



Maslan, Mark. Whitman Possessed: Poetry, Sexuality, and Popular Authority [review]

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REVIEWS

MARK MASLAN. *Whitman Possessed: Poetry, Sexuality, and Popular Authority*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. xiv + 221 pp.

When Allen Ginsberg in "A Supermarket in California" invoked Whitman as male muse, guardian spirit of gays, and counterweight to consumer capitalism, the terms he used to summon him up included "lonely old courage-teacher." Whitman is thus figured as an insinuatingly subversive cultural outsider who haunts America like a Falstaffian lord of potential liberating misrule (to bestow upon him the mocking honorific "graybeard" is, after all, to call up the ghost of the encounter between "Hal" and "that gray iniquity . . . that villainous, abominable misleader of youth, Falstaff, that old white-bearded Satan"). It is this kind of figuring of Whitman that Mark Maslan sees as dominating Whitman scholarship over the last thirty years: "In this view, Whitman conceives of his poetry as either detached from the culture it reinvents instead of representing or as storming the culture from 'without' in its determination to break down the barriers between literature and life, ideal and real."

Maslan's own interesting study is dedicated to the challenging of this perceived reading, and central to his alternative account is the argument that Whitman figures sexual desire *per se* in terms of self-annihilation that allow him to "normalize" forms of passion—such as his own—that would otherwise appear to be socially transgressive. In Maslan's view, Whitman was thus able to turn the sexual orthodoxy of his day on its head (just as Maslan intends his own study to reverse existing scholarly perceptions) and succeeded in fashioning himself into a figure truly representative of existent, as opposed to future prospective, American society.

One of the many strengths of Maslan's study is that it is well grounded in an analysis of the various received and emergent discourses of Whitman's own time. In demonstrating that Whitman's "association of [poetic] possession with the sexual [as most sharply manifest in homosexual experience]," he is careful to establish that this strategy derived both from long-established models of poetic inspiration and from models of physical desire that were current in mid-nineteenth century manuals of sexual hygiene. In these manuals, sexual desire itself was viewed with grave misgiving, as it un-manned the self by rendering it passive and powerless. Whitman's stroke of genius, in Maslan's view, was to seize on this model, and to turn it to his own purposes by highlighting the way in which it in effect turned male-male sexual relations into a central, graphic disclosure of "the essential logic of *all* sexual desire." Needless to say, though, this ingenious co-opting by Whitman of the hygiene movement's figures of sexual desire involved one further rhetorical twist: in, and indeed through, his poetry he reversed their negative moral evaluation of sexual possession and in the process triumphantly turned male homosexuality into "a mark of poetic vocation." And later in his career, during the Civil War, he was to build on this rhetorical and discursive success by implicitly claiming an

authority, specifically invested in him as homosexual poet, to represent war-time America.

Maslan sees his book as offering radically revisionist readings of several key concepts in Whitman criticism, such as "identity", "authority," and "representation." But while emphasizing that his Whitman exists, as poet, by the disrupting rather than the asserting of identity, Maslan recognizes that the poetry is full of tension on this very score, and furthermore that in his later life Whitman seemed to suffer in the breakdown of his own body the consequences of the breaking of selfhood that had been the precondition of his Civil War "service" to his nation. Such were the stigmata of one who had come to believe "his 'marginal' sexuality actually indicate[d] that he [was] the vehicle of an authority greater than himself." Other signs of this condition (or consequences of his particular conception of poetic possession) include the figuring of sex "as an assault on the body," a feature of his writing that Maslan's approach does not allow him to read in Michael Moon's terms, as evidence of the suffering condition of gays in Whitman's society. Moreover, fundamental for Maslan is the point that "Whitman's poetics of ravishment and rupture cannot be said to undermine authority [as] *it is itself a fiction of authorization*" [original emphasis]. To put it thus is to bring to mind the discourse of Transcendentalism, which Maslan does not examine to any significant degree (save insofar as it is implicit in his consideration of the rhetoric of Romanticism) but which might, perhaps, provide a further relevant and interesting context for refining one's understanding of the models of "possession" available to Whitman's own culture.

