

REVIEWS



DAVID GRANT. *“The Disenthralled Hosts of Freedom”: Party Prophecy in the Ante-bellum Editions of Leaves of Grass*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2021. Iowa Whitman Series.

In *The Disenthralled Hosts of Freedom*, David Grant presents a fascinating and thought-provoking reassessment of Whitman’s antebellum output through an extensive reading of the poet’s 1856 political tract, *The Eighteenth Presidency!* and the early editions of *Leaves of Grass*. While compelling, his conclusions leave Whitman scholarship in a peculiar place in the political landscape of 2021, since Grant’s primary intervention in the theoretical debate surrounding Whitman’s early works concerns the poet’s relationship to Republican party discourse—a conspicuously absent area of criticism in the pale of earlier work by Bill Hardwig and Robert J. Scholnick, as noted by Grant. Where those earlier works focused on Whitman in relation to the Whigs and the Democrats, the positionality of Whitman within the discursive formations of Republican rhetoric proves a more challenging task, and not simply because the proximity of Whitman to party is already a contestable field in a historical sense. Any argument proposing Whitman’s relationship to party becomes difficult precisely because the formal movements of *Leaves of Grass* present a politically minded text without attributing that political mind to any one party. Indeed, Grant highlights the “absence of those party signs in *Leaves of Grass*” as a critical point of his study regarding the salience of *The Eighteenth Presidency!*, a tract “so unqualifiedly Republican” that still shares “many of the tropes, associations, and national representations of his great poetry cycle.” How then, Grant asks, can scholars “account for those features common to the two works when they are shorn of their clear party markers?”

The poet’s style is consistent throughout the many iterations of *Leaves of Grass*. Recapitulating backwards, however, with a reading of *The Eighteenth Presidency!* as a politicized reorientation forward through *Leaves of Grass*, Grant considers the maneuvers of Whitman’s poetry in its use of multiple political tropes that existed as part of Republican discourse as well as the wider political battleground of the period: the tropes of “sovereign labor” in relation to the antislavery movement implicating the individual in self-consciousness and sovereignty; the typological dimensions of a historical sense between populace

and the founding fathers; the “thronging” sense applying itself to the power of collectivity; and the collective spirit of defiance in the face of conservative obedience.

Grant’s examination of each of these tropes is stunning, and the book’s principal dedication to a reading of Whitman in an antislavery mode is successful, with each chapter contributing to a complex political whole. However, in the shadow of this developing whole a mesh of content and form begins to take shape and slowly works at the distinctions between Whitman and the rhetorical discourse from which Grant’s argument claims he borrows. Alongside his general trepidation of seeing Whitman inundated within party contest in the early stages of the development of *Leaves of Grass*, Grant places Whitman in a privileged position, a *pathos of distance*, in relation to party rhetoric. Accordingly, Whitman is understood to be in close enough proximity to party discourse to “diagnose” social and political ills measure for measure with the Republicans, while also standing a far enough distance from that rhetoric to “promise a cure [to the ills related to party politics, both in source and instrument] independent of those offered by any one of the nation’s competing factions.” Although explicitly written in reference to the political project of *The Eighteenth Presidency!*, Grant’s analysis takes the early tract as the archetypal move freeing Whitman from party and opening the door to the use of tropes with a “free[dom] to abstract them from their source in the campaign contests and hence insinuate their new implications more fundamentally into the national imaginary.”

This position functions quite effectively for much of the text, with the first chapter identifying Whitman’s use of trope—the condemnation and distance of/ from party—for its effective abstraction and invocation of the people in combating “narratives of subservience.” These narratives return in the third chapter, where Grant considers poetic and party invocations of present relationships to the founding fathers. Similarly, Grant’s second chapter configures the historical context of Republican “free labor” as a touchstone-figure for the antislavery movement—a figure of progress that invokes the Republican standards of self-determination alongside political community threatened by the potential spread of slavery into the west. In Grant’s reading, for Whitman labor and the “labor poem” form the ground for a political sovereignty of embodied action given possibility by, and giving meaning to, the criticisms of party found in his first chapter. In Grant’s third chapter, however, the question of labor gives rise to the question of slavery, but now with the rhetorical trope of “the founders’ revolutionary achievement.” Here, through a trope that reduces by “universal and pervasive” use its distinctions in deployment, the Republican Party found itself positioned to assert a dedication to the founders’ vision which had otherwise

been “inadequate” and ineffective. In this regard, Whitman’s work is intensely focused on the antislavery movement and the maneuvering of political rhetoric to reverse political consensus in relation to the founders’ goals. Where any party had the ability to use the trope to declare the “conservative” necessity of the founder’s vision (thereby, a call to non-action or sovereignty) or the heralding of fulfillment (of the father’s successes and sacrifices), Whitman’s rhetoric was able to mend together antislavery politics and the compulsive, spontaneous necessity of action. As Grant puts it, “memory and performance thrive in a reproductive system where the undernourishment of one would starve the other. The Revolution will have happened only when treated as a herald of what the people must immediately do.”

Each of Grant’s prospective “tropes” offers something—often an ideological or social effect—unable to be treated in similar terms toward similar aims in party discourse. Such is especially the case in the fourth and fifth chapters where Grant offers readings of Whitman’s “Poem of the Road,” a poem he suggests throngs the collective while deferring to “Calamus” its realization into a post-universally binding community. It is in the “Calamus” poems that these affective dimensions of community, like sovereign labor and the typological reading of the founders, become a “call for action” rather than a “medium and the motivation for political restraint.” Thus Grant shows Whitman charging tropes into enriching and embodying tools for political struggle which, despite these transformations, still leaves a “debt” owed to the “affiliation” with a particular set of distilled Republican operations, reinvigorated by the possibilities of the party from which Whitman seemingly worked so hard to distance himself. It is here where Whitman himself becomes the potentially appropriated and reinvigorated “trope” that leaves Grant’s argument in a difficult position.

