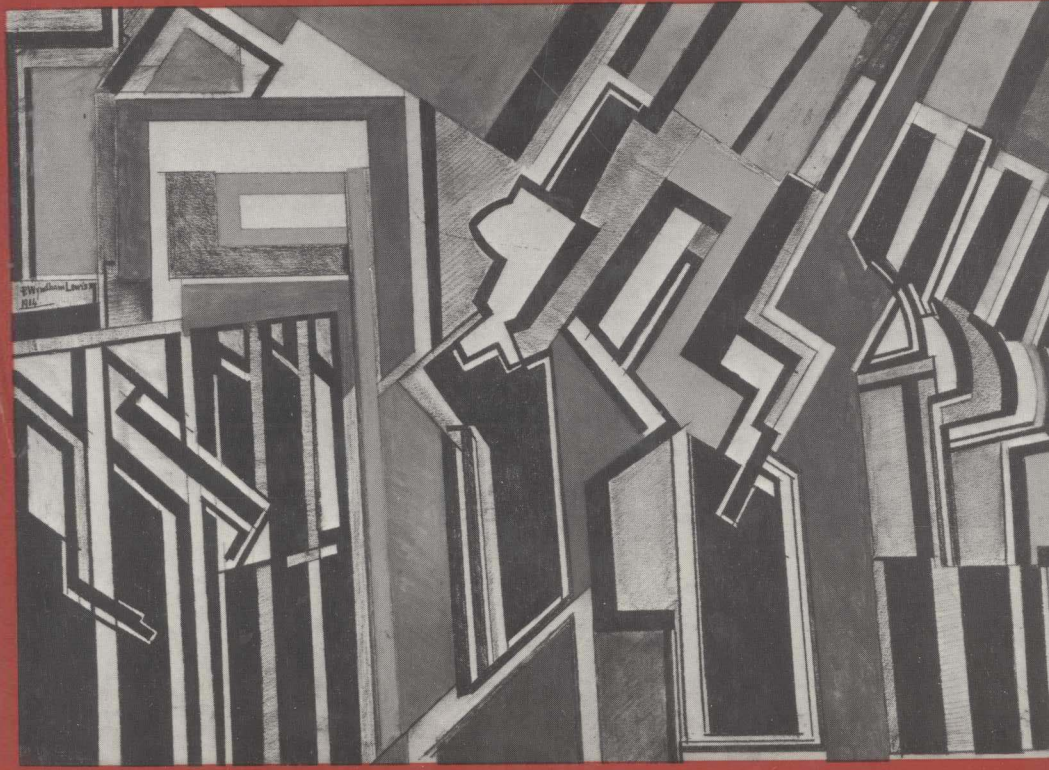
MODERN AMERICAN POETRY



edited by

R. W. CHERBIE BUTTERFIELD

Critical Studies Series

MODERN AMERICAN POETRY

MODERN AMERICAN POETRY

edited by

R. W. (Herbie) Butterfield

VISION
and
BARNES & NOBLE

Vision Press Limited
Fulham Wharf
Townmead Road
London SW6 2SB

and

Barnes & Noble Books
81 Adams Drive
Totowa, NJ 07512

ISBN (UK) 0 85478 385 7
ISBN (US) 0 389 20460 9

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Unwin Brothers Ltd.,
Old Woking, Surrey.
Phototypeset by Galleon Photosetting,
Ipswich, Suffolk.
MCMLXXXIV

Contents

Introduction

by R. W. (HERBIE) BUTTERFIELD

Emerson and Poe are the two most influential American poets and poetic theorists to have lived and written before those poets considered in this volume, at whose head stands Whitman, the founding father of modern American poetry, of a poetry both—let the words be spoken slowly and emphatically—modern and American. Emerson's celebrated dictum yoking the expansive American nation with a poetry appropriate to its character is to be found in his essay, 'The Poet' of 1844, where he announces: 'America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres.' Some five years later, in the last year of his life, Poe made a statement, equally famous but of utterly different bearing, wherein he devoted himself in principle to a pure poetry, existing in a sphere of technique and artifice alternative to the natural and historical world: 'There neither exists nor *can* exist any work more thoroughly dignified—more supremely noble than this very poem—this poem *per se*—this poem which is a poem and nothing more—this poem written solely for the poem's sake.' At about the same time Whitman was discovering the wider American continent on his journey from New York to New Orleans and back, and was beginning to experiment with the poetic forms that were soon to shape *Leaves of Grass*, the life's work that in 1888 in 'A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads' he termed in retrospect 'an attempt, from first to last, to put a *Person*, a human being (myself, in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, in America,) freely, fully and truly on record'.

