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from the INTRODUCTION TO THE
PENGUIN LEAVES OF GRASS

My own senses of Whitman were curiously numb until I was thirty. In the forties, when I was in college, it was considered literally bad taste to have an active interest in his writing. In that sense he suffered the same fate as Wordsworth, also condemned as overly prolix and generalizing. There was a persistent embarrassment that this naively affirmative poet might affect one's own somewhat cynical wisdoms. Too, in so far as this was a time of intensively didactic criticism, what was one to do with Whitman, even if one read him? He went on and on, he seemed to lack 'structure', he yielded to no 'critical apparatus' then to hand. So, as students, we were herded past him as quickly as possible, and our teachers used him only as an example of 'the America of that period' which, we were told, was a vast swamp of idealistic expansion and corruption. Whitman, the dupe, the dumb-bell, the pathetically regrettable instance of this country's dream and despair, the self-taught man.

That summation of Whitman and his work was a very comfortable one for all concerned. If I felt at times awkward with it, I had only to turn to Ezra Pound, whom the university also condemned, to find that he too disapproved despite the begrudging 'Pact'. At least he spoke of having 'detested' Whitman, only publicly altering the implications of that opinion in a series of BBC interviews made in the late fifties. William Carlos Williams also seemed to dislike him, decrying the looseness of the writing, as he felt it, and the lack of a coherent prosody. He as well seemed to change his mind in age in so far as he referred to Whitman as the greatest of American poets in a public lecture on American

poetry for college students. Eliot also changes his mind, as did James before him, but the point is that the heroes of my youth as well as my teachers were almost without exception extremely critical of Whitman and his influence and wanted as little as possible to do with him.

Two men, however, most dear to me, felt otherwise. The first of these was D. H. Lawrence, whose *Studies in Classic American Literature* remains the most extraordinary apprehension of the nature of American experience and writing that I know. His piece on Whitman in that book is fundamental in that he, in a decisively personal manner, first castigates Whitman for what he considers a muddling assumption of 'oneness', citing 'I am he that aches with amorous love. . . .' as particularly offensive, and then, with equal intensity, applauds that Whitman who is, as he puts it, 'a great charger of the blood in men', a truly heroic poet whose vision and will make a place of absolute communion for others.

The second, Hart Crane, shared with Whitman my own teachers' disapproval. I remember a course which I took with F. O. Matthiessen, surely a man of deep commitment and care for his students, from which Crane had been absented. I asked for permission to give a paper on Crane, which he gave me, but I had overlooked what I should have realized would be the response of the class itself, understandably intent upon its own sophistications. How would they accept these lines, for example?

yes, Walt,
Afoot again, and onward without halt, -
Not soon, nor suddenly, - no, never to let go
My hand
in yours,
Walt Whitman-
so-

If they did not laugh outright at what must have seemed to them the awkwardly stressed rhymes and

sentimental camaraderie, then they tittered at Crane's will to be one with his fellow *homosexual*. But didn't they hear, I wanted to insist, the pacing of the rhythms of those lines, the syntax, the intently human tone, or simply the punctuation? Couldn't they read? Was Crane to be simply another 'crudity' they could so glibly be rid of? But still I myself didn't read Whitman, more than the few poems of his that were 'dealt with' in classes or that some friend asked me to. No doubt I too was embarrassed by my aunt's and my grandmother's ability to recite that terrible poem, 'O Captain! My Captain!', banal as I felt it to be, and yet what was that specious taste which could so distract any attention and could righteously dismiss so much possibility, just because it didn't 'like' it? Sadly, it was too much my own.

So I didn't really read Whitman for some years although from time to time I realized that the disposition toward his work must be changing. Increasing numbers of articles began to appear as, for one example, Randall Jarrell's 'Whitman Revisited'. But the import of this writing had primarily to do with Whitman's work as instance of social history or else with its philosophical basis or, in short, with all that did not attempt to respect the technical aspects of his writing, his prosody and the characteristic method of his organization within the specific poems.

