivid personal presence, *clasp*, voice, living eyes, clasp of hands.

Unfortunately I didn’t use this example in the book, but I do mention the problem at the bottom of p. 75. However I didn’t expand on it, for I was concerned with the *speech* act. All of Whitman’s speech acts that I was working on were written as if they were parts of an oral act.

But now some questions to Bauerlein concerning his insistence that the rigid conditions he derives from Austin abolish illocutionary acts from literature. Let me start with Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. Did “illocutionary force proceed spontaneously out of [that] particular situation”? I presume so, but what of the father of one of those dead who was so far back he couldn’t hear much of it, so he read it over and over again in the newspaper the next day? Did he find that reading “fictional and groundless”? And if there is no illocutionary force at all in the repetition of that Address each May 30th ever since, why do hundreds come to hear it? And if its illocutionary force

vanishes in print, why does it show up in edition after edition in American Literature anthologies?

Again, Emerson's "Divinity School Address" and "American Scholar" and "Self Reliance" are all famous essays, but only the first was called an Address. Yet that makes little difference in our treatment of them, for they were all first given orally. But if a student reads one of them now, would he be reading "an empty, impotent abstraction"? The "Divinity School Address" was written in late June or early July, 1838, and delivered on the 18th, and printed that autumn. Was there illocutionary force in the manuscript only when it was delivered? Suppose it hadn't been delivered or it was read by someone else because Emerson had a cold? And did that force disappear when it was printed? I think not, but rather the illocutionary force was *mitigated* (say from 100% to 50%) when it went into print. An inevitable price to pay, but well worth it, for it made the remaining illocutionary force permanent. It was that which made all the controversy, for in its permanent form it might now corrupt thousands of believers, not just the few dozen graduating seniors—so, at any rate, Andrews Norton must have thought.

To say that the "illocutionary acts" of Emerson's lectures "lose their meaning in representation" is to mitigate them out of existence. Obviously there is some loss, but it is the kind and degree of loss that should concern us, not whether there was any, for no one questions that. Let me approach this matter another way. I saw and heard Kennedy's inaugural by television. Was I then *not* part of "a specified appropriate audience" before whom the act was completed? If not, why were the television cameras there? Again, one of the assorted unlucky breaks in my career was that I didn't hear Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" at its original presentation. But when I heard about it, I tracked down a record of it, then read it, and later used to bring to class a tape of that portion that was in our anthology. I truly don't know what it would have been like to be at one of those early performances, but I do think I got more out of hearing the record and reading "Howl" than I would have got back at the bar, beered up or drowsy on grass, at an early oral presentation. Sure, I would have liked to have been there as witness to a notorious but great occasion in American cultural history. But, and I ask this seriously, did my "absence" as "a specified, appropriate audience" *forfe*nd "Howl" as illocutionary, especially when I heard it once removed (i.e., by tape)? And here is a final question: would reading the manuscript of "Howl" before the event (as Ferlinghetti must have done) negate its illocutionary force completely any more than reading a Whitman poem that never was delivered?

To conclude with a mild *coup de Grass*: it is clear to me that Whitman wrote some of his early poems (the "platform poems") to give orally as well as to appear in print. In that later article, which Bauerlein knows, I show that the "rhetorical pauses" can have no other meaning except as guides to oral reading. It would seem, then, that the poet wrote to be heard as well as to be read. What I was up to in my book was to categorize what I found as one of

the stylistic features of that early poetry. Since many of them fitted Austin's neat categories, I called them "speech acts" and guessed that they came from Whitman's lost dream of being the prophetic orator of a Jacksonian America he wanted to revive. The article seems to back up the book, and I'm sorry Bauerlein didn't take it into consideration. Yet I am grateful to his article anyway, for he made me re-think that chapter and think through the grades and degrees of mitigation which Whitman's never-uttered speech acts underwent by becoming poetry. And yes, *Grass* would be a text in my class—that is, if I taught any more—and one lecture would still be on speech acts.

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