

REVIEWS



JIM PERLMAN, ED FOLSOM, AND DAN CAMPION, EDs. *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song. 200th Birthday Edition*. Duluth, MN: Holy Cow! Press, 2019. xix + 557 pp.

A great poem is for ages and ages in common and for all degrees and complexions and all departments and sects and for a woman as much as a man and a man as much as a woman.

—“Preface” to *Leaves of Grass*, 1855

I bought the first edition of *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song* in Philadelphia in the early eighties and carried it with me when I moved to Seattle a few years later to teach at the University of Washington. It survived a move to the Midwest in 1995 but got lost in the shuffle after 1998, when the second edition was published. *Sic transit*. Recently, I found the first edition again and greeted its almost miraculous reappearance gleefully. As Elizabeth Bishop says, “So many things seem filled with the intent / to be lost that their loss is no disaster,” which is true when it comes to books, but with three editions spread out before me, I can see that all the old favorites are here, that adding on doesn’t necessarily mean taking away, and that these editions talk back not only to Whitman but to each other.

For example, I overlooked Philip Dacey in the first and second editions (1981, 1998), but he caught my attention in the third edition as a “new” poet, which made me wonder about the editors’ working definition of “New” (292-94, 487). It turns out that the publication date is what matters: Dacey’s riff “Against Travel Bags with Wheels” was published in *Wild Goose Poetry Review*, in February 2012. It’s a lovely poem, appealing to me in my advancing years for its determination to carry “only what’s necessary / for the journey, the extras jettisoned.” I won’t give away the joke or the Walt connection, except to say that readers will find a Dacey who still loves imaginary dialogues, as he did in his mock-serious “Hopkins to Whitman: From the Lost Correspondence” (292-294). Turning back to that poem, I find an excerpt from Hopkins’s 1882 letter to his friend and editor Robert Bridges, in which he confesses, “I always knew in my heart Walt Whitman’s mind to be more like my own than any other

man's living" (292). Dacey's citation spares us the famous next line, "As he is a very great scoundrel, this is not a pleasant conclusion" (79).

If, then, we are counting new poets rather than new poems, and if "new" means new to a composite *Measure*, there are eleven new poets in the 200th *Birthday Edition*, one of whom, C. K. Williams, is represented by an essay. I wish I liked it more. But it feels to me somewhat out of place in a collection of "new" poets, all of whom are sociopolitical in one way or another, by which I mean that they are attentive to the chaotic divisions of our moment. Still, throwbacks are nice too, and Williams's belief that Whitman is writing the song of us all leads him to cite another hero worshipper, Randall Jarrell, who could be vicious about poets he didn't like, even if he was in awe of Whitman's Blakean sensitivity to minute particulars. Williams, too, asks us to slow down to contemplate "the brilliance of [Whitman's] ear for the smaller scales of language music" (482), such as the sounds of an amputation in "Song of Myself": "The hiss of the surgeon's knife and the gnawing teeth of his saw, / The wheeze, the cluck, the swash of falling blood . . . the short wild scream, the long dull tapering groan" (483). Often, Williams explains, Whitman "devises dances of vowels that can vault the literal meanings of words into sound combinations that create meanings far beyond their utterance" (482). Lovely. James Wright picks up on this theme too, in his 1962 essay, "The Delicacy of Walt Whitman," in which he describes "delicacy of music, of diction, and of form" (242). Like Williams, Wright acknowledges his indebtedness to Jarrell's "Some Lines from Whitman," an essay not to be found in *Measure*, even if it can seem that almost everything else is.

