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A Backward Glance

MY DISCOVERY AND EXPLORATION
OF THE WHITMAN CONTINENT
(1941-1991)

ROGER ASSELINEAU

“DISCOVERY”! HOW CAN A FRENCHMAN boast of discovering Whitman when Whitman’s biography by Léon Bazalgette appeared as early as 1908, followed the next year by Bazalgette’s complete translation of *Leaves of Grass* and ten years later by the poet’s *Oeuvres choisies* translated by Jules Laforgue, Louis Fabulet, Francis Vielé-Griffin and no less a writer than André Gide? But all this was before my time, in another generation, and every generation has to discover the world anew. Besides, Christopher Columbus is credited with the discovery of America, though he was not the first one to reach its shores.

It was not as easy as one might think for a young Frenchman to discover Whitman in France in the late 1930s. In the course of my secondary studies in Latin, Greek and philosophy (plus English, of course), the name of Whitman was never mentioned once, and neither was that of Gide, for in those days the only good writer was a dead writer and French literature stopped with the last year of the nineteenth century. After my “baccalauréat,” however, I decided to take a degree in English and become a teacher of English. I thought classical studies were too bookish and the study of English would give me a chance to meet people and travel abroad. So I took a degree in English at the Sorbonne (“licence ès lettres”) and studied English literature from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf, but not to Thomas Wolfe, for no American author was ever mentioned. The curriculum was exclusively English. There were a few courses in American literature, but they were optional and did not count for a degree. So very few students took them, and there were hardly any students of English among them. I did take them, however, during my MA year, for the writing of my thesis on “The

Editor’s Note:

This is the second in a series of essays written by some of the most eminent senior Whitman scholars of our time. These essays, both autobiographical and critical in nature, explore the ways that Whitman entered the lives of these scholars and trace the paths of decades of encounters with his work.

Pantheistic Elements in Wordsworth's Poetry" left me some leisure. There were only three books on the syllabus: *Tom Sawyer* (not *Huckleberry Finn*, of course, for fear Huck's dialect should corrupt our English), Edwin Arlington Robinson's *Cavender's House* (which I thought rather tedious), and Edith Wharton's *Hudson River Bracketed* (because she lived in France, I suppose). It was rather poor fare and I must confess that, except for Mark Twain, I was not too much impressed by this first contact with American literature.

I took my "agrégation" in English in 1938, after spending a year in England where I taught French in a small public school (Canford School, near Wimborne, in Dorset) to improve my spoken English. Out of the twelve authors on the syllabus, there was not a single American writer, unless T.S. Eliot is counted as one, but *Murder in the Cathedral*, which was on the syllabus, can hardly be considered a specifically American play.

After I obtained my "agrégation," I was appointed to the lycée in Havre and taught (British) English there for a year. By that time, the sky was beginning to darken in Europe, but, after Munich, we had a year's respite. At Havre, I could not help thinking of America. I lived in an apartment which looked out on the entrance to the harbor and from my window I could see the transatlantic liners sail in and out, and I dreamed of traveling on one of them some day. I was determined sooner or later to go to America. In the meantime, I thoroughly studied *The American Language* by H.L. Mencken to prepare myself for the linguistic discovery of the United States.

But this could not take place in the immediate future. War with Germany broke out in the fall of 1939. I was drafted and spent one year in the French Army and narrowly escaped being taken prisoner. During the German occupation, the atmosphere was stifling. France had become a huge prison-camp and traveling was impossible. This exacerbated my *Wanderlust*, which I had not yet been able to satisfy. So I decided that, as soon as the war was over, I would travel at last to my heart's content. I needed a good reason for it. So I made up my mind to work for a doctorate in American literature. A rather rash decision, since I knew practically nothing about it.

