



## On Whitman, Dickinson, and Readers

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# ON WHITMAN, DICKINSON AND READERS

MILTON HINDUS

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Have you reckon'd a thousand acres much? have  
you reckon'd the earth much?  
Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?  
Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning  
of poems?

Stop this day and night with me and you shall  
possess the origin of all poems,  
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun,  
(there are millions of suns left,)  
You shall no longer take things at second or third  
hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead,  
nor feed on the spectres in books,  
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor  
take things from me,  
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from  
your self.<sup>1</sup>

THIS PASSAGE from *Song of Myself* chides greed and materialism and snobbery. Of these, snobbery is perhaps the worst and most culpable. Yet how could Whitman avoid awareness of the extent to which he himself was dependent upon his readers? Ideally, readers are or should be equal to each other, but are there not some readers who, through long energetic *practice* or some special gift of sensitivity, intelligence and sympathy, are "more equal" than others?

Whitman's friend Felix Adler had once assured him that, when talking of readers, "We must not count; we must weigh."<sup>2</sup> Whitman himself, in his conversations with Traubel, often seems to preen himself on the quality of such readers as John Addington Symonds and Edward Dowden, on the sheer extent of the linguistic capability and erudition which has prepared them to take in his meaning fully. Surely Whitman must have known that the technique of indirection which he commended to poets would always be a stumbling-block to those who, either through hopeless indolence or simplicity, were incapable of grasping or refused to see that verbal power results more often from "circuit" than from naive directness or "innocence." It is not merely irony—though that is the most signal instance—but all literature, even the most "objectivist" literalism which finally eschews and renounces all figure and image, that "says one thing and means another."

"I or you pocketless of a dime may purchase the pick of the earth"<sup>3</sup> says the same thing as "the best things in life are free," but the way of saying is

altogether different, isn't it? And it is the way of saying that holds the secret of what distinguishes literature from popular music, the witty from the witless. "What oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed." "These are really the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands,"<sup>4</sup> Whitman assures us. Maybe. But who has expressed them so before or is likely to again without seeming redundant?

There is evidence that Whitman was troubled by the contradiction implied by his pride in the appeal of his poetry to some "choice," sophisticated and learned readers and his theoretical egalitarianism which consigned all such discriminations to snobbery. His keen awareness of the "origins" and elements of poetry, far from breaking down the walls of separation between the instructed and the uninstructed as he had hoped, proved in practice more difficult for the populace to accept than the facile adornments of educated conventional verse. At first, Whitman was concerned with the competition from this direction alone. (His nearly illiterate mother could say that, in her opinion, if Longfellow's *Hiawatha* was poetry, then Walt's *Leaves of Grass*, published in the same year, 1855, might be also, but the less biased and more suspicious public did not look at it that way.)<sup>5</sup> Later in the century, there were increasing signs, however, that Whitman was faced with competition from another, less expected direction, namely from poets who were writing for an audience of literary intellectuals priding itself upon its erudition, subtlety, and abilities to penetrate the most challenging systems of syntax and decipher the most recondite symbolism. Would not his own more accessible, transparent, "primitive" work, which, closely read, proved often, not so much by intention as through ineptitude, to be as opaque as Mallarmé's, fall between two stools? It would never appeal to the broad, simple and single-minded audiences of the Longfellows, Whittiers and Tennysons, and it would also miss that more demanding, clever and intellectual audience which rose to the challenge of a Browning (who said of his *Sordello* that when he wrote it God and Robert Browning knew what he meant, but now God alone knew) and would soon rise to the challenges of such successors as Pound and Eliot.

In December 1889, according to Traubel, Whitman "alluded to Browning" (recently dead), of whom he said: "He is a man who needs to be studied out, and that I can't do, even if I were inclined to. And yet the best readers seem in our time to take most delight in just such writing." One of the visitors, Clifford, according to Traubel, broke in at this last point to ask: "Why the *best* readers?" And Whitman back-pedaled a little, answering:

Perhaps that is not an admirable—the best—word: I might put it, those who seem the weightiest readers. And I do not know that it is a drawback or a lapse to be as Browning is—I do not know that he ever set up to be anything himself—the world has been left to its own conclusions—and the future may make much of him—much. He is not a man to be read as you go along,

but what of that? Is a strip of sky to be seen or penetrated as you go along, or the river, or a boat, or the men on the street? . . . For what after all do we know of nature—of a tree—of anything? There are a thousand convolutions—a thousand circles—one upon another—on and on—and what we see—what we grasp is about the quarter of one circle. . . .

