



Whitman Then and Now: A Reminiscence

James E. Miller Jr.

ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)

ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

Copyright © 1990 James E Miller

Recommended Citation

Miller, James E. Jr. "Whitman Then and Now: A Reminiscence." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 8 (Fall 1990), 92-101. <https://doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.1283>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

A Backward Glance

WHITMAN THEN AND NOW: A REMINISCENCE An Essay Written Not Out of Research but Out of Memory and Conviction

JAMES E. MILLER, JR.

IN LOOKING BACK OVER THE PAST SEVEN DECADES, my tenure to date on earth, I search for the origins of my involvement with Walt Whitman. It could not have been during my high school days in the Thirties. My high school class, in a school located in the oil fields outside Oklahoma City, recently celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of its graduation, and since I had been the senior class president, I was asked to deliver a speech. I agreed on condition that I would be able to repeat the valedictorian address I had delivered at the ceremonies in 1938. I was shocked, maybe even embarrassed, when I unpacked it from a box where my mother had kept it safe for many years and found that the two poets I quoted were William Cullen Bryant (“So live that when thy summons comes to join / The innumerable caravan, which moves / To that mysterious realm,” etc.) and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (“A boy’s will is the wind’s will, / And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts”). I changed not a word and read the four pages at the reunion from a xerox copy of the original.

Why had I not quoted Whitman? I have to conclude that Whitman was not a significant presence in the high school American literature anthology from which I learned about Bryant and Longfellow. My first encounter with Whitman must have been in the Jones and Leisy anthology, *Major American Writers*, used in the survey course I took at the

Editors’s Note:

WWQR is pleased to begin 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, will explore the ways that Whitman entered the lives of these scholars and will trace the paths of decades of encounters with his work. We are pleased to initiate this series with an essay by James E. Miller, Jr., the Helen A. Regenstein Professor of English at the University of Chicago, and the author and editor of numerous works on Whitman and other American authors. Forthcoming contributors to this series will include Gay Wilson Allen and Roger Asselineau.

University of Oklahoma—was it 1939 or 1940? Among the Whitman poems included was a mutilated version of “Song of Myself.” I remember my interest in the poem was such that I sought out the whole poem and marvelled at how the editors had deleted some of the most vital passages. The opening section was there, but dropped were the sections immediately following, through the famous Section 5, in which Whitman’s soul makes what seems like physical love with his body and launches the transfiguring experiences of the poem.

Also missing from this version were Sections 22 through 29, the most exquisitely sensual of “Song of Myself,” including the highly charged and ecstatic lines in Sections 28-29 devoted to touch: “Is this then a touch? quivering me to a new identity, / Flames and ether making a rush for my veins, / Treacherous tip of me reaching and crowding to help them” (CPSP, 45).¹ Jones and Leisy had interpolated a summary of missing sections, saying: “Sections 27-29 interpret the union of the poet with people and things under various physical symbols.”² Even I, a green undergraduate from the Oklahoma prairies, knew that this summary was an evasion. I could not say exactly what was going on in those deleted sections, and I am not sure that I can do so now, but I knew that the summary was a slick cover-up.

I was unable to follow up my detective work on the Jones and Leisy version of “Song of Myself” because my plans to go to graduate school were changed by World War II, which had begun by the time of my graduation in 1942. But I had not forgotten the experience when, after four years in the army, I finally did enroll at the University of Chicago for my first graduate English courses in the summer of 1946, and found myself in two classes: one devoted to Alexander Pope, the other to Walt Whitman. The latter was taught by Napier Wilt, who had a hard time finding an available text to use in the course. He finally ordered a small hard-cover 1945 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, designed, one Bernard Smith said in a Preface, as “a reader’s—rather than a student’s—edition.”³ Its pages are covered with my pencilled notes. Next to Section 5 of “Song of Myself,” I had written “mystic recognition/growth through comtemplation/ *imagery is sexual*.”⁴ I still have my well-thumbed copy of the first edition of Gay Wilson Allen’s *Walt Whitman Handbook*,⁵ published the same year (1946) I entered graduate school.

The Whitman course turned me into something of a Whitmaniac, and when I went to teach at the University of Nebraska in the early 1950s and was asked to teach a graduate seminar, I took out my graduate school notes and began a Whitman seminar of my own. Soon I was scribbling down ideas and before long published my first two essays on Whitman in *PMLA*: the first, “‘Song of Myself’ as Inverted Mysti-

cal Experience," in 1955; and the second, "Whitman's 'Calamus': The Leaf and the Root," in 1957. They became part of my *Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass*⁶ published in 1957.

