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REVIEWS

WALT WHITMAN. *Song of Myself and Other Poems*, selected and introduced by Robert Hass, with a lexicon of the poem by Robert Hass and Paul Ebenkamp. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010. 260 pp.

C. K. WILLIAMS. *On Whitman*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. xvi + 187 pp.

In 1981, a century after Whitman issued the final edition of *Leaves of Grass*, I wrote that "here, a hundred years later, our poets still talk about, talk to, talk back to Walt Whitman." That was in my introduction to *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*, which collected nearly a hundred poems and essays by poets from Whitman's time to the then-present, examining how "again and again poets come to grips with [Whitman's] definition of what the American poet should (and should not) be, respond to his development of the poetic line, his concepts of poetic subject and object," as they "argue with him, agree with him, revise, question, reject, and accept him." Jim Perlman, Dan Campion, and I issued an expanded edition of *The Measure of His Song* in 1998, bringing the poetic conversation with Whitman right up to the edge of the twenty-first century. And now, a decade into that new century, the talking back to Whitman is increasing and becoming more international in scope, as poets from around the world respond more and more frequently to him. The ongoing dialogue with Whitman in the United States remains intense as well, as is evidenced by the appearance of these two remarkable books by two of America's best-known and most accomplished poets. Robert Hass and C.K. Williams are both Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winners; Hass has been Poet Laureate of the U.S. Both are accomplished translators. One is from California (and teaches at Berkeley), the other from New Jersey (and teaches at Princeton). Their poetry is as different as their geographical associations: Hass's poetry is marked by concision and a haiku-like meditative intensity; Williams's work is known for its long, discursive, unrhymed lines. In later poems, however, Hass's lines have expanded, and some of his poems bleed into prose, while in Williams's later poems, the lines have often shrunk and are broken in surprising places, as in the early William Carlos Williams. Hass and Williams come together in their admiration for Whitman, and each of these new books is a substantial addition to the long tradition of America's poets talking back to Whitman.

Hass's book is a selection of Whitman's poems and, like any selection of one poet's work made by another poet, tells us as much about the poet doing the selecting as about the poet whose work is being selected. Hass gives us the original 1855 version of the poem that would come to be called "Song of Myself" (anachronistically titled here as "Song of Myself" instead of "Leaves of Grass," Whitman's 1855 title for the poem) followed by the final (1881)

version (here labeled the "Deathbed Edition: 1891"). In a brief, engaging introduction, Hass ruminates on the "new kind of formal structure for poetry" that Whitman was after: "He wanted music . . . and he wanted something like the feel and realistic detail that was characteristic of journalism and the novel in his day, which was for him the idiom of the vivid present." That idiom is what fascinates Hass, himself a master of the range of diction and tonality that English affords, and so he finds "the richest and most surprising thing" about "Song of Myself" to be "its language": "Whitman draws his diction from every level of written and spoken language available to him—the speech of the streets—'the blab of the pave,' he calls it (an example of what I mean), the speech of the crafts, the languages of the professions, the vocabularies of science and technology and law and the pulpit."

Following the two versions of the poem, then, Hass—along with poet Paul Ebenkamp—offers a "lexicon" of Whitman's diction, a feast of definitions of the odd, surprising, sometimes arcane, sometimes original, sometimes bizarre words that appear in "Song of Myself." The lexicon traces what Hass calls "the raffishness and playfulness" of the poem's diction, examining "usages we didn't recognize and others that it simply never would have occurred to us to use." Consulting nineteenth-century editions of Webster's as well as the *OED*, the *Dictionary of Americanisms*, the *Dictionary of American Regional English*, and a number of scholarly books on Whitman, Hass and Ebenkamp have produced a tool that even seasoned students of Whitman will learn from and will have fun doing so. Part of the fun is in seeing which of Whitman's words jump out at Hass, as when he pauses at the line, "I fly the flight of the fluid and swallowing soul," and comments simply, "swallowing !!!" Or when he stops at "What burnt the gums of the redcoat at Saratoga when he surrendered his brigades," and notes: "burnt the gums ???" At other times, as with the brilliant discussion of the butcher boy's "shuffle and breakdown" as dancing techniques emerging from African-American culture, the definitions are expansive and revealing.

Hass concludes the book with a selection of additional Whitman poems, including the expected ones—"Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," "Out of the Cradle," and so on—but also some unexpected, very brief poems, like "A Farm Picture," "As Adam Early in the Morning," "The Runner," and "After the Supper and Talk." No Hass selection of Whitman would be complete, of course, without some attention to the Whitman of the brief, intense meditation, what Hass calls "his brilliant and surprising experiments in the short form," which, he says, "anticipate the imagist procedures of the young modernists who came a half century later," and some of which "have almost no antecedents in the lyric poetry that came before him." Hass's selection of Whitman now joins the group of my favorite "Selected Whitman" volumes chosen by prominent poets—for me, that group includes the selections by Langston Hughes, Robert Creeley, and Galway Kinnell. In each case, we are given insight into how one of Whitman's "poets to come" has talked back to him, not only by writing an illuminating introductory essay, but more importantly by revealing in which of Whitman's poems each poet has found particular power and inspiration. These selected volumes, then, are neglected resources for understanding a

poet's peculiar and idiosyncratic aesthetics, as each shapes Whitman's work into a distinct body of poetry that generates his own.

