

did things by halves. He never knew what leisure was. He was still working shortly before his death at fifty-seven years of age. He was younger than Whitman by thirteen years and died three years before him. In a way he was a pathetic failure, all the more as he also wanted to be an inventor like Edison and wasted time and money making experiments, pottering about and never finding anything. His intimate friendship with Whitman made him happy, but his passion and obstinacy in discussion led to a ten-year estrangement and to the break-up of his marriage. To make matters worse, the premature deaths of both his son and his daughter affected him deeply. Yet, he carried on to the end stoically, heroically; without a word of complaint.

After Jerome Loving's excellent study of O'Connor *the writer* in his book *Walt Whitman's Champion*, we thus have now an authentic portrait of O'Connor *the man*. Actually we get more than the man, for Florence Freedman generously provides us with information about the numerous minor figures which gravitated round him, and, very often, Whitman steals the show, as was to be expected, but this makes the book all the more valuable.

University of Paris-Sorbonne

ROGER ASSELINEAU

William Heyen, *Eight Poems for Saint Walt*. Roslyn, New York: The Stone House Press, 1985. 13 pp. \$20. [Limited edition: 26 lettered copies, and 135 numbered and signed copies.]

In this handsomely designed chapbook with three striking wood engravings by John De Pol, William Heyen continues the century-old tradition of talking back to Walt Whitman. Like countless poets before him—from Swinburne to Richard Eberhard, from Pound to Louis Simpson, from Lorca to Erica Jong—Heyen evokes Whitman in his own poems in an attempt to complete the embrace that Whitman initiated, to encounter Whitman face to face, to capture for a moment the magical joining that Whitman's poetry promised—a conquering of space and time within the charged field of a poem. These poems make a significant contribution to this tradition of continuing conversations with Whitman.

As Heyen's title suggests, there is a religious air to this book; Heyen associates Whitman with Jesus, a conjoining that has its own long tradition, going back of course to O'Connor, Bucke, Burroughs, Harned, Kennedy, and initiated in poetry in the 1880s by Robert Buchanan (who saw Whitman "Touch'd with some gentle glory of the Christ!"). Heyen grounds the Jesus-comparison in Whitman's *Drum-Taps* poem, "A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim." Heyen offers a vision of "Jesus and Walt together, building a fire at Shiloh" that seems to release "the souls of dead soldiers" from a cold black pond into the "island of light" formed in the sky above the fire; Jesus's redeeming of the dead is associated with Walt's redemption of the Civil War slain, Whitman's lilacs becoming as symbolically charged as roses in the Christian tradition: "Jesus' tears were tiny roses, / lilacs welled in Walt's eyes." The religious iconography and worshipful tone are perhaps the least satisfying elements of the book; Heyen has more original insights into an ongoing relationship with Whitman that he fortunately explores in some depth.

Heyen begins his series of poems with an image of walking over a pond of ice and

suddenly seeing “a face pressing upward” through the clear ice, then more faces, until he becomes aware of lives that exist across the planes dividing our present from the past and the future. These ice-locked souls are the “*Insistent Ones*” who “keep their own dimensions.” Heyen attempts to travel across the planes, through the dimensions, and in a poem called “Bread” he encounters Whitman as a young boy in the Whitman home in West Hills “in 1821 or ’22,” standing in the kitchen with Louisa, the aroma of freshly baked bread permeating the air:

Twenty panes in each window behind her
where the boy stands on a chair
to look for his future.

Heyen mirrors Whitman’s continual claim that he stops somewhere waiting for us, that he is with us, “men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence,” that “you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose.” Yes, Heyen answers, and *you*, Walt, are more in *my* meditations than even you might have supposed. As Whitman’s poems allow him to travel forward through time and space to address us directly and intimately (“Is it night? are we here together alone?”), Heyen’s poems allow *him* to travel back through space and time to address Walt directly and intimately. Heyen journeys back to a past in which Whitman is looking forward to our present: “His eyes are lasers / probing fields I’d walked through to be here. / He sees a city I now see / that I hadn’t seen, and now I know. . . .” Heyen’s syntax, like Whitman’s, loosens our grasp on temporal distinctions, erases clear demarcations between realms of past, present and future: “Yesterday, at Easter, I’ll see an altar-cross of lilies; / tomorrow, I saw a bed shrouded in late snow.” As in Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” the shifting and displaced verb tenses make time itself begin to seem slippery, malleable. The young Whitman, face pressed to the glass pane of his West Hills home looking to our future, separated from us by the clear glass of time, is like the face staring up at Heyen through the frozen surface of the pond, the “insistent one,” who must be encountered via the time-transcending power of a poet’s words.

Heyen senses the Long Island of the early 1820s hovering like a backdrop to the Long Island of the 1980s, and he tastes the bread of his vision—both a symbolic communion with Whitman and the very real rye from Louisa’s oven: “I can almost / taste it, and will, until the Island’s light / opens into the breathing elms in time / to place us there again. . . .” Heyen’s poems take us on a journey to the past, then place us, dazed, back in this world, “the one we wake in, / now, here.” In creating a palimpsest of past and present, Heyen reminds us of the *differences* as well as the conjoinings of our time with Whitman’s. In “Rails,” Heyen takes us to the subway below Whitman’s Broadway, to the subterranean and nightmarish present far removed from the ideal future that Whitman imagined. In “this new world” of a materialistic America, Heyen feels himself “lurch forward” in “time’s onrushing tunnel” while above the subway, in another dimension and at a far different pace, “along Broadway, under black stars, / Walt rides the coaches, calls and waves to us.” But it is no casual or naive merging of past and present that is enacted here; Heyen’s odd syntax—half affirmation, half questioning—leaves the very validity of such joinings very much unresolved: “These rails are still his ribs, are they? / We still hear horses in the tunnels, do we?”

At such times Heyen sounds more like Louis Simpson, asking Whitman if the open road leads to the used car lot, to a present seemingly used up, abused, hopelessly detached from Whitman's idealized visions of America. Heyen's pond, early in the book the container of mystery and the past and the "insistent ones," becomes in "The Host" polluted and dying: Heyen finds a turtle buried in the littered mud and proclaims it doomed in the "churned slime" that "blurs, burns, / bursts into black glare, every atom / of chemical water, rust residue, planet vomit / shining in death-light." If Whitman's present yielded a future that has settled into our present, our present seems destined to yield only an empty future, a "21st century, / empty, beyond illusion."

Heyen, a poet who grew up in Whitman territory, clearly has encountered the vital ghost of Whitman's continuing presence. He has often written of Whitman; earlier poems (in *Long Island Light* [1979]) presented his relationship to Whitman, and these new poems continue his exploration of the fertile edge between contemporary life and Whitman's dreams of an American future. Whitman's challenge to "Poets to Come" continues to produce, quite directly, some interesting poetry.

The University of Iowa

ED FOLSOM