A colleague at Nebraska, Bernice Slotte, joined me in writing an essay on Whitman and Dylan Thomas; we adapted a line from Ezra Pound's "A Pact" for the working title: "Whitman and Thomas: One Sap and One Root." We abandoned this title when an irreverent colleague asked us which one was the sap. The essay appeared in 1959 as "Of Monkeys, Nudes, and the Good Gray Poet: Dylan Thomas and Walt Whitman."⁷ By this time, Karl Shapiro was teaching at Nebraska, and on hearing Bernice and me discuss the possibility of using our essay as the nucleus for a book, Karl enthusiastically joined the enterprise. The three of us published *Start with the Sun: Studies in Cosmic Poetry*⁸ in 1960; later the subtitle was changed to *Studies in the Whitman Tradition*. The book—a wild, upstart work—linked Whitman with D. H. Lawrence, Hart Crane, Dylan Thomas and various other contemporary writers. It was meant to arouse attention and it did, not all of it favorable.

As a result of all this publication, I was asked by Houghton Mifflin to edit the *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose by Walt Whitman*, published in the Riverside series in 1959; and I was also invited by Twayne publishers, which was initiating its United States Authors Series, to write the Whitman book,⁹ which appeared in 1962 (revised and reissued just this year). The editor at Houghton Mifflin encouraged me to deal directly with Whitman's sexuality in my introduction. In attempting to do so, I used a word not found in any dictionary—"omnisexual"¹⁰—a term that has gained some currency in Whitman criticism. Had I known at the time Norman O. Brown's *Life Against Death*, I might have used his borrowing from Freud, "polymorphous perversity,"¹¹ which gets at some of the meaning gathered into my word. In retrospect, I'm glad I didn't—because of the negative value-judgment implicit in "perversity." I thought my neologism so useful in coming to terms with a subject charged with turbulent, conflicting emotions that I later wrote a piece focusing on it: "Walt Whitman's Omnisexual Vision," published in *The Chief Glory of Every People*, edited by Mathew J. Bruccoli in 1973.¹²

During this period my enthusiasm for Whitman was naturally at its height, but as I came to sense or know the hostility to Whitman in many poets and critics, I sometimes had self-doubts. Had I found myself beguiled by a bad writer who mistook his undisciplined prose for lines of poetry? Although Whitman attracted moderate attention, academic and otherwise, it was clear that he was found wanting by the ruling sensibilities of the age. No one would question that the age's ultimate

ruling sensibility was T. S. Eliot. Eliot's put-down of Whitman was not a frontal assault, but a few words and phrases dropped here and there in the large body of his criticism.

In a little essay entitled "Whitman and Tennyson," published in 1926, Eliot casually linked the American poet with the British poet who, largely because of Eliot's own redefinition of the English poetic tradition, was then at the nadir of his reputation. Eliot wrote: "Whitman had the ordinary desires of the flesh; for him there was no chasm between the real and the ideal, such as opened before the horrified eyes of Baudelaire. But this, and the 'frankness' about sex for which he is extolled or mildly reproved, did not spring from any particular honesty or clearness of vision. . . . There is, fundamentally, no difference between the Whitman frankness and the Tennyson delicacy."¹³ In his 1928 Introduction to *Ezra Pound: Selected Poems*, Eliot remarked that, in order to be able to read Whitman at all, he "had to conquer an aversion to his form, as well as to much of his matter." In denying an influence of Whitman on Pound, Eliot claimed that Pound's versification was "a *logical* development of the verse of his English predecessors," while Whitman's originality was "spurious in so far as Whitman wrote in a way that asserted that his prose was a new form of verse." Eliot added in an aside: "And I am ignoring in this connexion the large part of clap-trap in Whitman's content."¹⁴

It is difficult to describe to someone who did not live through the period the intellectual domination of it by T. S. Eliot, whose every casual critical remark was elevated into received critical dogma, and whose own poetry established the pattern which all poetry was to follow and inspired the rules of the New Criticism by which all poetry was to be tested. The most influential poetry textbook of all time must be *Understanding Poetry*, edited by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, and first published in 1938. That edition contained one Whitman poem, quite uncharacteristic in form, "Pioneers! O Pioneers!," followed by a brief "exercise" instructing the student: "Define the tone of this poem in relation to metrical and other technical factors."¹⁵

In case you begin to think that I am (or was) suffering from some quaint form of academic paranoia, I must quote from a volume edited by Lewis Leary in 1965, *The Teacher and American Literature*, and in particular an essay by Edmund Reiss entitled "Recent Scholarship on Whitman and Dickinson." Reiss wrote: "We are still faced with the disconcerting fact that neither Whitman nor Dickinson is accepted as a 'really' great poet. They are both recognized as important historically, but neither seems to have written the kind of poetry that repays formal analysis, or at least the kind of formal analysis by many of the old New Critics, whose dicta still unofficially represent the official word in many academic circles today."¹⁶ Reiss of course welcomed the work on Whit-

man out of Nebraska, as well as that from other sources (including Allen's biography *The Solitary Singer* in 1955 and Richard Chase's critical book *Walt Whitman Reconsidered* that same year), as work that might help to bring about a turnaround in the reputations of Whitman and Dickinson.

