

REVIEWS

JASON STACY. *Walt Whitman's Multitudes: Labor Reform and Persona in Whitman's Journalism and the First Leaves of Grass, 1840-1855*. New York: Peter Lang, 2008. 168 pp.

Sustained scholarly attention has been paid, over the past quarter of a century, to Whitman's connections with the artisanal crisis of his early years and to the implications of this not only for his political stance and social vision but also for his creative writing. By now, the main features of this dimension of his work have been fairly clearly identified, although, as Andrew Lawson's interesting recent study showed, there remains plenty of scope for refining scholarly understanding of Whitman's own, somewhat elusive, class position. The current study by Jason Stacy is a welcome further excursion into this well-travelled territory, and while generous in openly acknowledging its debts to previous scholarship, it proposes to sharpen appreciation of the continuity between Whitman's early work in education and journalism and his emergence in 1855 as a would-be national poet.

From humble, self-effacing amanuensis for illiterate soldiers to raucous political hack (*The Eighteenth Presidency!*), from sober graveyard poet to sensational author of a temperance-era pot-boiler, and from provocatively loafing scribbler to would-be august leader writer, Whitman proved adept at mastering different roles and at employing a range of different discourses. To treat this versatility as merely a by-product of his apprentice years is to risk failing to realize how seminal this facility proved eventually to be for his emergence as a mature poet. Like the dyer's famous hand, Whitman's otherwise assertive imagination could, whenever he willed, subdue itself to that with which it was working. Like an actor, he was capable of the mimicry the occasion demanded. No wonder he was a connoisseur of the New York stage. One of the strengths of Lawson's recent study lay in its revivifying exploration of the dazzling language game that is "Song of Myself," that rainbow coalition of styles, that rhetorical catwalk on which so many of the discourses of the period strut their stuff. Like any true poet, Whitman's first and last love was language, and his passion for words was voraciously promiscuous.

This subject is also Stacy's territory, and it proves fruitful. Preferring recent performative models of self-realization to the foundationalist models of an earlier period in search of the (ontologically suspect?) deep sources of personality, Stacy distinguishes between three key roles Whitman adopted over a period of roughly a quarter of a century culminating in *Leaves of Grass* (1855). Styling these "the Schoolmaster," "the Editor," and "the Bard," he associates them with Whitman's period respectively as teacher on Long Island, as New York editor during the 1840s, and finally as an emergent poet. His emphasis is therefore not so much on the private biographical background as on the way Whitman's

published writing was in each case very carefully tailored to a public persona consciously chosen from the portfolio his period and his circumstances made available. These personae were adopted to further Whitman's consistent aim of fashioning a truly democratic republic. A prominent consequent strength of Stacy's study is the rewarding, and largely unprecedented, thoroughness with which it scrutinizes Whitman's journalistic output over a period of almost two decades. A related strength is its persuasive demonstration that, far from marking a dramatic break with that journalism, the poetry of 1855 represents a clear development of its social vision as a Whitman frustrated by the turn taken by political events and the effective implosion of the Democratic Party looked to poetry to develop a new persona and to exploit a new discourse for articulating his abiding concerns.

Given that Stacy's overall approach results in gains in our understanding of the earlier Whitman, leading to the problematic issue of his emergence as a poet, it is a pity that so very little space is given to the study of the poetry itself. Examination of Whitman "the Bard" seems disproportionately slight compared to the attention paid to "the Schoolmaster" and "the Editor." Numbering only 131 pages of text in total, this study is in some ways admirably succinct but also frustratingly curtailed. During its brief life-cycle, it succeeds in illuminating several issues, definitively accounting for Whitman's flirtation with nativism during the mid-1840s, demonstrating how his Quaker inheritance went deeper and proved more long-lasting than has generally been supposed, sharply distancing Whitman from the gang cults of the Bowery B'hoys and their like, and usefully distinguishing the poet's version of the loafer from other models of which both he and mainstream contemporary society disapproved.