However, I did not want my doctoral dissertation to be an imposition, a purely academic exercise on some dull topic leading to dryasdust scholarship. I loved poetry, the poetry of Wordsworth in particular. I tried therefore to find an American poet who would somehow remind me of him and would have the same mystical leanings. The solution to my problem was Walt Whitman. I discovered him by chance while skimming through a textbook for secondary schools entitled *The Spirit of the Age*, edited by Germain d'Hangest, Sr. I don't have it anymore and don't remember what poems were quoted, but I was immediately

struck by their extraordinary appearance. The poems instead of being printed from left to right, as is the rule, were printed from the bottom to the top of the page, so that the lines were vertical instead of horizontal and thus sprawled on each page as comfortably as in the 1855 quarto edition of *Leaves of Grass* (which, of course, I did not know yet). It was an arresting sight and I was not disappointed when I read them. They called up immense open spaces and gave an impression of strength and irrepressible dynamism. They were only samples, but I was conquered. The information about Whitman which I found in *A History of English Literature* by Arthur Compton-Rickett (which, despite its title, treated of American literature), confirmed my impression. Without taking the trouble to look further into the matter, I called on Professor Louis Cazamian, whom I knew and admired, and told him of my desire to write a dissertation on Whitman. My innocence was such that I did not even know that a fellow countryman, Jean Catel, had already written two dissertations on Whitman. The major one was entitled: *Walt Whitman: la naissance du poète* (1929) and the minor one was more technical and bore on *Rythme et langage dans la 1ère édition des "Leaves of Grass," 1855* (1930). Now, in those days, when doctoral candidates were few and there remained numerous authors to study, there was not supposed to be more than one dissertation per author. Fortunately, Louis Cazamian thought that Catel's dissertations did not block the way (since they did not cover the whole field), and he welcomed with enthusiasm my project of writing on the entire life and career of Whitman. I then had to obtain the approval of Professor Charles Cestre, who was the professor of American literature at the Sorbonne. I was unknown to him, but, as he was about to retire and Louis Cazamian recommended me, he accepted my project—with resignation.

By then (1942), I had a topic, but still no copy of *Leaves of Grass* on which to work. Luckily, the United States had not entered the war yet and "Shakespeare and Company" was still open. I thus could buy the last copy that Sylvia Beach had in stock, without suspecting that she owned some Whitman manuscripts and had known Catel and published in *Le Navire d'Argent* the text of *The Eighteenth Presidency*, which Amy Lowell had helped him to find in a Boston bookshop.

Now at last I was the proud owner of a copy of *Leaves of Grass*, but it was a very imperfect copy. It was the old Everyman's Library Edition of *Leaves of Grass — Part I and Democratic Vistas*, first published in 1912. It stopped with "By Blue Ontario's Shore" and "Reversals," and, to make up for what was missing, it offered the complete text of *Democratic Vistas*. The editor was Horace Traubel, who gave a very partial image of Whitman and saw in him, above all, a prophet of Democracy and a radical. I was thus very inadequately equipped, but, the circumstances being what they were, I considered myself very

fortunate and, whenever I had some spare time, during the long summer vacations in particular, I read and re-read "Part I" of *Leaves of Grass* and tried to extract from the poems all that they contained implicitly as well as explicitly. I squeezed them to the last drop and took hundreds of pages of notes.

I taught in lycées in Beauvais and Paris after I was evacuated from Havre on account of the almost daily British air-raids. But I had other responsibilities, too, for, with a group of friends and colleagues, I helped Allied airmen, who had parachuted over France when their planes were brought down, to hide and afterwards escape and return to England by way of the Pyrenees at first and of Brittany later. I thus became acquainted with a varied assortment of Americans: Wasps from New England and New York, Poles from the Middle-West, Irishmen, Southerners, etc. It was very much like reading one of Whitman's catalogues, but it was more dangerous, and I was eventually arrested by the German police in February 1944 and tried by a court-martial of the German Air-Force, which condemned me to death. This could very well have been the end of my (still-born) dissertation. But the sentence was not carried out. I stayed in jail at Fresnes, near Paris, until August 1944, when I was liberated by my jailers during the truce negotiated by the French Resistance Forces, one week before the arrival of the Allied Forces.