There were, of course, some noteworthy non-conforming poets of the time who pried open the sacred canon established by Eliot to include Whitman. Karl Shapiro is an excellent example. He not only contributed "The First White Aboriginal" and other Whitman pieces to *Start with the Sun*,¹⁷ but he had the audacity to raise questions about Eliot himself and his cult in "T. S. Eliot: The Death of Literary Judgment,"¹⁸ which appeared in the *Saturday Review* in 1960. Even earlier, Shapiro's fellow war-poet, Randall Jarrell, published an astonishing essay on Whitman, first in *Kenyon Review* in 1952 as "Walt Whitman: He Had His Nerve," and later collected in Jarrell's *Poetry and the Age* (1953) as "Some Lines from Whitman." Jarrell clearly saw his critical job as a rescue operation in the face of critics who had condemned without looking: "To show Whitman for what he is," Jarrell said, "one does not need to praise or explain or argue, one needs simply to quote." And Jarrell's essay follows the strategy of quoting one dazzling passage from *Leaves of Grass* after another, followed by such exclamations as: "One hardly knows what to point at—everything works." I remember still the liberating excitement I felt when I first read this essay. I especially admired Jarrell's tone in dealing with Whitman's condescending critics. He wrote, in a passage I have quoted many times to my classes: "I have said so little about Whitman's faults because they are so plain: baby critics who have barely learned to complain of the lack of ambiguity in *Peter Rabbit* can tell you all that is wrong with *Leaves of Grass*."¹⁹

T. S. Eliot passed from the scene in 1965. No one can say for sure when the New Criticism passed on, but it certainly began assuming a defensive posture in the Sixties and Seventies as it seemed headed for cover. Allen Ginsberg and the beat generation, taking over Whitman's "open road," surged to the fore in the Fifties. And poets like Robert Lowell and John Berryman began remaking themselves, reaching inward for the personal dimension they heretofore had programmatically excluded from their poems, and reaching outward to audiences they had previously neglected or ignored. New poets like Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Adrienne Rich brought new sources of poetic energy to the literary scene. Poets like Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks, together with the long ethnic tradition they represented, achieved recognition too long deferred. As Hughes wrote in the first line of a 1925 poem: "I, too, sing America."²⁰ The multiplicity and diversity of today's poetic voices appear to be a fulfillment of Whitman's prophecy:

“Poets to come! orators, singers, musicians to come! . . . / Arouse! for you must justify me. / I myself but write one or two indicative words for the future, / I but advance a moment only to wheel and hurry back in the darkness. . . . / Expecting the main things from you” (CPSP, 13).

Whatever the reasons and wherever their roots in literary history, the Eighties witnessed a revolution—a renaissance—in Whitman’s reputation. If there is something that might be called post-modernist criticism, it is surely as multiple and diverse as the poetic voices now heard on the literary scene. At one extreme there are critics dedicated to the belief that language, by its very nature unable to connect, can only hold up mirrors to itself, not to life or experience. At the same time, there are critics who believe that the language of literature not only connects and means, but can save lives—of writers as well as readers (here I appropriate the language of Alice Walker in “Saving the Life that Is Your Own”²¹). It is the critics closer to the latter view that have, I believe, been most successful in restoring Whitman to his proper place in the tradition.

I cannot provide here a complete bibliography of Whitman books and essays for the 1980s—it would be much too long.²² But I’ll cite two examples suggestive of wide-ranging, serious, and intense critical interest in Whitman today. The first is Betsy Erkkila’s second book on Whitman, *Whitman the Political Poet* (1989). She says in her Preface: “[My] title is at once a statement and a challenge. It is an attempt to restore a series of linkages—Whitman, political, poet—that have been torn asunder in the wake of Modernist, Formalist, and New Critical strategies.”²³ David Kuebrich, in his *Minor Prophecy: Walt Whitman’s New American Religion* (1989), states in his opening chapter: “My purpose is to engage in a scholarly quarrel with . . . current views of Whitman and to propose a revisionist interpretation, one that tries to resurrect the earlier prophetic reading of Whitman’s intention and to establish it at the center of Whitman studies.”²⁴ I can only echo some Chinese leader: “Let a thousand interpretations bloom. This poet is large. He contains multitudes.”