Yet to the extent that anthologies as capacious as this one can have a theme, the rhythms of everyday life would seem to be it, especially in the selections from 2000 to 2018, which reflect the sociopolitical anxieties of our present moment, in which the idea of universals can seem hopelessly outdated. If "a great poem is for ages and ages in common and for all degrees and complexions and departments," it must speak to common experience. Yet most of the new poems in this welcome addition to the company of Walt emerge from a place of greater or lesser resistance to the idea of universals, even as they remind us that poetry can appeal to Whitman's dream of a common language, which was reiterated and revised by Adrienne Rich in her 1978 poetry collection, *The Dream of a Common Language*. Rich continues her critique of sexual dualism in "Beginners," the 1993 essay that is included in the new *Measure*, as it was in the previous edition. Comparing Whitman and Dickinson, Rich notes that "These 'beginners' cost difficulty and pain to themselves as well as to others," and that "the appearance of the beginner is a necessary, even a 'relentless,' event

in human history” (432-33). It’s an important essay, and if you don’t already know it, or even if you do, it bears rereading for its rendering of “a strange uncoupled couple, moving together in a dialectic that the twentieth century has only begun to decipher” (432).

Organized on the principle of adding without subtracting, the new *Measure* continues the work of the second edition in complicating the patriarchal, heterosexual, and masculinist bias of the universalist tradition. Seven of the twelve new poets are women (Monique Ferrell, Julia Alvarez, Daphne Gottlieb, Rosanna Warren, Maria Melendez Kelson, Meena Alexander, and Marie Howe). As a group, they constitute an impressive racial, ethnic, and linguistic mix.

We can hear, for example, the voice of Meena Alexander, who was born in Allahabad, India in 1951, raised in India and Sudan, received her PhD at the University of Nottingham in 1973, returned to India to teach, and arrived in New York City in the fall of 1979, where one of her first purchases was a paperback edition of *Leaves of Grass*. In “With Whitman at the Crossroads,” she tells us, “It has fallen apart from repeated use or maybe it’s the glue in the binding. In any case it’s a book I treasure and I refuse to part with it” (494). After further border-crossings, Alexander established herself as an award-winning poet, and a Distinguished Professor of English and Women’s Studies at Hunter College and the Graduate Center of City University in New York. Her stunning memoir *Fault Lines* (1993; 2003) describes the personal cost of her struggle with the postcolonial burden of the dark-skinned female body. In May 2018, she came to Dortmund, Germany, to speak to the members of the Transatlantic Walt Whitman Association on what it takes to appreciate Whitman in the moment. She looked frail, but I had no idea that she was dying. “It’s the fragmented nature of what Whitman was struggling to hold together that spoke so powerfully to me,” she explained (495). Fragmented, “yet flowing” (496). “I will muse,” Alexander writes in her brilliant sonnet “Resolutions for the Year 2017,” “on the happiness of trees” (499).

If I had to fault the new *Measure* in any way, it’s that I found the biographical notes insufficient. For example, when I googled “Monique Ferrell,” I began to construct a narrative explaining why an African-American poet-attorney would be especially well positioned to appreciate the social injustices that trouble the narrator of “Eating Sushi in Brooklyn.” Through the grapevine, however, I learned that the “Sushi” poet, who teaches at City Tech, has been dealing with confusion with the other Monique Ferrell since she was a child. Granted that the attorney is quite a bit older than the poet, the biographical note did not give me the poet’s date of birth or the date of birth for Maria Melendez Kelson for

that matter (553, 554-55). Since Kelson publishes as Maria Meléndez and as Maria Melendez Kelson, I was not sure whether the author of “Let America Be las américas” was Mexican American (she is). Anthologies usually demand biographical labor from their readers, and this one could use a few translation notes too. The poem ends, “Let America be plural again, / (america always was plural to me) mujeres // de maíz, gente del monte, / casta cuervo, lombrices” (488).

