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Robert Pattison. *The Triumph of Vulgarity: Rock Music in the Mirror of Romanticism.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1987. xii, 280 pp. $19.95.

Once again, it appears that Whitman is associating with the wrong company. He has, according to Robert Pattison's *The Triumph of Vulgarity,* become the poet of America that he wanted to be, but not in any way he could have foreseen. In contemporary America, the author asserts, "Vulgarity has triumphed" (p. 3), and rock music "is the music of triumphant vulgarity" (p. 9), just as Whitman is "the prophet of vulgarity, and *Leaves of Grass* is its Bible" (p. 19). If the present state of American culture is dismal, and the author clearly thinks it is, the reason is that the tendencies and attitudes of Whitman's poetry have prevailed; and *that,* the author insists, is a disaster of immeasurable proportions.

Professor Pattison explains that the vulgarian is characterized not by bad taste, but rather by the absence of taste altogether. Whitman's loving grasp of his world in all its parts is therefore demeaning rather than enhancing, since he lacks discrimination. If everything is infinite, then nothing has particular value. Whitman's romantic pantheism thus reduces all experience and all phenomena to the same common level, artless and unenhanced. Spears of grass or the brown ants in the fields become, in Whitman's view, as significant as any work of nature or of art.

One wonders how Whitman would respond to some of Pattison's judgments—for example, "Whitman's democracy is Vulgaria by another name" (p. 27). He might, for one thing, be gratified to find himself treated as a figure of such importance in a book as impressive, as idiosyncratic, and as oddly compelling as *The Triumph of Vulgarity.* Pattison ranges widely through literature, philosophy, and rock music; clearly he has spent more hours listening to rock music than he would care to count. One can only admire such selfless devotion to scholarship.

And yet, if Whitman is to be labeled the father of contemporary American vulgarity and thus of rock music (p. 10), one must ask if he would care to acknowledge his paternity. I suspect not, because the portrait of Whitman in *The Triumph of Vulgarity* is, finally, a caricature.

As the father of rock, Whitman would naturally share its essential features—that is, to be "crude, loud, and tasteless" (p. 4). This view of Whitman is of course nothing new; as early as 1855 a reviewer for the *Critic* (London) called Whitman "a poet whose indecencies stink in the nostrils," adding that "Walt Whitman is as unacquainted with art, as a hog is with mathematics." Among many other comments in the same vein we have Ezra Pound's outburst of 1909: "[Whitman's] crudity is an exceeding great stench, but"—Pound adds, anticipating Pattison—"it *is* America." More recently, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (second edition, 1985) editorially informs the student in the first footnote to "Song of Myself" that the poem is "undeniably uncouth" (p. 1986). Whitman is of course willing to risk being "crude, loud, and tasteless," as well as "uncouth," but these are hardly dominant characteristics. At his best, or near to it—which means in an enviably large number of poems—Whitman exhibits a delicacy, a subtlety, and an attention to fine and exquisite detail that moves him far from the throbbing coarseness of most rock.

But the question is never settled. Since 1855, Whitman's admirers have had to insist that, yes, he is an artist, he does care about language, he is a poet. Whitman himself, of course, liked to disparage his art, as though his poems really *were* barbaric yawps, the voice of "Nature without check with original energy"; but that is hardly

the end of the matter. When Pattison asserts that *Fun* is "the highest aesthetic achievement of a rigorous pantheism like Whitman's" (p. 197), he has let his curmudgeonly suspicions lead him far afield. One can only say: Open your copy of *Leaves of Grass*—and read it.

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