I was saved, but my dissertation had been delayed by several months, for I could neither read nor write while I was in jail. Actually, the project remained practically at a standstill until the end of the war in Europe. But when the war stopped, I obtained an American Field Service Fellowship and left for the U.S. as soon as I possibly could, on a Liberty ship carrying American troops back home. I landed in Boston. My destination was Harvard. It was like being in Paradise after what I had gone through. The nightmare was over. I was at last in a position to work seriously and steadily and to explore the Whitman continent I had almost accidentally discovered several years before.

Harvard was an ideal place for such an undertaking. The English Department was doing pioneering work in the field of American studies and included such distinguished Americanists as Kenneth Murdock, Perry Miller (just back from the wars and at the top of his form), Howard Mumford Jones and, above all, F.O. Matthiessen, whose *American Renaissance* had appeared only a few years before in 1941. The first two were supposed to be my supervisors, but actually they left me full liberty to work as I chose, and I spent all my time in Widener Library. I had stack privileges and a stall in the stacks (an unheard-of privilege in France), next to the American literature shelves. I had, at my elbow so to speak, all the documents I needed. In those pre-Xerox days, I frantically copied pages and pages of books and articles, which I thought

I might need in France later. It was not mere mechanical compilation, however, for I had already prepared a detailed plan of my dissertation. I had *a priori* divided my subject into chapters and sub-chapters, and I had a folder full of blank sheets of paper at the top of which I had written all my chapter and sub-chapter headings. In proportion as I collected materials, I sorted them out and assigned places to them in my plan. My blank pages were thus gradually filled and I sometimes had to add new ones, for I constantly found new matter and new ideas. It was a kind of organic growth within each chapter; it was not anarchic and random, but predetermined and regulated.

That was a very exciting time and full of unexpected occurrences. For one thing, I found in Houghton Library a rich repository of original documents on Whitman, and then I made the acquaintance of Clifton J. Furness, who had published some of them in his *Walt Whitman Workshop* (1928). By a curious coincidence, he lived only two or three blocks from Perkins Hall where I had been given a room. I met him several times and we had some interesting conversations about our common hero whose biography he was trying to write. Unfortunately he died only a few months after our first encounter.

By another coincidence, it was at that time (the beginning of 1946) that Gay W. Allen's *Walt Whitman Handbook* appeared. It was the best available overall study, the best guide-book to the territory I was exploring. I immediately bought it, devoured it and digested it, and shortly afterwards made the acquaintance of its author. He then lived close to New York, in Leonia, N.J., and it happened that I spent all my vacations in Teaneck about one mile from his house. I called him up. He invited me to visit him. He and his wife, Eve, received me very warmly and we have been close friends ever since.

Exploring the Whitman continent takes time. After one year at Harvard there still remained *terrae incognitae* which I had to visit before returning to France, if I wanted my documentation to be complete. So I decided to stay another year in America, but, this time, I was an instructor in French in the Romance Language Department at Harvard and I had much less time to devote to my research. I was able, however, to visit Duke University during the summer vacation and to work for three weeks in the Trent Collection, then presided over by Ellen Frances Frey, who had compiled an admirable catalogue of it, published the year before in 1945. During the academic year, I also managed to visit the Whitman Collection of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. There Sculley Bradley took me to Timber Creek and, of course, I went on a pilgrimage to Mickle Street in Camden and to Whitman's tomb in Harleigh Cemetery. But my most thrilling experience and the climax of all my explorations occurred while I was working in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, when I suddenly