That said, with today’s headlines making it harder and harder to believe in common experience, what a beautiful distraction it is to sit down with this expanded and expansive birthday tribute to an ever-fresh Whitman who, I discover, is not only Alexander’s muse “in a time of war” (499) and Dacey’s “reassuringly intimate” travel bag (487). Rather, for Ferrell, Walt Whitman is not “a dead man is not *an* esteemed poet” because “he is a housing development on carlton avenue / across the street from the park once a fort he helped to name.” And “whitman is a rusted otis elevator stuck between floors [he is] myrtle avenue at night” (469). For Ferrell, “Walt Whitman” is an empty signifier, a meaningless abstraction. It’s the place in Brooklyn that’s real, real because of the people who live in the Walt Whitman Houses, a dilapidated public housing complex, real because of the “foggy ancient black man muttering to passers / *they are coming white people are coming*” (469). Real, too, because the neighborhood is gentrifying and Ferrell feels guilty about dining with friends who remark, “*if our parents didn’t own these houses we’d never be able to live here*” (469). “Sushi in Brooklyn: A Dedication to Walt Whitman” is an off-rhyme tribute to Whitman’s democratic dream of equality in which everyone gets a seat at the table and enough to eat too. There’s a nice reassuring father-daughter motif to ease the pain.

Just when I was relaxing into the wit and pathos of Ferrell’s *bricolage* of styles, Julia Alvarez threw me a curveball, this one partly in Spanish, but a pattern is emerging. If Ferrell takes some of her cues from Whitman, she is also indebted to a gentrified Gwendolyn Brooks, lighter-skinned and surrounded by laughing friends, but still passionate about damaged people. Alvarez is even more obviously talking back to Langston Hughes. “*I, Too, Sing América,*” she writes (471), and as Ed Folsom points out, “The acute accent over the ‘e’ slyly opens the Spanish/English blend that the poem then enacts” (55). I wasn’t sure what to make of Alvarez’s use of italics (most of the poem is in italics). And I wasn’t sure what the poem has to do with Walt Whitman, except in a general sense. Sure, Whitman writes about “our” America, and Hughes and Alvarez do too, as do Ferrell and Brooks, and all of them are black or brown social justice

writers, but I loved the language. With her “sancocho / *of inglés / con español*,” her linguistic stew, Alvarez, a Dominican American, claims to be writing “*with all América / inside me*.” Then, too, I’m a sucker for rhymes, and I loved the rhythm of the rhymes.

With Daphne Gottlieb’s “Whitman’s Sampler: Killing the Father of Free Verse,” I was back on more familiar ground. It’s a sestina, composed of lines by Whitman, such as “O unspeakable passionate love,” “No array of terms can say how much I am at peace about God and about Death,” and “The sea whisper’d me” (473). Not all the lines are exact renderings, and again, you’ll have to be the judge. Do we appreciate “I am stern, acrid, large, undissuadable, but I love” (573) and if so, do we also appreciate “I bequeath myself to the death to grow from the grass I love?” (574). The poem, then, is trickier than it might seem from Gottlieb’s clear headnote, in caps and parentheses, “(ALL LINES BY WALT WHITMAN.)”

Reading Ferrell, Alvarez, and Gottlieb sequentially raises an interesting question not just about their relationship to Whitman, to other poets, and to each other, but about our reading practices. When it comes to anthologies, we don’t expect to read straight through from cover to cover, but the new subsection of new poets from 2000–18 invites a sequential reading, and I found myself thinking about the groupings, or clusters. Ferrell, Alvarez, and Gottlieb form a minority cluster (Gottlieb, who is Jewish, has been nominated for the Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Poetry). With James Kimbrell and Dean Young, we return to what one might think of as the old normal, and Kimbrell’s “Up Late, Reading Whitman” eases us into his dream-life “where the living and the dead step toward each other” (478). I’d like to meet him, his neighbor’s dog, his sister as a young girl again, and it might be fun to read his neglected utility bill too. Kimbrell’s Whitman is “a lover of loitering horses, stenographer to the stars” (476), and a fine trombonist too: “His cheeks puff out like old Satchmo’s, // and I’m happy as a bald-headed man / in a rainstorm of fedoras until the song is over and my parents // sit down and my sister turns up / and tugs on his beard. ‘But Walt,’ she says, ‘Your ride is here,’ // and walks him out to the Brooklyn Ferry honking in the driveway” (476). After these dazzling hijinks, I’m not sure about meeting the parents.