These three remarks from a century and more ago on the nature of an envisaged or an achieved poetry may serve between them to describe the principal concerns of the

American poetry that has followed. These are, simply named, America, the poem '*per se*', and the self: America, perceived extensively as a whole or intensively as a region or locus—America, exalted for its extravagant, creative possibility or execrated for its abysmal, destructive actuality; the poem, conceived either as the imagination's subjective haven or as craft's objective structure—the poem, small and accomplished or lifelong and interminable; and the self, in general tendency more isolated from society and the other than its old world counterpart—the self, expressed, explored, incarcerated, liberated, revealed, confessed, indulged, proclaimed. America, the poem, the self; and, of course, these elements conjoined: the American poem, the American self, the American poetic self.

This American poetry that began to come into its own in the mid-nineteenth century through the work in particular of Emerson, Poe and Whitman, has become in the twentieth century one of the great national literary achievements, composing a body of work remarkable on the one hand for its exceptional subtlety, on the other for its extraordinary vitality, and altogether for its amazing variety. American readers do not need an Englishman to tell them this; and English readers should not, although it is to be feared that too many do. (Strange, how little known in England still, outside a very small world of initiates, poets and professional specialists, are all save a handful of Americans: a back-handed tribute perhaps to American poetry's distinctiveness, its foreignness for the English.)

This collection of essays examines the work of some of that art's major practitioners, opening with the two brightest luminaries of the later nineteenth century, Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, although Dickinson's light was fated to shine only posthumously. There follow essays on six poets from the great generation of modernists, who came to the fore in the first decades of the century, to work and write, long-lived most of them, through into the 1960s. Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams are the acknowledged masters here, Marianne Moore and Hart Crane also assured in their standing, with Robinson Jeffers presently somewhat less secure in his reputation, but a poet, for all his eccentricity, his off-centredness, of major stature. The remaining essays

concentrate on figures who may have begun to publish volumes in the 1930s but most of whose work has been done since the Second World War and to whom recognition has come in more recent decades. The two, so different New Englanders, Charles Olson and Robert Lowell, here loom largest, in several senses; and the four other poets treated are in turn invigoratingly different from one another, in their casts of mind, their subjects and their forms. How continually entertaining, how broadly instructive is that literary culture which possesses contemporaneous poets as different as J. V. Cunningham from Edward Dorn, as George Oppen from Robert Duncan, or as, a generation previously, Marianne Moore from Hart Crane, or as the ur-examples indeed, Whitman from Dickinson, Emerson from Poe: tokens perhaps of American individualism, triumphs certainly of individuality.

The editor of the collection is a member of the University of Essex Department of Literature, whose first Chairman in the 1960s was Donald Davie, the poet, critic and authority on Ezra Pound, an Englishman of course but one who on leaving Essex was to take up residence chiefly in the United States. At Essex Davie ensured that a major preoccupation of his Department was with the poetry of various linguistic cultures and historical periods, but in particular with modern poetry, and in particular again with American poetry. Early on he invited to the Department the youngest poet considered here, Edward Dorn, who between 1965 and 1975 spent five academic years at Essex. After Davie left, his successor as Chairman, Philip Edwards, invited to the Department another of the poets discussed here, Robert Lowell, who at the time of occupancy of his Essex post from 1970 to 1973 had probably the widest renown of all American poets then living. Two other American poets, Tom Clark and Ted Berrigan, were also associated with the Department, before economic belts began to be worn tightly and bleakness descended. It is in the manner of a small testament to the University of Essex's aesthetic faith in American poetry and to its professional expertise in the subject that all who have been asked and have agreed to contribute to this volume have a close connection with Essex, as teachers or students, present or past, and in one case as the longstanding external examiner of the Essex M.A. in American Poetry.