Speaking of Browning's obscurity, Clifford had asked if Whitman, too, had not been "taxed for meanings," to which he replied: "Oh yes! often! . . . There is something irritating in the question."<sup>6</sup>

Of course, the obscurities of Browning are not the same as those of Whitman, and no doubt Whitman realized it. He knew his own limitations—that he was unable to "study out" the meanings of Browning even if he wanted to and that, in this sense, he was separated from some of the best, weightiest readers "in our time." An audience, looking upon literature less as a passing pleasure or entertainment than as an active challenge to understanding, was something evidently completely new so far as Whitman was concerned, and this audience seemed to him likely to grow in size rather than diminish in the future. In this, he was undoubtedly right, and some of the most difficult poets of the new century would show themselves to be Browning's descendants rather than his own (though they might, like Pound, grudgingly recognize him as their true "pig-headed father").<sup>7</sup> The audience of Browning would become in large part the academic audience of the 20th century, the last audience on a sizable scale for serious poetry (complete with its paraphernalia of classics, linguistics, history, anthropology, semantics, semiotics, structuralism, grammatology, etc.). The modern world was on its way back to Alexandria and Whitman was aware of it and uncomfortable with his knowledge.

Even earlier than Whitman, the unpublished Emily Dickinson had become an unknown member of the audience for the sort of demanding intellectual poetry that was then just beginning (beginning, that is, in the 19th century; it had been an important, if not dominant, trend in the 17th century) but would not come into its own really until the 20th century. She was not only a member of what had not yet been described as an "avant-garde"; she was also, at least some of the time, writing for an audience like herself, an audience still growing and destined to discover her work long after her death. About her attitude to Robert Browning, Jack Capps, in his book on *Emily Dickinson's Reading*, tells us:

In her letters, she mentions Robert Browning almost as frequently as she does his wife, and one would like to think that his effect on Dickinson the poet was the greater of the two. The first indication of her having read Robert Browning occurs in the letter to Higginson that mentions both Keats and the Brownings. His name then disappears from her letters until she reports to the Norcross sisters that she "noticed that Robert Browning had made another poem." She apparently had learned of his recently published *Dramatis Personae* from the following notice that appeared in *The Springfield Daily Republican* (edited by her good friend

and correspondent Samuel Bowles) on September 14, 1864: "There is no denying the genius of Browning. He is a man of vigorous thought in poetic form. But his forms of expression are so angular and obscure that his thoughts are inaccessible to by far the greater part of his perplexed and mystified readers. He does not coin his gold for general circulation . . . but he gives you the quartz of rock, rich in the precious metal. . . . *Dramatis Personae*, the new collection of his poems . . . will be admired understandingly by an appreciative few." Emily Dickinson was one of the appreciative few; when she speaks of Robert Browning, she never suggests that his obscurities have troubled her in any way. In fact, the obscurity probably heightened her reading pleasure, and when she declared, "Tell all the Truth, but tell it slant—," she echoed his explanation that "Art may tell a truth / obliquely." [She might also be said to have echoed Walt Whitman's Preface of 1855 in which he had asserted that "the expression of the American poet is to be new . . . *indirect* and not direct." We do not know if she had read that Preface, but the letter quoted comes years after the one from Higginson to her in which we know that Whitman's name had been mentioned.] The Browning passage is one of several marked by light pencil lines parallel to the outer margins in Sue's copy of *The Ring and the Book*, a copy more than likely shared with Emily.<sup>8</sup>