Dean Young cites Whitman in his title, “Look at Quintillions Ripen’d & Look at Quintillions Green,” from “Song of Myself,” Section 33 (479), but he’s goofier than Kimbrell and more self-consciously intellectual. “Quintillions” works with odd temporal juxtapositions and shifts in levels of diction that bring us to a Dadaesque conclusion. Shall we ponder the three halves of the soul?

Or shall we commit to a single ending, a word set apart on a line of its own: “Spangle.” Is it a verb or a noun? Perhaps an allusion to the “Star-Spangled Banner”? Or “A mansion with many bathrooms. / Something dark on the moors” (480)? Go figure. As Young explains, in his non-explanatory way, “In your future is a long journey” (480). As for me, I’m about to go on a short journey to the library, where I’ll look again for *The Art of Recklessness: Poetry as Assertive Force and Contradiction*, but before I do, let me say what Young said, in a *Jubilat* interview, “I think to tie meaning too closely to understanding misses the point.” Perhaps that’s why “Spangle” stands out. There it is, free-floating. It sounds like good advice, and it’s so much better than “Sparkle.” Make of it what you will.

After Young’s pyrotechnics, I had trouble settling down to the tempered gravity of Rosanna Warren’s “A Kosmos,” which picks up on the elegiac motif of Kimbrell’s “Up Late, Reading,” but there’s no inebriated comedy, no trombone-playing Satchmo. Instead, Warren seeks to understand “some even starker question,” and she is “never one not to look at things squarely” (481). The things include I.V. tubes, bruised arms, a pale, bald head. Some weeks later, grieving the loss of the poet-friend whose mouth in death was “suddenly tender, the mouth of a girl,” Warren hopes to find consolation in a relic, her friend’s copy of *Leaves of Grass*. Instead, she finds manuscripts neatly stacked, framed photographs, and, “like a private message / from Whitman, who saw things whole, / the small / dried body of a mouse. A kosmos, he, too. He, too, luckier.” Why luckier? Perhaps because the mouse knows nothing, whereas the (implicitly weeping) speaker is unable to emulate Whitman? It’s a haunting poem, occasioned by the death of Deborah Tall, who struggled against a rare form of breast cancer before she died of the disease at the age of fifty-five. I can’t get it out of my mind.

Folsom’s “Introduction” notes that “jarring metonymic discoveries continue in other poems as well” (58), and readers will find some of them in Mark Doty’s “What Is the Grass?”, which reflects on “faith in language” (489). Martin Espada, who earned a J. D. degree and worked as a tenants’ lawyer, reiterates “I see” to protest police brutality directed against “dark-skinned bodies falling in the street.” Projecting himself into the future, he wonders “How We Could Have Lived or Died This Way.” Espada believes that songs of insurrection can effect dynamic social change and mimics Whitman the *revolutionaire* throughout his own poem. The headnote is from Whitman’s “To a Foil’d European Revolutionaire” (490-91). Marie Howe’s “Singularity” closes the tonally diverse sequence. It’s fitting that she leaves us with lots of questions: “Do you sometimes want to wake up to the singularity / we once were?” Quoting

Whitman (“*For every atom belonging to me as good / Belongs to you*”), she asks, “Remember?”

I’ll close with a quick look at what Whitman has to say about “The Poetry of the Future.” It is an under-read essay that was published in the *North American Review* in February 1881 and slightly revised for *Collected Prose*, and it includes extensive quotations from a British critic who denigrated American poets (Whitman himself excepted) for their lack of wholeness. To demonstrate this point, the critic claimed that “American poets show better in an anthology than in the collected volumes of their works.” Whitman didn’t commit himself on how best to read American poets (the quoted passage is a long one), but he did say this: “Meanwhile, Democracy waits the coming of its bards in silence in twilight—but ‘tis the twilight of the dawn” (*LOA* 1030). The word *anthology* feels inadequate to describe *Measure*’s spangles, and we need someone like Whitman to come up with a new one. Meanwhile, I will return to the birthday book’s riches, think more about marimba y bongó, and muse on the happiness of trees.

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