Two personal notes on the international scene must be taken as merely suggestive. During this academic year in France, *Leaves of Grass* was listed as a text for the *agrégation* examinations, and has been the subject of lectures at universities throughout France (including those by Jerome Loving, who was there for several months; I myself appeared on a Whitman panel with the noted French Whitmanian, Roger Asselineau, at the Sorbonne this past fall). In China, Zhao Luorui (known to her American friends as Lucy Chen) has finished translation of the whole of *Leaves of Grass* into Chinese—the first time ever—and is currently reading galleys. She has kept me apprised of her progress. She took her Ph.D. at the University of Chicago in the late 1940s, and

returned to her position teaching at the University of Beijing, where she has spent her career. It is perhaps symbolic that at the beginning of her career, it was her translation of *The Waste Land* that introduced China to T. S. Eliot; at the end of her career, she had been assigned as her academic task, now on the verge of publication, the translation of the entirety of *Leaves of Grass*. Lucy Chen has commented in an interview: "I thought I didn't have to know much about Eliot to translate him. I had to know the writers Eliot read to know Eliot. But you have to know Whitman himself before you begin translating him." On Whitman's themes she said: "The individual means everything to Whitman. The individual should have a chance for self-development. Whitman talks a lot about sex, you know. I'm not afraid, being an old woman. I try to be faithful."²⁵

I began by saying that I wanted to explore my lifelong involvement with Walt Whitman. In the lecture I gave last October for *agrégation* students in France, I took a clue from Jorge Borgés in his assertion in his 1968 Foreword to *Homage to Walt Whitman*²⁶ that it was the poet's genius not only to make himself but also to make the reader a major character in *Leaves of Grass*. In my lecture, "Whitman's Camerados in *Leaves of Grass*,"²⁷ I emphasized the recurring moments of intimacy shared by the Walt of the *Leaves* and the reader—the moveable "you" that settles on anyone who picks up the book. At the end of one of the opening poems, "Starting from Paumanok," Whitman exclaims: "O now I triumph—and you shall also; / O hand in hand—O wholesome pleasure—O one more desirer and lover! / O to haste firm holding—to haste, haste on with me" (CPSP, 24). At the end of *Leaves*, in "So Long," Whitman says: "Camerado, this is no book, / Who touches this touches a man, / (Is it night? are we here together alone?) / It is I you hold and who holds you, / I spring from the pages into your arms—decease calls me forth" (CPSP, 349). In between these lines from the beginning and concluding sections of *Leaves*, there are many other passages quite similar that bring poet and reader into an almost mystical relationship, mingling the physical with the spiritual.

I must unabashedly classify myself as one of Whitman's camerados. I have read *Leaves of Grass*, and thus loitered with Walt Whitman off and on, even hand in hand in the very holding of the book, over the past fifty years. Of course no one has ever seen us together because in effect Walt is a secret sharer, not demanding but sharing sustenance, remaining silent on the shelves between encounters, and even when in hand an invisible presence to an unimaginative observer. But when I have taken the book from the shelf and opened it, Walt Whitman has sprung to life in a metaphysical or spiritual communion from which I have carried away much more than I have ever or could ever put into words. At the beginning of his essay, "Fate," Emerson says the question he will

address is, "How shall I live."²⁸ In effect, I see Emerson's question as my own purpose in my first dedication to the reading and teaching of literature a half century ago: to find out—"How shall I live." Now fifty years later I can say that one of the texts from which I have learned much on frequent revisiting is *Leaves of Grass*. I have always found Walt Whitman there, waiting for me to join him on the journey. What I have learned from Whitman and from many other of my secret sharers is that one lives life not by a fixed answer, but by the question itself. Each moment of life requires its own new—and renewed—answer.

I cannot conclude without sharing with you what is perhaps my favorite passage from Whitman, as it is my firm belief that in criticism the poet should always have the last word. This excerpt was not included by Randall Jarrell in his brilliant essay, "Some Lines from Whitman," but it might have been. And I would want Jarrell's commentary, quoted before, to stand as mine for this passage: "One hardly knows what to point at—everything works." As an introduction to these extraordinary lines, and to stand in interesting contrast, I quote first from the opening of Emerson's remarkable essay, "Experience," in which he positions himself and his readers on a stairway enveloped in mystery: he says, "Where do we find ourselves? . . . We wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight."²⁹ You will recall that in the main body of his essay, Emerson goes on to deal with the "portly and grim" Lords of Life waylaying individuals on their ascent of the stairs. In the passage I have chosen from Section 44 of "Song of Myself," Whitman too finds himself on a stair, but he speaks with assurance as to what lies below and what awaits above. Whitman uses the language of science—of evolution; whereas many found in Darwin's theory of evolution much to cause despair, Whitman in his poetic ingenuity and wit finds instead much to affirm:

I am an acme of things accomplish'd, and I an encloser of things to be.