Walt Whitman could sense the coming of that intellectual audience which was destined to be the other stool (the first was popular acceptance) that he would fall short of in the coming age in which puzzle and problem-solving in literature (Vladimir Nabokov includes his poems and his chess problems between the same covers and thinks the two have much in common) would become for many of "the happy few" a "heightened" reading pleasure and pastime. Whitman was conscious of lacking the requisite equipment, patience, practice, or even desire to become that kind of reader, and he could hardly satisfy such readers. For it is not by chance that a certain kind of reader is drawn to a writer. What is taken out by the reader must first have been put there by the writer. The "deep readers of the world," as Saul Bellow calls them ironically (like that snobbish music-lover in Proust who derives her intellectual authority to reject Chopin from having "gone as far" as the study of Harmony and the Greek alphabet) will hardly be satisfied with a merely "natural" writer like Whitman, who, despite an occasional reference to Hegel, is hardly an intellectual and whose profundities are those of the elementary facts rather than those produced by skillful syntactical artifice.

Not very different from this Whitman is the Emily Dickinson who composed her most lucid *letters to the world*, lyrics characterized by the most transparent clarity of expression and based on the keenest observation, generalization and far-reaching suggestion, e.g.

A charm invests a face  
 Imperfectly beheld—  
 The Lady dare not lift her veil  
 For fear it be dispelled—  
 But peers beyond her mesh—  
 And wishes—and denies  
 Lest Interview—annul a want  
 That Image—satisfies—<sup>9</sup>

But this is not the Emily Dickinson who exercises a fascination for most practitioners of “depth analysis” upon writers incapable of answering back. There is another Dickinson just as there is another Browning than the one who wrote of “An Incident in the French Camp.” The other Browning is the one whose involutions appealed to Ezra Pound and had appealed earlier to Emily Dickinson. The other Dickinson is the one who wrote “Further in Summer than the Birds / Pathetic from the Grass / A minor Nation celebrates / Its unobtrusive Mass . . . / . . . Antiquest felt at Noon / When August burning low / Arise this spectral Canticle, / Repose to typify. . . .”<sup>10</sup> The other Dickinson is also the one who has left behind such puzzling, albeit terribly moving, documents as the third of her so-called Master Letters.

Whitman was no more capable of writing in such an involuted, hermetic, brilliantly allusive and evasive manner than he was capable of writing like Longfellow or Whittier. This may be the source of his difficulties with an academic audience. His true audience, with exceptions (which, closely looked at, may be less exceptional than they seem), is the un-academic and even the anti-academic; that is essentially what William Carlos Williams, Allen Ginsberg, the Beats and their epigones are. It is these who have never been embarrassed by his awkwardness or his lapses, what Paul Elmer More describes as “his imperfections and incompleteness and . . . all his vaunted pedantry of the pavement.”<sup>11</sup> These lapses, if that’s what they are, like his insistence upon his most unappetizing subject-matter and acceptance of social deviance, are to the anti-academic all marks of his true authenticity. Such qualities are the real reasons for their insistence on his centrality as a model for all future American poets.

Emily Dickinson, on the other hand, has become the protagonist, particularly in her most obscure, difficult and challenging intellectual phase, for the most advanced literary academics, self-styled intellectuals, Anglophiles, and, more recently, radical feminists. Yet comprehensively looked at, she is as clearly deserving as Whitman of something more than a cultish or snobbish destiny and following.

Whitman, in particular, as I have said, is conscious of the dependence of writers upon their readers. Speaking to Traubel about his biographer, Richard Maurice Bucke, who had been developing an interest in such writers as Sydney Luska (a pseudonym of Henry Harland in the 1880s) and Rider Haggard, Whitman commented: “Doctor [Bucke] is like the lover—who sees charms in his mistress because he is eligible to see them—not so much *because* they are in her as because they are in him.” To which Traubel adds: “I used to say sometimes, half of Shakespeare’s greatness is in his reader. . . .” Such assertions are of a piece with the statement of Whitman which for a long time served as the motto on the masthead of *Poetry Magazine* (Chicago): “To have great poets, you must have great audiences too.”