1

Whitman's Anti-Grammar of the Universe

by JACKIE KAYE

Whitman's essay of 1888, 'A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads', sums up thirty years of constant revision of his radically heterodox poetic sequence *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman describes the poems as his 'carte de visite to the coming generations of the New World',[1] thus quoting and comparing himself with the famous French Egyptologist Champollion. Champollion's *Egyptian Grammar* had for the first time deciphered the markings on the tombs and monuments of the Nile empire and translated them into the language of nineteenth-century France. On his deathbed Champollion had pronounced his *Grammar* to be his 'carte de visite' to the world. He had found that the apparently random designs on ancient Egyptian monuments were based upon a discoverable order; Whitman on the contrary is concerned with a radical disordering of language and events. The language of Whitman's poetry is pragmatic and affective and it exists in a paratactical relationship with the world of objects and actions, neither subordinated to nor subordinating that world. Foucault in *The Order of Things* announces the birth of literature in the dissolution of the link between knowledge and language:

> . . . that reciprocal kinship between knowledge and language. The nineteenth century was to dissolve that link, and to leave

> behind it, in confrontation, a knowledge closed in upon itself and a pure language that had become in nature and function, enigmatic—something that has been called, since that time, *Literature*.[2]

For Whitman however that reciprocity still exists and his poetry is disturbingly unenigmatic. Like Pound, Whitman writes poetry which is 'a mimesis of some external and consequently verifiable event'[3] and thus, instinctively, he writes the contradiction of all that was written as 'literature' in the last century:

> The Old World has had the poems of myths, fictions, feudalism, conquests, caste, dynasties, wars, and splendid exceptional characters and affairs, which have been great; but the New World needs the poems of realities and science and of the democratic average and basic equality, which shall be greater. In the centre of all, and object of all, stands the Human Being.[4]

Whitman's authority as a poet derives from two sources. There is the historical moment upon which the 1855 Preface relies: 'The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races.'[5] This is the authority which, when the tension is slackened, gives us 'The Song of the Exposition' and the kind of unrestrained nationalism which disfigures some of the later poems. Yet this kind of authority is a real need in a poet who does not assert himself as the sole composer of his own songs. Whitman's assertion that *Leaves of Grass* would not exist without the war of secession[6] is an acknowledgement of the need for a firm root in the historical event and a sense of being part of the tribe whose moment the poet is living even when that unrestrained lack of humility out of which all individual works of art are created is moving towards a sentence which will announce the 'mortuum est' of history.

So the Preface of 1855 invites a reciprocity from the reader which invokes the context of community and shared culture and validation. The poet is an arranger, a reference point around which the moment coheres, and that moment is specific: the United States of America in the middle of the nineteenth century. If the Civil War gave Whitman a sense of validation, then that validation was double. The *Drum Taps* poems commemorate the feeling of being one of the tribe,[7] but

'When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd' is not only a tribute to Lincoln but a closely worked poem celebrating the regenerative powers of artistic creation. Ten years later Whitman wrote 'Passage to India' where the terror of isolation, of being cast out from the pack, is masked by a simultaneous defiant assertion of the sole validity of the mythic consciousness in its celebration of death disguised as a commemoration of technological innovation as the most available form of patriotism. 'A Backward Glance', then, is not a guide to what we can expect to find in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. By 1888 Whitman had become far more conscious of the problem of authority, and the essay can be seen in many ways as a post-hoc justificatory exercise. However, it is truthful:

> I had my choice when I commenc'd. I bid neither for soft eulogies, big money returns, nor the approbation of existing schools and conventions. . . . I have had my say entirely my own way.[8]

The ability to speak out of the self is the source of Whitman's power and subversive force. It is true that 'I have had my say . . .' could stand as the epitaph for the most élitist kind of poetry. It all hinges on what is said, the value of the self that is uttered. The self that Whitman speaks is not exclusive, it invites response and identification; yet the power of speech is located in a religious consciousness set against the historical moment. This is the other source of Whitman's double authority. He must speak at one and the same time of the permanent truths he has experienced and the timebound facts through which he has lived, and to do that he has to find a language which can be simultaneously transcendent and contingent and remain authentic.