C. K. Williams's *On Whitman* is constructed as an extended meditation on Whitman and his work, though it contains within that meditation its own substantial anthology of Whitman's poems, because Williams quotes Whitman generously and at length throughout the book. There's probably a page of Whitman's poetry for every two or three pages of Williams's prose. Williams's commentary, at its best, serves as a revelatory glimpse into why he is drawn to each passage, what its particular thrill is. And "thrill" is the tone of this volume: Williams reveals, with searing poetic insight, how, "more than with any other poet's, Whitman's words sound as though they're being generated as they arrive on the page, spontaneously, with no premeditation, no plotting." Williams knows that this impression is a false one and in fact results from Whitman's incessant revision; the spontaneity comes not through spontaneous revelation but with a great deal of plotting and premeditation. But the result is electric: "I'm moved every time, by excitement and gratitude. Whenever I turn to the *Leaves of Grass*, the power of the poems is undiminished, the sense of wonder, of something like awe, of transport, not in the least lessened." Whitman's poems produce for Williams, again and again, "the same flood of constant surprise, of something almost like disbelief." Williams invites us to hop on as he takes us on an exhilarating ride through Whitman's poetry.

While Hass acknowledges the "music" of Whitman's poetry but dwells in the diction, Williams does the opposite, immersing himself in what he calls Whitman's "ever-refreshing, ever-renewing music." He wants to correct the misperception that Whitman is somehow prosaic, lacking a poetic ear: "commentators tend to neglect the brilliance of his ear for the smaller scales of language music, his stunning ability to put together completely unlikely and compelling combinations of words. Often he can be quite subtle in the intricacies of his music, moving through paired vowel patterns. . . . But often, too, more often, he devises dances of vowels that can vault the literal meanings of words into sound combinations that create meanings far beyond their utterance. Things like, 'the blab of the pave,' 'lacy jags,' 'flaunt of the sunshine I need not your bask.'" Coming upon such phrases, Hass glosses the words ("blab," he explains, is "Whitman's wonderful invention of the city street as a babbler"), but Williams just listens to the music, content to live with "those lines the precise meaning of which can only be guessed at." Williams grounds all his general pronouncements in the specifics of beautifully selected, extended passages of Whitman's poetry. From start to finish, though, it is Whitman's *music* that forms the intrigue: "When and how Whitman first heard his music is a mystery still, perhaps *the* mystery." So Williams illustrates "that surge of language sound, verse sound, that pulse, that swell, that sweep, which was to become his medium, his chariot—just to try to imagine him consciously devising it is almost as astounding as it must have been for him to discover it." He tracks the "stressy, surging pulses," "his wandering syntax, his phrase-determined rhetoric," that demonstrated to Whitman that "his perceptions were all new, and all his." While Hass admires the intensity of some of Whitman's later poems, Williams frets over the attenuation of this music in Whitman's postbellum work: "he all but untuned the original power

of his symphony. He was having fatal trouble sounding like himself, the poet he had been, whose music was diluted now, and weary."

When Whitman's music is working, Williams finds it moving to the beat of the body, to the meters of sex and desire: "most remarkable to me when I read the poems again isn't their social-revolutionary implications, but rather their exultant sensual exuberance, the unabashed (to say the least) delight Whitman is able to convey about sex, how large the pleasure his character takes in the sexual, and how the erotic is extended out past body, past psyche, to eroticize all of reality." Williams is masterful at articulating the in-body/out-of-body ecstasy that many feel when reading Whitman: "His body inhales the world, ingests it; he devours reality with eyes and ears and nose and tongue, and always in a way in which all that passes through him is elevated, enhanced, intensified." Struggling with the way Whitman was cast as a religious prophet by his early disciples and by later critics, Williams finally settles on his own definition of Whitman's new "religion": "it would be a religion of the imagination," a kind of anti-religion that sought to free rather than repress desire and to allow "the wild leaps mind can make towards truth if it's released from conceptual strictures." Whitman's musical religion, Williams says, offers "a vision of imaginative consciousness that is a secular equivalent of the spiritual immortality most religions claim to offer." Without his unique music, "Whitman might be considered now as just one more nineteenth-century spirituality salesman," Williams says, but "with it, he becomes part of the national psyche, and for poets, to a great degree the very foundation of our aesthetic."

So, when asked, as American poets inevitably are, "whether my work had been 'influenced' by Whitman," Williams gives a memorable answer: "rather than being influenced by him or not, for me and possibly most contemporary poets, Whitman is rather our unconsciousness: he defines for us the prospect of poetry, its possibilities, its parameters, in a way that's still in effect." I find Williams's more critically oriented discussions in this book—Whitman's relation to Baudelaire or Emerson or Longfellow or Eliot or Pound or Hugo or Lorca—less engaging than his breathtaking performance of Whitman's music. He finally pulls it all back around to the way Whitman makes us hear his music as coming ultimately from within ourselves. Echoing Whitman's perception that "All music is what awakes from you when you are reminded by the instruments," Williams asks, "When we hear great music, or probably any music, don't we hear it as though it were being generated within us? And don't poems, read properly, come to us in the voice of our own minds?"

In one of his most Whitman-like poems, "The Covenant," a meditation on death that echoes Whitman's ("I can hardly believe that so little has to be lost to find such good fortune in death"), Williams begins by evoking an oddly comforting encounter: "In my unlikeliest dream, my dead are with me again, companions again, in an ordinary way." That's the feel of *On Whitman*, and, in a different register, of Hass's *Song of Myself*: Whitman's old dream of dying into his book and then living again with every future reader is enacted fully as Williams and Hass find themselves "companions again" with the dead Whitman, who reveals himself, in the twenty-first century, to be their contemporary.

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