

## REVIEWS

JAMES PERRIN WARREN. *Walt Whitman's Language Experiment*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990. xi + 217 pp.

*Walt Whitman's Language Experiment* grows out of James Perrin Warren's Yale University dissertation of 1982, "Walt Whitman's Language and Style." The apparent similarity of Warren's overall undertaking to C. Carroll Hollis's *Language and Style in Leaves of Grass* (1983) makes comparison inevitable. Yet despite some affinities, the two critics actually emphasize different matters and come to different conclusions. When Hollis's *Language and Style in 'Leaves of Grass'* appeared, his book represented the discovery of a whole new continent of interpretive possibilities. Dazzlingly original, Hollis traced the impact of oratory on Whitman's style and made what remains one of the most powerful cases for the superiority of the early *Leaves* (1855 to 1860) to the later editions. Warren's book, though less of a breakthrough, nonetheless has considerable virtues of its own. Warren develops a two-part structure in his treatment of Whitman's theory of language and its connection with his poetic practice. He first considers Whitman's ideas about language in the years 1854 to 1856 and then argues that the poet "changes the focus of his theory . . . between 1856 and 1892" (3), a change that Warren contends is perceivable through analysis of the syntax, diction and organization of the poetry. With greater success than any other commentator, Warren places Whitman's ideas about language in historical context, finding precursors in Wilhelm von Humboldt, August Schleichner, Christian Bunsen, and Maxmilian Schele de Vere. Additionally, in a number of detailed readings, he analyzes the synchronic aspect of the poet's "ensemble" of language against the "vista" of its future development.

Warren notes that Whitman's "organic" or transcendental language theory "emerges in three texts dating from 1855 to 1859: the notebooks *Words* and *Primer of Words*, and the last two chapters of *Rambles Among Words*" (11). The early theory—"Whitman's conception of the 'Real Grammar'" —marks the style of the first two editions most notably in the poet's use of foreign borrowings and the formation of new words (46). The overall effect of Whitman's "verbal turnings," Warren argues, is to "dislodge words from any fixed grammatical categories in order to emphasize the 'floating and movable' possibilities of American English" (47). What to many had been an embarrassment—Whitman's enthusiasm for foreign languages seeming to outmatch his knowledge—is here correctly seen not as the poet's haphazard grab for tone and grandeur but as part of his conscious purpose, intelligently and consistently executed (51-52). Warren's discussion of the word "amie" (49), for example, clarifies the purposeful sexual ambiguity of the term. Whitman was displaying not poor French but ingenious manipulation of language.

Along with many virtues, this book contains problematic patches. I found troubling Warren's tendency to hear "clear" or "explicit" echoes in places where connections, if they exist, are not self-evident. For example, he quotes the fifth line of "The Sleepers," ("Pausing, gazing, bending, and stopping") and notes that this line "clearly echoes" the final line of "Song of Myself" ("I stop somewhere waiting for you"). *Stop* appears in both lines, but this is a nickel word appearing in countless places in Whitman's *oeuvre*. Since the rhythm, diction, and tone of the two lines differ markedly, the recurrence of a single common word hardly seems decisive. Similarly, we are told that a sentence from "Democratic Vistas" "explicitly echoes" the final sentence of *Rambles*. Yet the similarity rests on the single (and again ordinary) word "flowers" (121). In both cases overstatement evokes resistance where a more temperate claim might have encouraged one to see a previously overlooked connection.

This tendency toward overstatement also mars Warren's treatment of *Rambles*. He explains that he has established Whitman's authorship of the final two chapters of *Rambles* in an earlier essay (*Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 2:2 [1984]: 22-30). Yet the *WWQR* essay did not erase all questions about Whitman's connection with these chapters. (Which parts of these chapters are we to believe Whitman wrote? How much of these chapters did he write? Why did the poet not take credit for his contributions?) In 1984, Warren exercised caution, refusing to assert that "The Growth of Words" (one of the last two chapters of *Rambles Among Words*) was "entirely Whitman's work, for this is demonstrably not the case." By the time of book publication, Warren talks simply (and thus misleadingly) of "the last two chapters of *Rambles*, which Whitman authored" (11).