realized that I had found what I thought was the definitive and incontrovertible proof of Whitman's (at least potential) homosexuality. When I examined a scrap of paper belonging to Manuscript Notebook 9 dating back to 1868-1870 I noticed that in the sentence "*But pursue her no more*", "her" had been erased and above the letter "e" the dot of an "i" was very clearly visible. It was this detail which attracted my attention first, and, looking more closely, I could very clearly read "him" under "her", which was added later to camouflage the masculine pronoun—a correction which Emory Holloway failed to indicate (and perhaps to notice) when he published this document in *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, vol. II, p. 95,—though he noted other substitutions. This discovery, to my mind, confirmed and justified a homosexual interpretation of "Calamus" and other poems and shed a new light on certain dubious aspects of Whitman's life. Though nearly all critics of Whitman (and more particularly Emory Holloway) had fought shy of this issue until then and done their best to hush it up, I saw no reason for doing so. I knew *Corydon*, Gide's apology for homosexuality, and did not regard this sexual preference as a taint liable to detract from the value of Whitman's poetry. So I was delighted with my discovery and did not hesitate to put at the head of my chapter on his sex life the unambiguous epigraph: "The Love that dare not speak its name," which I borrowed from Lord Alfred Douglas. As early as 1949, interpreting three unpublished letters addressed to Whitman (two of which had been given to me by Holloway), I showed that, when boasting of having a French mistress in Washington, he was merely trying to hide his predilection (*Modern Language Quarterly*, March 1949, pp. 91-95). Holloway rather resented this use of his letters.

I completed my research by visiting the Beinecke Library of Yale University, the Saunders Collection of Brown University and the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library. So, when I returned to France in September 1947, I had all the materials I needed to write my dissertation. I once more taught in a Parisian lycée at first, but, as the Sorbonne was short of Americanists (there was just Professor Maurice Le Breton, who had succeeded Professor Cestre) I was appointed in 1949 "assistant," i.e., instructor in English. It was a promotion, but no matter for rejoicing, for it was rather a curse in disguise. I was submerged with work and, contrary to what I expected, I had no time to write. So I applied for and obtained a Smith-Mundt grant and spent the year 1950-1951 in the United States, at Harvard once more. This time I was completely free and I finished the first draft of my dissertation by the summer of 1951 as well as the research I had to do for my minor dissertation on "The Literary Reputation of Mark Twain after His Death."

When I returned to France, I was immediately appointed assistant professor in American literature at the University of Clermont-Ferrand. Despite this handicap, I succeeded in having my dissertation typed and approved by Professor Le Breton (who was my supervisor by now) and in completing my minor dissertation by the end of 1952; in January 1953, I defended both dissertations at the Sorbonne. Thus things went quickly at the end. Thanks to a generous grant from the Ministry of Education, the record of my long exploration of the Whitman continent was published in 1954 under the title of *L'Evolution de Walt Whitman*. It was a fat volume of 569 pages.

Despite its bulk and daunting appearance, it was well received and obtained good reviews, notably in the *Figaro Littéraire* by Jean Guéhenno. It had the honor of the front page and it caused a minor Whitman revival in France. It was even reviewed in an obscure anarchist sheet called *L'Unique* by one Louis Armand. But in the United States, it caused little stir, though there were two long and enthusiastic reviews by Sculley Bradley. French having ceased to be a universal language, American Americanists could not be expected to read from cover to cover a French book of over five hundred pages. In its original language, the impact of my book in the United States was bound to be limited. But Kenneth Murdock and other friends at Harvard convinced the Harvard University Press that they must publish a translation of it, and I agreed to translate it. I did it with the cooperation of American colleagues who happened to be teaching in my university (I was by then professor of American literature at the University of Lyon): Richard P. Adams and Burton L. Cooper. It appeared in two volumes: the first in 1960 as *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, with a subtitle, *The Creation of a Personality*, and the second in 1962, subtitled *The Creation of a Book*.

In this form and with the generous support of Gay W. Allen whose *Solitary Singer* had appeared in 1955, my *Evolution* became one of the standard books on Whitman. I am not blind, however, to its limitations. As Seymour Betsky pointed out in *English Studies* ("Whose Walt Whitman? French Scholar and American Critics," 1966), my method tends to overintellectualize Whitman's poetry and to emphasize his ideas to the detriment of what took place in the inmost recesses of his soul. If I were to write such a book now, I would proceed differently. Charles Cestre made much the same point when he accused me of ignoring Whitman's lyricism (about which he had himself written an article). But no book of criticism can be all-inclusive. If I had focused my study on Whitman's lyricism and on the dark forces that impelled him, I would have neglected other aspects of his works which, to my mind, were well worth examining.

During the years between the publication of *L'Evolution de Walt Whitman* and its translation, I was not idle or unfaithful to Whitman.

