

REVIEWS



Schmidgall, Gary. *Containing Multitudes: Walt Whitman and the British Literary Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press. 386 pp.

Gary Schmidgall's ambitious study provides the most thoroughgoing treatment yet of Walt Whitman's relationship to British literary predecessors, primarily poets. Other Anglophone writers, including Whitman's compatriots William Cullen Bryant, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Fanny Fern were closer at hand, but Schmidgall implies (by making them outside the pale) that they were less engaging and less pressing. Highlighting the potent force of British writing in the nineteenth-century U.S., Schmidgall devotes a chapter each to connections between Whitman and William Shakespeare, John Milton, Robert Burns, William Blake, and William Wordsworth and then treats more briefly a group Whitman called other "big fellows": Walter Scott, Thomas Carlyle, Oscar Wilde, Algernon Swinburne, and Alfred Tennyson. Like Harold Bloom, Schmidgall is ultimately interested in Whitman's "gymnast's struggle" with strong predecessors. He also makes the shrewd observation that Whitman "read no other poet's works as intensely as he read, reread, and revised his own" (xx).

Schmidgall observes that an effort to tie Whitman "umbilically to the British literary tradition is bound to seem a contradictory and counterintuitive project—a fool's errand" (xiii). But that's only if one takes Whitman at face value, as many have. The inspiration for *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman often claimed, came not from other writers but from first-hand experience. In an unpublished manuscript, probably drafted prior to 1855, Whitman insisted "there is something better than any and all books, and that is the real stuff whereof they are the artificial transcript and portraiture" (*NUPM* 1: 188). He even audaciously declared that his own book functioned differently than others, that *Leaves of Grass* provided unfiltered experience itself: "You shall possess the good of the earth and sun" rather than "spectres in books." Yet at other times—especially late in life—Whitman was more candid about the importance of reading to his writings. In a conversation with Horace

Traubel recounted in *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, he discussed the minor poet John Sterling, a friend of Thomas Carlyle:

“It is interesting—even odd—how many things come into, stay in, a man’s mind which he cannot account for!” Then they would “pop up” after awhile, “a man thinking he owned them himself.” . . . “What a strange make-up of beginnings and ending and appropriations we are!” (WWWC 3:119)

For Whitman, a poet who often minimized his learning and sometimes posed as being rude, uncouth, and vulgar, one goal was to benefit from reading without appearing pedantic or derivative. He read voraciously and unpredictably, and as a poet he rarely seems imitative because of his extraordinary mixture of registers. Whitman owed a lot to British literary giants, though, as *Containing Multitudes* demonstrates so thoroughly. Especially enlightening is Schmidgall’s ability to establish affinities between Whitman and Milton, a highly learned and allusive poet. Throughout the book Schmidgall is perceptive (and at times delightfully witty) in his comments on Whitman in connection with Wordsworth, Tennyson, and, of course, Shakespeare—the focus of one of his most extended discussions.

*Containing Multitudes* is provocative in the best way, prompting questions that go beyond its scope. For Whitman, how does the British literary tradition compare in importance to the American tradition? And should Anglophone poets be considered as unquestionably more significant for him than writers Whitman read in translation? (It is good to remember that Whitman carried copies of Dante and Virgil in his knapsack at various times in the Civil War.) Emerson once remarked that *Leaves of Grass* was a “remarkable mixture of the Bhagvat Ghita and the *New York Herald*.” This famous observation stresses sources both below and beyond Schmidgall’s emphases on high culture and Britain. Emerson’s *New York Herald* remark seems especially fitting in light of recent discoveries that Whitman occasionally developed found poetry, forging some of his Civil War poetry, for example, out of material he came across in various newspapers. Found poetry is consistent with Whitman’s comment in his marginalia that “all kinds of light reading, novels, newspapers, gossip etc., serve as manure for the few great productions and are indispensable or perhaps are premises to something better.” That

easy-to-overlook “etc.” contained a lot: scientific and pseudo-scientific treatises, historical studies, geographies, self-help manuals on learning to swim, and thousands and thousands of pages of newsprint, a surprising number of them preserved by Whitman himself and ultimately by the Library of Congress and other repositories. Promiscuous reading proved useful to Whitman—but how, when, and to what extent? For Whitman, we may wonder what was more important, influences from high culture or those from more popular sources? We need additional work on Whitman’s reading so we know with increasing specificity what was within his intellectual purview: we need work comparable to that already done on Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville, and Mark Twain. Some promising work by Matt Cohen on Whitman’s marginalia and annotations has begun to appear on the *Walt Whitman Archive*, and we can hope that eventually this work will be fully fleshed out. In scholarship as a whole, in this era of big data, what are some of the next steps we can anticipate over the next thirty years or so? We will never get beyond the need for good human judgment about the significance of echoes, reappropriations, remixing (the kind of work Schmidgall has so ably performed), but we can have our attention alerted to echoes we’d never heard, borrowings we’d never seen, as increasing amounts of our cultural heritage becomes machine-traceable. Stefan Schöberlein has recently demonstrated how Whitman’s borrowing from Maximilian Schele De Vere’s *Stray Leaves from the Book of Nature* contributed phrasing and key ideas to “This Compost” and “The World Below the Brine.” Other non-literary but nonetheless key intertextual references almost certainly will be discovered in an age when computer-aided detection of intertextuality is becoming more feasible.

Schmidgall’s book may not provide much sense of the global reach of Whitman’s curiosity and ambition (for example, his fascination with Homer and other ancient Greeks, and his interest in writers from Germany, Persia, Iceland, France, and elsewhere), but *Containing Multitudes: Walt Whitman and the British Literary Tradition* may do something more important: it provides an invaluable account of Whitman’s affinities with many of the finest writers who ever worked in his language.