An approach such as Stacy's is confronted by the difficult issue that faces all of us who endeavour to approach the poetry from the direction of its historical context. How did that relatively conventional historical experience produce that explosively unconventional poetry? The problem may not be an insurmountable one, but I cannot claim ever to have satisfactorily resolved it. After every fresh attempt, and every relative failure (self-protectively registered as a partial success), one is left with doubts. These can go as deep as wondering whether, in fact, the poet's historical moment and his poetry may, after all, not belong to different, irreconcilable, categories of experience. Which is not so to mystify the poetry as to make it sound wholly inexplicable, nor even to deny there can be any real substance to the supposition that there are significant continuities between history and poetry, but simply to face the possibility that no wholly satisfactory model, or discourse, exists (or perhaps can exist) for comprehending and articulating such continuities. Perhaps one should recognize the applicability in this context of Wittgenstein's sage comment that a range of different languages are necessary for the expression of human experience, and that one should resist the attempt to fold any one of these languages into any other. Insofar as any models or discourses offer at least the promise of a satisfactory explanation, they may very well derive from the repeated, and increasingly convoluted, attempts by past thinkers of the Left (broadly associated with erstwhile Marxist ideologies). But their contributions have of late been condescendingly treated as discredited by the supposed bankruptcy of their political philosophies. The

only heirs to this tradition that seem to enjoy some current credence are those who work in the area of discourse theory, where left-wing analyses of social orders merge with twentieth-century advances in sociolinguistics.

Stacy's approach smoothes over the radical disjunction between Whitman's evolution into revolutionary poet and his previous relatively unremarkable functioning as "Schoolmaster" and "Journalist." Moreover, rather than explore the opportunities Whitman's personae offered him for exploiting the rich resources of different discourses, Stacy prefers to emphasize how Whitman's strategic adoption of his three key roles provided him with means of advancing his social and political views. And he stresses that, rather than seeking to uncover "layers of multiple discourses," his volume "traces the trajectory of a single voice in the public sphere." His focus is on Whitman's constant shrewd choice of "personas meant for public consumption."

Underneath his many disguises, then, Stacy's Whitman remains faithful to his early and abiding concern for the continuation of a truly republican America. In common with many recent Whitman scholars, he sees the poet as consistently attempting to square the traditional republican values of the artisanal class with the very different values inherent in the practice of a new kind of capitalism. Very rightly, in my opinion, he is wary of the tendency of some scholars to equate Whitman's poetic radicalism with radical, even revolutionary, views on social and political affairs. His Whitman, like mine, is a man of relatively conventional political views, comfortably sitting within the broad spectrum of political and social opinion in his day. And I also agree with his identification of one of Whitman's key strategies for retaining his essentially artisanal vision. In the face of a startlingly changed society, he went on insisting that although his America may have become sadly and worryingly misguided in many of its contemporary practices, it remained true "at heart" to its supposed founding vision. Much of his psychic and creative energy went to the yearning, tenacious, ingenious, and in later years rather desperate, maintenance of this psychologically indispensable national myth. The key, perhaps, to the flowering of his poetic genius, this increasingly costly effort may also partially explain the eventual withering of his giant talent.

Within its chosen limits, then, this is an interesting study that advances our appreciation not least of some of Whitman's earlier, and still largely overlooked, writings such as the series of "Sun-Down Papers" he published while teaching school in rural Long Island. It reaffirms the importance of carefully reading the young Whitman for one's understanding of the national vision of the later arrestingly original poet, and it confirms how loyal Whitman remained in his prime (as indeed down to his very death) to the resolutely republican vision of his country so deeply implanted in him by the artisanal culture he had encountered both on the hearth and through his earliest work experiences. As this volume unambiguously demonstrates, Walt Whitman's "Multitudes" all derived from a single, spinal vision whose interests in the end they all, however differently, served.