For a reader of my own inclinations, the test of any study of Whitman is the extent to which it refreshes and augments our appreciation of the poetry. Maslan's book certainly passes this test. His structures of thought enable him to produce notably illuminating readings of several individual poems, including "Spirit Whose Work Is Done," "From Pent-up Aching Rivers," "Spontaneous Me," as well as sections of "Song of Myself." It is in his treatment of the *Drum-Taps* poems, however, that Maslan really comes into his own as interpreter. His accounts of key moments in such poems as "A March in the Ranks" are masterly. He sees such moments as turning on the bestowal on the poet of a unique authority to speak, through the transfer of breath itself from dying soldier to self-abnegatingly receptive listener, who then in turn breaks silence to "represent" this silent constituency of suffering—Whitman's "divine average." As Maslan points out, it is such moments as these that most powerfully instance "the interlocking erotics, poetics and politics of Whitman's possession" which is the central theme of his study.

Precisely because such close readings are, for me, much the most persuasive confirmations of Maslan's whole thesis, I wish he had offered us many more, rather than choosing, as he does, to conclude his study with an abstract consideration of the implications of his approach for the kind of post-structuralist theories of selfhood and power that derive from the work of Derrida and Foucault. Partly in consequence, this book can sometimes give the impression of deferral—of amassing a great deal of impressive and interesting theoretical material with the promise of its leading to a substantial reinterpretation of Whitman's poetry, but of failing, in the end, fully to make good its promise. More's the pity because not only are the grounds here established for such an

interesting re-assessment, but tantalizing examples are given of how the poetry might be read afresh in the light of such a readjustment in thinking. It would be good to have the poetry extensively re-presented in these terms, as proof that (to paraphrase Ginsberg) Whitman's beard—that unerring indicator of the prevailing ideological winds in American culture—is indeed pointing in Maslan's direction tonight.

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STEPHEN JOHN MACK. *The Pragmatic Whitman: Reimagining American Democracy*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002. xxii +182 pp.

Since the 1970s the scholarship on Whitman has expanded exponentially, not only in a veritable cascade of journal articles but also in an amazing number and steady production of books or monographs. Whitman once said that he contained "multitudes," and everybody seems to have found his or her own Whitman to promote. There now exist in book form, for example, the "political" Whitman, the "German" Whitman, the "Emersonian" Whitman, the "solitary" Whitman, the "socialist" Whitman, the "representative" Whitman, the "linguistic" Whitman, the "erotic" Whitman, and of course the "homosexual" Whitman, whose personality permeates all the other Whitmans. Joseph Jay Rubin published *The Historic Whitman* in 1973, and George B. Hutchinson published *The Ecstatic Whitman* in 1986. The first, a rough biography, viewed Whitman as securely tied to political and social history, whereas the second, while acknowledging the poet's historical contexts, found an intriguing connection between Whitman's mysticism and his psychological conflicts.

Since Whitman's own day there has been a shift in this country from the individualist philosophy of Emerson to the collectivist ideology of Franklin Roosevelt, from Transcendentalism to Pragmatism in one form or another, or from a logocentric or foundational point of view to a relativistic one. This major change in ideology, essentially inspired by Darwin, took place between the American Civil War and World War I, and was influenced along the way by Freud and such cognitive pragmatists as John Dewey and George Herbert Mead. Pragmatism, defined as the acceptance of a belief if it allows us to function better, has softened our relativistic landing somewhat, especially through William James's quasi-religious notion that "truth happens to an idea." Whitman, who stands squarely between the ages of romance and realism, certainly had the seeds of pragmatism in his doctrines. Anybody who grew up as poor as he did would have to seek social adjustments—as indeed he did as editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle* in the 1840s. According to Louis Menand in *The Metaphysical Club* (2001), a study of pragmatism and its precursors which has popularized the subject once again, Whitman's main mentor Emerson was also a pragmatist in the sense that he distrusted institutions while appropriating some of their ideas. What Emerson does not share with pragmatism, however, is its questioning in some quarters of the concept of the individual conscience as a transcendental authority. And it is here, I think, that the debate of our time continues.