None of these problems lessens significantly the worth of *Walt Whitman's Language Experiment*. The book profits from Warren's wide knowledge of language theories and his laborious efforts in hard research. Perhaps most impressive is Warren's archival work which allows him, for example, to provide an account of the "Sleepers" notebook displaying a masterful knowledge of a very complex matter, knowledge put to use in clarifying that difficult poem. In fact, Warren knows the key documents concerning Whitman's language theories so well that in several places he makes convincing arguments about dating and composition history on the basis of ink and paper clues. Warren's interests also lead him regularly into nineteenth-century dictionaries with the result that readers of *Leaves* gain a refined sense of Whitman's meanings.

Warren focuses repeatedly on Whitman's characteristic "rhetoric of deferral," a rhetoric based on his "persistent vision of linguistic and spiritual evolution in America" (105; 137). This rhetorical move, linked to what Sacvan Bercovitch has called the "American jeremiad," is clearly elucidated and is shown to shape Whitman's language throughout his career. Finding the "rhetoric of deferral" everywhere has the tendency, of course, to blur Warren's idea that Whitman changed the focus of his theory of language. Yet if the alteration Warren wants us to see—a change in Whitman's theory—does not appear clearly enough in this book, his treatment of other matters adds measurably to our understanding of the poet's techniques, especially his handling of "deverbal style," of syntactic parallelism, and of Whitman's effort to replace meter with

rhythm. This book, then, despite some imperfections, stands as a useful addition to the small body of criticism that examines systematically Whitman's magic with words.

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GRAHAM CLARKE. *Walt Whitman: The Poem as Private History*. London: Vision Press & New York: St. Martin's Press (Critical Studies Series), 1991. 176 pp.

Cotton Mather died when Wallace Stevens was a boy—or so it's claimed in "The Blue Buildings in the Summer Air"—finally exhausted by the unavailing effort to make his rhetoric of certainty prevail over the still small voice of persistent inner questioning: "There was always the doubt, / That made him preach the louder, long for a church/ In which his voice would roll its cadences, / After the sermon, to quiet that mouse in the wall." Similarly, "Walt Whitman" seems to have died when I was a boy, since critics have tended, these past forty years, to listen for the mouse whose quietest nibblings at the poetry's surface "myth" of a heroic, healthy, all-American personality have been picked up by sophisticated modern sonic systems and magnified through the loudspeakers of countless latter-day critical writings. It is, therefore, puzzling to find Graham Clarke claiming that his study departs from established critical practice in the attention it pays to "the private Whitman"—the "lonely old grubber," in the famous phrase quoted from Ginsberg, consigned to the desolate margins of the very culture to which his poetry claims to be central and a far cry (not to say howl) from the painstakingly constructed fiction of his poetic self.

Original, on the terms it advertises, this short book may not perhaps be, but a stimulating addition to Whitman studies it nevertheless most certainly is, thanks primarily to the vivid quality of the writing which is epigrammatically succinct, rich in interpretative insights and marked by a restlessly quick critical intelligence. Confining himself almost exclusively to the poetry of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*—in the belief that here, before Whitman had perfected his public persona, the unaccommodated man most makes his uncomfortable presence felt—Clarke everywhere discovers signs of the state of contradiction in which Whitman's poetry lives and has its being. Even the priapic exuberance of "I Sing the Body Electric" (for convenience, I use the familiar later titles of these poems) is seen to carry within it the seeds of doubt which produce, in "Bunch Poem" (later "Spontaneous Me"), a hidden world of guilty sexual needs. A short chapter on the trope of vocal effects in "Song of Myself" culminates in an ingenious disquisition on the letter O which would have delighted Jonathan Swift, and is followed by a long, outstanding chapter on "The Sleepers," convincingly read as "an 'anti-text' to the world that 'Song of Myself' projects." These studies in the 1855 edition are at the very center of the book, but other, flanking, material includes an examination of the early stories (interpreted, not for the first time, as coded autobiography); an essay on Whitman's photographic images; and a chapter twinning him with Emily Dickinson—Clarke's approach allowing him here to see the secret spiritual