I have written so far of Whitman's language in terms of speech, the word out loud. And this is the way Whitman himself refers to his poetry; he always talks of saying, singing, chanting. Whitman's poems are uttered not written. They offend the eye as they ramble across the page. They have no metre, no rhyme, no stanzaic form. They remain unpredictable and present real problems of readability as they spurn narrative and indulge in indiscrete and inappropriate use of

the written word. These lines mimic speech in that they seek to capture its ephemerality and ability to shift from one plane of experience to another in one breath: 'I concentrate towards them that are nigh, I wait on the doorslab.'[9]

Speech is anarchic, it implies freedom of a radical kind; it is not recoverable, it can never be unsaid. The only arrangement in it is that of the individual lungs and tongue and consciousness. Time and again we find Whitman exhilarating in this multifarious possibility—'Speech is the twin of my vision'—and exhorting himself, 'Walt, you contain enough, why don't you let it out then?'[10] What comes out is not literature, for literature is finite, enclosing, contained; it is the rooms and rows of books on shelves which Whitman invites us to abandon. Yet his long rambling lines are more than a deconstruction of poetic form or even an attempt to find an equivalent for the exciting temporariness of speech. They are a way of locating and justifying the nature of knowledge in a manner that is not predetermined or metaphoric. The core of this attempt is Section 5 of 'Song of Myself', and the experience described there pervades Whitman's poetry. Upon the reading of these lines depends the validity of the whole of *Leaves of Grass* so that if they are read as symbolic or allegorical, then the whole structure fails. This single moment of intense religious illumination has to be heard as something that really happened:

> I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you,
> And you must not be abased to the other.
> Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat,
> Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom or lecture, not even the best,
> Only the lull I like, the hum of your valvèd voice.
>
> I mind how we lay such a transparent summer morning.
> How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd over upon me,
> And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart,
> And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held my feet.

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and
knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth,
And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and
the women my sisters and lovers,
And that a kelson of the creation is love,
And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
And mossy scabs of the worm fence, heap'd stones, elder,
mullein and poke-weed.[11]

It is out of this experience that the authority to speak arises in terms of the mythic force of the poem. What is spoken reconstitutes that individual mystical illumination as universally available: 'And what I shall assume you shall assume,/ For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.'[12] What is celebrated is the connectedness of life; differentiation and selection are a kind of impiety. Systems of ordering, control, containment are discounted:

I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,
Nature without check with original energy
. . . . .
Through me many long dumb voices,
Voices of interminable generations of prisoners and slaves,
Voices of the diseas'd and despairing and of thieves and
dwarfs.
. . . . .
Through me forbidden voices,
Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil'd and I remove the veil,
Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur'd.[13]

Out of this capacity to transfigure and be transfigured emerges a self, announced as 'Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son'.[14] This self, like those of another epic hero, Odysseus the man of many turns, is both a guise and a disguise. It is the product of divine transformations like those undergone by the Greek hero who, like Whitman, is seldom named but when he is, it is to great effect. What matters is not the socially bestowed identity but the capacity to be one with the universe in its phases and flows and that harmony which is discovered not ordered.

Whitman is composing a kind of anti-grammar of the universe. If we can take the invention of grammar as a system of ordering the disorderly and mysterious power of speech and reducing it to a series of laws, then Whitman's anti-grammar releases once more the flows between speech and the universe: 'To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow/ All are written to me, and I must get what the writing means.'[15] What is also unwritten in this process is the individual personality. Life exists to reproduce itself and thus no particular life form can be privileged:

> Urge and urge and urge
> Always the procreant urge of the world
> . . . . .
> To elaborate is no avail
> . . . . .
> Showing the best and dividing it from the worst age vexes age.[16]

Whitman's equation of all beings is sometimes connected to the idea of democracy or 'en-masse', that is, it is linked to the political institutions of the United States. But Whitman the poet is not really concerned with an end to social inequalities, although Whitman the journalist might have been. In 'The Sleepers' master and slave exist in a complementarity which is a product of a different kind of perception than the political. Significantly, however, this poem of the first edition was transposed in the final edition of *Leaves of Grass* to the back of the book along with that other awkward celebration of death, 'Passage to India'. What Whitman celebrates is in fact the explosion and atomization of individual identity into a total sharedness of life. It is true that this freeing of self from form is alibied by Whitman in terms of the hobo-tramp figure. In 'Song of the Open Road' there is a double movement outward. There is the invitation to freedom from social constraint: 'Divesting myself of the holds that would hold me'.[17] Yet there is also that sense of fluid interaction which mocks all distinctions and turns words into objects: 'You objects that call from diffusion my meanings and give them shape!'[18]

Whitman often rejects the inauthentic social self imposed on the fluid contradictoriness of life, the self which is 'not the Me