As he concludes his theoretical narrative, Grant considers the impetus of consciousness in party discourse as that which spells out the conditions of possibility for partisan struggle towards “completing and hence truly realizing the Revolution.” Channeling the idea of “becoming,” he writes:

In a party’s own representations, less important than any contest for power was the conversion narrative that would decide that contest: each voter traveling down a course from inertia, isolation, and incoherent outrage toward recognition, awakening, affiliation, and redemption. . . . No matter how fantastical this narrative appears, it authorizes us to treat party discourse as an important part of the rhetorical field to which other varieties of nineteenth-century national self-fashioning belong.

Here, precisely, is the crux of Grant’s project: the narrative he offers is not “fantastical.” Rather, what appears fantastical—the non-linear yet multi-staged process of becoming, with its end not a prescribed party initiative but

the product of a reinvigorated populace with the conditions of reconciliatory redemption present to it—is all too familiar in contemporaneous frames outside the context of the antislavery movement. Without the fantastical element of the argument, then, there lies a consistent gap in the formal dimensions of what Whitman offers. Where Grant proposes such a “conversion narrative” as potentially “fantastical,” he claims the value of his position lies in the “*author[ization]*” of an approach to a discursive field which has already occurred—it is an authorization and discursive uncovering that has given space to the approach he offers, but that works against Whitman’s poetry.

It is apt to return at this point to Grant’s introductory maneuvers throughout his reading of *The Eighteenth Presidency!* that offer differing perspectives on Whitman’s relation to political discourse. “Echoes of [George Frederickson’s 1965 reading] that the tract floated free from party,” he argues, “can be nuanced or unqualified. They range from Betsy Erkkila’s balanced conclusion that ‘[a]lthough Whitman was closest in his views to Fremont’s Free-Soil platform, in *The Eighteenth Presidency!* he refuses to identify with any particular political party’ to a more extreme position that the denunciation of party amounts to a renunciation of political involvement.” We should ask whether what Grant offers is inadvertently—in a reversed form of his own argument on Whitman—an extreme position on the poet’s early “debts” to Republican party discourse through his empty, non-ideological yet functional, and undoubtedly political, use of formal tropes borrowed from and channeled through their discursive frame. The “fantastical” work at play in *The Disenthralled Hosts of Freedom* is not the developmental model it traces in Whitman, then, but its seeing in Whitman a continued dialectical enmeshing of a form/content distinction that disguises as much as it reveals. For all that Grant’s analysis does to position Whitman’s politics outside the frame of Republicanism—with resemblance and iteration rather than repetition and translation (however much “translation” seems to be an apt conceptual position to consider difference)—its excellent aesthetic arguments leave Whitman entrenched within the interlocked tropes and formal rhetorical devices of the party.

In this sense, Grant’s novel opening of discourse in the spaces between the works of Hardwig and Scholnick is an enclosure around Whitman in which poet and party form a system home to “thronging,” affective community, typological relation to the forefathers, and a spontaneous self-directing labour, all ostensibly emptied of their Republican ideological content, yet incomprehensible as prophetic tropes without their framing within that field of discourse. Moreover, such an enclosure presents a Whitman whose early poetic output succumbs to and reproduces a set of ideological maneuvers that further a

redemption narrative distinct from its antislavery origins and which lends its voice to those left “articulat[ing] the most extravagant claims of national regeneration.” However, when examined as a rhetoric beyond the intentional thrust of an antislavery discourse of redemption—that is, when examined through the dialectical process of Grant’s analysis—Whitman’s prospective politics (and enjoining rhetoric) become devoid of any such “claims of natural regeneration.” Instead, Grant allows them to exist in a rhetorical field populated by “claims” ironically emptied of rhetorical necessity. Despite these challenges, David Grant’s work offers an invigorating and complex set of political and aesthetic interrogations of Whitman’s poetic output which ask us to reconsider and take seriously the poet’s relationship with Republican discourse. In taking such a possibility seriously, however, we must consider whether the use of rhetorical tropes that are perpendicular to a certain discursive arena—through a noteworthy and all-too-emphasized and equivocal distance and proximity—may yet leave the rhetorician both buried in its trappings and inadvertently free from more radical, even conservative, poetic potential.

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WALT WHITMAN. *Lebenseiche, moosbehangen. Live Oak, with Moss*, translated and edited by Heinrich Detering. Aachen: Rimbaud, 2021. 70pp.

Heinrich Detering, professor of Modern German and Comparative Literature Studies at Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, has worked, or is working on, a variety of topics, including ecocritical and gay literature, and the writings of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Mann, Bertolt Brecht, and Günter Grass. A poet himself, he is also a translator who has rendered Bob Dylan’s poems and prose into German. Now he has come out with a small but interesting bilingual edition of a cycle of Whitman’s poems that until recently was primarily known only to Whitman specialists.

Live Oak, with Moss is a cycle of twelve manuscript poems headed with Roman numerals which are part of University of Virginia Valentine-Barrett collection. It includes such poems as those Whitman would later entitle “I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing,” “What Think you I take my Pen in Hand to Record” and “When I Heard at the Close of the Day,” that center on the poet’s emotional relationship with another man. Whitman at one point probably considered this work an integral whole to be published in that format and order.