Because of the revival of interest in his poetry, a French publisher asked me to translate a selection from *Leaves of Grass*, though three translations were already available; but Léon Bazalgette's was awkward, that of Gide and his group was too fragmentary, and that of Pierre Messiaen too grossly incorrect at times. I accepted his invitation with enthusiasm and thought I could do the job easily since I knew Whitman from A to Z. Actually it was a very difficult task, for the translator discovers unsuspected depths and mysteries when he tries to replace English words with French ones, but I found that the result was quite rewarding. The intensity of Whitman's poetry is such that the reader can feel its radiations through the leaden screen of the translation. (It gives the lie to Robert Frost, who claimed that the poetry of a poem is precisely what you lose when you translate it.) This is at least how I felt and my translation, published by "Les Belles Lettres" in 1956, was regarded by such poets as Alain Bosquet as worthy of the original. It was twice reprinted in the form of a bilingual edition (in 1972 and 1989), preceded by a critical introduction, and it has been quite popular with students ever since.

Students of English! They are probably Whitman's only public in France nowadays, for the French, as a rule, read very little poetry, as publishers and poets know from bitter experience. But, in general, French students react very strongly, as I did myself when I discovered him. Readers accustomed to French (and classical Latin and Greek) poetry receive quite a shock when they come into contact with *Leaves of Grass* for the first time. Whitman's poetry is "indirect," as he said, only insofar as it suggests the unsayable; otherwise it is so bare, so devoid of superadded ornaments, so charged with electricity, so directly emotional and passionate that the reader cannot fail to respond with the same intensity. The Italian essayist, Giovanni Papini, expressed this admirably in a sentence which I never tire of quoting: "I, a Tuscan, an Italian, a Latin have not felt what poetry really means through Vergil or Dante, still less through Petrarch and Tasso [. . .], but through the childish enumerations and impassioned invocations of the kindly harvester of *Leaves of Grass*" (*Ritratti Stranieri*, Florence, 1932).

And that is why, for my part, I have never tired of lecturing or writing on Whitman. Though I have written on other authors, I have always remained faithful to him and never stopped writing articles about him, about his relationship to Wordsworth for instance, and the role played by water imagery in his poetry (this was based on Gaston Bachelard's theories about what he called "material imagination," or the impact of the four elements on a poet's imagination; it was an attempt I made to apply a new method to the study of Whitman), etc. Whitman thus has pride of place in the collection of essays I published in 1980 under the title of *The Transcendentalist Constant in American Literature*.

I must confess, however, that, though my interest in Whitman's poetry has never ceased or even declined, I tend more and more to neglect or ignore his democratic message. I prefer the transcendentalist poet who tirelessly tried to find an answer to the child's unanswerable question: "What is the grass?" (not "What is capitalism?"). I do not think this is a purely personal reaction. It seems to me that, at least in France, the excesses of Democracy and the corruption of politicians have alienated people from politics. Besides, insistence on equality has led to encroachments on liberty, and Whitman did not realize that there was an antinomy between them. His strident apology for equality therefore sounds hollow. But his attempts to found a personal religion, the metaphysical contents of his poetry, have lost none of their appeal, precisely because they are less self-assured and more discreet than his political programme. His *Leaves of Grass*, in this respect, are still as green as ever.¹

NOTES

1 If I may add a postscript to this story, let me express my gratitude to my American colleagues who have never resented my intrusion on what they could have considered part and parcel of their national territory. They have, on the contrary, very generously welcomed me and treated me as one of them. Thus, when the New York University Press began the publication of the *Collected Writings of Walt Whitman*, I was included in the advisory editorial board and, more recently, I was invited to join the editorial board of this review. When James Woodress prepared the updated edition of *Eight American Authors*, he entrusted me with the revision of the chapter on Whitman and I must also recall that Charles Feinberg extended his generosity to me and let me work freely on his invaluable collection of manuscripts before he gave it to the Library of Congress. He let me edit in particular Whitman's notes on Taine's *History of English Literature*, just as the Huntington Library gave me permission to publish some of Whitman's unpublished poems.