Yet Whitman was aware of the pitfalls in such "populism" as well. The passions, preconceptions, enthusiasm and idealism of readers were capable on occasion of making something out of nothing. He himself was not only a voracious reader but, perhaps more important, a re-reader of what he had read long ago. And this, not surprisingly, led him to new perceptions and valuations. James Fenimore Cooper, whom Whitman liked more and more as he reread him, he told Traubel, is "something in his ways like [Sir Walter] Scott, though with less sparkle than Scott but having in common with Scott a sort of garrulity. Not that it is really garrulity in an offensive sense. I find as I grow older, I read and read the novels again, then turn to the long labored prefaces and read every word again."<sup>12</sup> Nothing is more characteristic of his conversations with Traubel than this sort of careful assessment and weighing of material that he has read before.

Whitman was aware of "the amplitude of time," as he calls it in *Song of Myself*, and relied on it confidently to do the kind of justice to what he himself had written that he was always trying to do to other writers. When Traubel told him of an article in *Harper's Weekly* which had asserted that Browning "alone in his generation has contested the palm with Tennyson," Whitman said: "I suppose that Time must settle all this about Browning—Time, which may be said to settle all things. Browning may be the man for 200 years hence; that remains to be developed. I do not think that all this investigation of our time goes for nothing." To Traubel's interjection that "contemporary fame is chance," Whitman assented: "Yes, nothing more so," and added, still thinking of Browning, that the recently dead poet "seemed to have a quality which defied his envious contemporaries, too—and this it might be which by and bye would most largely persevere."<sup>13</sup>

As Whitman himself was slowly failing in 1890, four years after Emily Dickinson had died in Amherst, her name and work for the first time surfaced in the literary world (unfortunately for her under the aegis of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, whom Whitman definitely nailed in his conversations with Traubel as "a lady's man,"<sup>14</sup> and whose patronage also aroused the suspicions of Alice James in London even though she could see nothing wrong with the work of Emily herself<sup>15</sup>). Despite the keen alertness of the Whitman circle in Camden to significant literary developments, her name is nowhere mentioned in the six volumes of Traubel thus far published. Perhaps it will appear in those which have still to appear, which will take us up to Whitman's death in 1892. Here, if Whitman or Traubel could but know it, was the only competitor who might (long after the most famous of contemporary poets dwindled or disappeared) contest the field with him. In the American race for immortality, both have proved the most tireless of long-distance runners, undiminished and unfatigued by time. We become increasingly aware that, different as they are in so many ways, in this respect at least, Whitman and

Dickinson, for good reason no doubt, had more in common than either would ever know. Often enough, they have been ratified by the same generous and reflective readers, to whose number they themselves belonged.

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## NOTES

- 1 *Leaves of Grass*, Comprehensive Reader's Edition, ed. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 30.
- 2 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, IV (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953), 31.
- 3 *Leaves*, p. 86.
- 4 *Leaves*, p. 45.
- 5 See Justin Kaplan, *Walt Whitman: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), p. 11.
- 6 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, VI (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), pp. 195–196.
- 7 Ezra Pound, "A Pact," *Personae* (New York: New Directions, 1971), p. 89.
- 8 Jack Capps, *Emily Dickinson's Reading* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), pp. 87–88.
- 9 *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), p. 201.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 485–486.
- 11 Paul Elmer More, *Shelburne Essays on American Literature*, edited by Daniel Aaron (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), p. 253.
- 12 Traubel, VI, 35.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 204.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 15 *Alice James, Her Brothers, Her Journal*, ed. Anna Robeson Burr (Boston: Longwood, 1977), pp. 248–249. Her entry for January 6, 1892, reads in part: "It is reassuring to hear the English pronouncement that Emily Dickinson is fifth-rate—they have such a capacity for missing quality; the robust evades them equally with the subtle. Her being sicklied o'er with T. W. Higginson makes one quake lest there be some latent flaw that escapes one's vision, but what tomes of philosophy *resume* the cheap farce, or express the highest point of view of the aspiring soul more completely than the following:  
'How dreary to be somebody;  
How public like a frog,  
To tell your name the livelong day  
To an admiring bog!'"