



Miller, Matt. Collage of Myself: Walt Whitman and the Making of Leaves of Grass [review]

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REVIEWS

MATT MILLER. *Collage of Myself: Walt Whitman and the Making of Leaves of Grass*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010. xviii + 295 pp.

One bemused visitor to Whitman's cluttered dingy den during his most fertile period remarked on a peculiar phenomenon. Suspended from the ceiling was a piece of string. And to that string were attached scraps of paper, of several colors, each featuring fragments of writing. The whole therefore somewhat resembled the colorful tail of a kite. Responding to his caller's puzzled question, Whitman explained that this was the poem on which he was currently working. The scraps of paper were potential parts of the poem. And their loose attachment in this form to a piece of string allowed him to untie and retie them at will, thus allowing him constantly to review and revise his text in exactly the way he, a highly experienced printer, was used to doing when dealing with movable type. The anecdote offers us a vivid glimpse into Whitman's compositional method, confirming Matt Miller's contention that his poems can be fruitfully viewed as assemblages.

Miller's book is as valuable a publication on Whitman's poetry as any to have appeared for some time. *Collage of Myself* is also avowedly a product of our digital age. Miller's researches into the vast tangled litter of Whitman's surviving papers and manuscripts have been enabled by the great online archive of materials assembled by Ed Folsom and Kenneth Price, and his insights are very much the product of a culture in which word-processing, cutting and pasting, spatial composition of web pages and the like have reawakened and sharply focussed those of Whitman's compositional practices that now seem so to resemble these modern features as to have been uncannily prophetic and indeed positively proleptic.

In what is a beautifully written study, Miller challengingly proposes that Whitman became a poet rather belatedly and unexpectedly (although he had theorized the poet's role in advance) when, possibly as late as the spring of 1855, he discovered, via increasingly intensive experiments with poetic prose, the omnivorous potentialities of the long line. This discovery was as liberating as it was revelatory: it suddenly provided a form that could hospitably include all the different scraps of writing (both his own and the work of others) he had for so long been assembling with no clear view of their eventual use. It also encouraged him to fly in the face of every established literary convention and to regard every form of language, without exception, as his personal poetic "estate": prose was grist for this mill every bit as good as what had previously conventionally passed for poetry. Hence the astonishing variety of discourses deployed in the restlessly shifting texts of his early poetry.

These are arresting claims, persuasively supported by Miller's assiduous and perceptive combing of the manuscript materials and sensibly modified by his concession that other factors may also have been at work in the rather sudden

emergence of Whitman as a poet. And these arguments neatly dovetail with the further contention that this serendipitous mode of composition rhymed with Whitman's personal nomadic circumstances as he constantly changed jobs and moved from one temporary home to another. One might further speculate that they also rhymed with other features of his case, such as his chronic fear of any settled self-identity and, of course, his political convictions. The politics of Whitman's syntax is another related subject that remains to be explored. Anticipating William Carlos Williams and others, he was ever anxious to avoid, as far as possible, the subordination of any one element of a sentence to any other and to respect the autonomous value of every single word. For him, the sentence should be treated as a democratic unit, a society of equals, and so, in turn, should the sentence entire be allowed its own space and not made dependent on those by which it was preceded or followed. The compositional method of infinitely rearrangeable text so persuasively and fruitfully highlighted by Miller was therefore ideally suited not only to Whitman's needs but to his deepest convictions. A sentence, along with its temporarily constituent words, was free, so to speak, to go wherever it liked.

Recalling his early life as a printer's apprentice, Whitman made one particularly arresting observation. Learning how to compose type as a young boy had, for him, involved training his body to know instinctively where every letter could be located—the “r” container being placed further away from the “c” for instance, and lower down. His growing body had thus almost literally been shaped by type; the “body imaging” that psychologists tell us is fundamental to the formation of our individual identity and involves spatial sense had in his case partly been completed in this way; and he had developed a muscle memory for type that surely played a vital part in all his creative compositional practices thereafter. No wonder he could write a passionate love-poem to a complete font; or that he could offer his poems as his body; and no wonder either that he could entertain the hope that those warm-bodied poems could break down the barrier represented for ordinary readers by the “cold print” of which they had actually been composed. Hence, too, perhaps, his interest in the “eroticisation” of his texts, an aspect of his compositional process to which Miller pays particular attention, showing how even the most sexually suggestive passages have been laboriously constructed, cobbled gradually together out of disparate previous materials.