My feet stike an apex of the apices of the stairs,
On every step bunches of ages, and larger bunches between the steps,
All below duly travel'd, and still I mount and mount.

Rise after rise bow the phantoms behind me,
Afar down I see the huge first Nothing, I know I was even there,
I waited unseen and always, and slept through the lethargic mist,
And took my time, and took no hurt from the fetid carbon.

Long I was hugg'd close—long and long.

Immense have been the preparations for me,
Faithful and friendly the arms that have help'd me.

Cycles ferried my cradle, rowing and rowing like cheerful boatmen,
For room to me stars kept aside in their own rings,
They sent influences to look after what was to hold me.

Before I was born out of my mother generations guided me,
My embryo has never been torpid, nothing could overlay it.

For it the nebula cohered to an orb,
The long slow strata piled to rest it on,
Vast vegetables gave it sustenance,
Monstrous sauroids transported it in their mouths and deposited it with care.

All forces have been steadily employ'd to complete and delight me,
Now on this spot I stand with my robust soul. (CPSP, 62)

NOTES

1 Page numbers following "CPSP" after Whitman quotations refer to James E. Miller, Jr., ed., *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose by Walt Whitman* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959).

2 Howard Mumford Jones and Ernest E. Leisy, eds., *Major American Writers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935).

3 *Leaves of Grass*, with Preface by Bernard Smith (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), v.

4 *Ibid.*, 34.

5 *Walt Whitman Handbook* (Chicago: Packard and Co., 1946).

6 *A Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).

7 "Of Monkeys, Nudes, and the Good Gray Poet: Dylan Thomas and Walt Whitman," *Western Humanities Review* 13 (Autumn 1959), 339-353.

8 *Start with the Sun: Studies in Cosmic Poetry* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960).

9 *Walt Whitman* (New Haven: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1962; rev. 1990).

10 "Introduction," *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, xxxii.

11 *Life Against Death* (New York: Wesleyan University, 1959; rpt. Vintage Books, Random House, n.d.), 30-31.

12 *The Chief Glory of Every People: Essays on Classic American Authors* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), 231-259.

13 "Whitman and Tennyson," *The Nation and Atheneum*, 40 (Dec. 18, 1926), 426; rpt. in part in Edwin H. Miller, ed., *A Century of Whitman Criticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), and in Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom, and Dan Campion, eds., *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song* (Minneapolis: Holy Cow! Press, 1981).

14 "Introduction," *Ezra Pound: Selected Poems* (London: Faber & Gwyer, 1928), viii-ix, xi; rpt. in part in *Ezra Pound: A Critical Anthology*, ed. J. P. Sullivan (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1970).

- 15 *Understanding Poetry: An Anthology for College Students* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1938), 315.
- 16 "Recent Scholarship on Whitman and Dickinson," *The Teacher and American Literature*, ed. Lewis Leary (Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1965), 115.
- 17 Shapiro, *Start with the Sun*, 57-70.
- 18 "T. S. Eliot: The Death of Literary Judgment," *Saturday Review*, 43 (27 Feb. 1960), 12-17, 34-36.
- 19 *Poetry and the Age* (New York: Vintage Books, 1953), 102-103, 107, 119.
- 20 "I, too," *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1959), 275.
- 21 "Saving the Life that is Your Own," *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 3-21.
- 22 Many of the works that would appear on such a list were written by participants at the conference where this paper was originally presented, the meeting of the American Literature Association, San Diego, May 31-June 2, 1990.
- 23 *Whitman the Political Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), v.
- 24 *Minor Prophecy: Walt Whitman's New American Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 3.
- 25 Edward A. Gargan, "Walt Whitman Sings Anew, But Now With a Chinese Lilt," *The New York Times*, Feb. 16, 1988, 1, 5.
- 26 "Foreword," *Homage to Walt Whitman: A Collection of Poems from the Spanish*, translated and annotated by Didier Tisdell Jaén (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1969), xiii-xvii.
- 27 "Whitman's Camerados in *Leaves of Grass*," *Americana 5: Walt Whitman, Francis Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Jeanne-Marie Santraud (Paris: Presses de L'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1990), 39-53.
- 28 "Fate," *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957), 330.
- 29 "Experience," *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 254.