It is in this context that I would want to record one note of caution. In a fascinating extended analysis of the gradual evolution of the celebrated “boss tooth” passage from “The Sleepers” (a poem, it transpires, almost entirely composed of pre-existent prose fragments), Miller demonstrates how Whitman reworked sections like this to ensure they were not gender-specific, or sexually explicit, and suggests (in common with current received opinion) that this was from regard for the conservative views of his age. That may be true, at least in part, but to emphasize it unduly risks overlooking one vital aspect of such cases. At bottom, poets don't resort to tropes rather than plain statement in order to conceal meanings (although this might very well be an incidental incentive) but rather in order to enrich and heighten them, so that they more faithfully correspond to the complexities of human experience. To call the penis “love-root”

is not to weaken but rather to increase and intensify language's power to convey the mysteries of sex. One of the most unfortunate consequences of the present favoring of the term "decoding" (itself of course a trope) when discussing poetry is that it reinforces the reductive instincts of an anti-poetic culture that believes images are at best fanciful, and often suspect, decorations of plain truth. As a poet uncannily born and bred (and instinctively mythogenetic in character) as much as "made," Whitman instinctively understood the fallacy of such a view, as his poems amply testify.

Out of Whitman's early seminal "spatializing" experience in the print and newspaper trades grew, as Miller emphasizes, his sense of a text as made up of "mobile units of language," a sense made visible in the untidy mass of papers, overwhelming to any unsuspecting observer, by which Whitman seems to have surrounded himself wherever he went from his earliest to his final years. And Miller demonstrates how his peripatetic lifestyle necessitated a constant temporary reshuffling and packaging of these materials, resulting in an awareness of the "radical portability" of texts. Other important legacies of his early background were an awareness of language as the common property of society, not the preserve of an individual, and of words as possessing a materiality imaged, as it were, by the hardness of type. The latter insight is embodied by "Poem of Materials," to which Miller pays revealing attention. As for the former insight, it released Whitman from any inhibitions about originality or plagiarism to a degree that, as Miller demonstrates, has made even the most enlightened of his recent critics uneasy. Well before Saussure's assertion that it is language that speaks us not we language, let alone the obsessions of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E school, Whitman had intuited the (sometimes literally) "borrowed" nature of his own expressions.

While this kind of examination of Whitman's work leads Miller naturally to speak of it in terms of "found language," "collage," and "ready mades," he recognizes that such models do not exhaust the case. One of his most suggestive strategies is to adopt Deleuze and Guattari's celebrated organic image of the rhizome in a notably successful attempt to characterize the mysterious coherence of several of Whitman's most typical poetic forms. A rhizome is the sideward-creeping underground stem of a plant that is thus able to send up shoots and growth in unpredictable places at unspecifiable intervals. As Miller points out, this is a suggestive trope for radically unconventional compositions that are "irregular, centerless, and asymmetrical" in structure, such as those favored in particular by the early Whitman. But for Miller the key trope for understanding his Whitman is that of the collage, an image that, of course, links Whitman's work in an anticipatory way to those of such major artists of the twentieth century as Marcel Duchamp. Miller's last chapter is devoted to an interesting elaboration of this insight and forms a powerful conclusion to a study of exceptional value.

Not the least of Miller's achievements is to have produced a Whitman very much for our own time, just as the major scholars of the past have, whether consciously or otherwise, largely produced a Whitman for their time. Of course, all direction implies exclusion, as Jung wisely said, and Miller inevitably leaves unexamined the tension between those seminal features of Whitman's work to

which he has devoted his own attentions and those others consequent upon his having been a contemporary of Emerson and Hegel rather than of William Carlos Williams and Picasso. In other words, Whitman was not only a pioneer of collage, he was also a Transcendentalist, a Romantic organicist, and an Idealist, among other things, and these, too, entered deeply into the form and matter of his writing. And then there's the enigma of significance and quality. Why is it, that if you and I—or Matt Miller—were to adopt Whitman's seemingly objective method of collage, the result would likely be of no interest other than to ourselves, and even then only fleetingly? Why is it that Whitman's "plagiarisms" still speak so appealingly and indeed eloquently to us, while those of our students (increasingly frequent in our Whitmanian digital age) do not? It is through such riddles, at the last, that any critic must go when confronted by artistic achievement. But it is no reflection on Matt Miller's impressive achievement in this volume that he has not succeeded in solving them.

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