It was, finally, the respect accorded Whitman by three of my fellow poets that began to impress me as not only significant to their various concepts of poetry but as unmistakable evidence of his basic use to any estimation of the nature of poetry itself. I had grown up, so to speak, habituated to the use of poetry as compact, epiphanal instance of emotion or insight. I valued its intensive compression, its ability to 'get through' a maze of conflict and confusion to some centre of clear 'point'. But what did one do if the emotion or terms of thought could not be so focused upon

or isolated in such singularity? Assuming a context in which the statement was of necessity multiphasic, a circumstance the components of which were multiple, or, literally, a day in which various things *did* occur, not simply one thing - what did one do with that? Allen Ginsberg was quick to see that Whitman's line was of very specific use. As he says in 'Notes Written on Finally Recording Howl', 'No attempt's been made to use it in the light of early XX Century organization of new speech-rhythm prosody to *build up* large organic structures'. The structure of 'Howl' itself and of subsequent poems such as 'Kaddish' demonstrates to my own mind how much technically Ginsberg had learned from Whitman's method of taking the poem as a 'field', in Charles Olson's sense, rather than as a discreet line through alternatives to some adamant point of conclusion....

The constantly recurring structures in Whitman's writing, the insistently parallel sounds and rhythms, recall the patterns of waves as I now see them daily. How can I point to *this* wave, or *that* one, and announce that it is *the* one? Rather Whitman's method seems to me a process of sometimes seemingly endless gathering, moving in the energy of his own attention and impulse. There are obviously occasions to the contrary to be found in his work but the basic pattern does seem of this order. I am struck by the fact that William Michael Rossetti in the introduction to his *Poems of Walt Whitman* (1868) speaks of the style as being occasionally 'agglomerative', a word which can mean 'having the state of a confused or jumbled mass' but which, more literally, describes the circumstance of something 'made or formed into a rounded mass or ball'. A few days ago here, walking along the beach, a friend showed me such a ball, primarily of clay but equally compacted of shells and pebbles which the action of the waves had caused the clay to pick up, all of which would, in time, become stone. That meaning of 'agglomerate' I think

particularly relevant to the activity of Whitman's composition, and I like too that sense of the spherical, which does not locate itself upon a point nor have the strict condition of the linear but rather is at all 'points' the possibility of all that it is. Whitman's constant habit of revisions and additions would concur, I think, with this notion of his process, in that there is not 'one thing' to be said and, that done, then 'another'. Rather the process permits the material ('myself' in the world) to extend until literal death intercedes. Again, it is interesting to think of Zukofsky's sense that any of us as poets 'write one poem all our lives', remembering that Whitman does not think of his work as a series of discreet collections or books but instead adds to the initial work, *Leaves of Grass*, thinking of it as a 'single poem'.

The implications of such a stance have a very contemporary bearing for American poets - who can no longer assume either their world or themselves in it as discrete occasion. Not only does Whitman anticipate the American affection for the pragmatic, but he equally emphasizes that it is space and process which are unremittingly our condition. If Pound found the manner of his poems objectionable, he nonetheless comes to a form curiously like *Leaves of Grass* in the *Cantos*, in that he uses them as the literal possibility of a life. Much the same situation occurs in Williams's writing with *Paterson*, although it comes at a markedly later time in his own writing. Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems* and Louis Zukofsky's 'A' are also instances of this form which proposes to 'go on' in distinction to one that assumes its own containment as a singular case....

Undertaking any of this, I felt a sudden giddiness - not at all self-humbling. This man is a *great* poet, our first, and it is unlikely indeed that his contribution to what it literally means to be an *American* poet will ever be equalled.

But I do not want to end this note with such blatant emphasis. As Duncan says, Whitman is a deeply gentle man and, humanly, of great, great reassurance. If our America now is a petty shambles of disillusion and violence, the dreams of its possibility stay actual in Whitman's words. It is not 'democracy' that, of itself, can realize or even recognize the common need. It is only, and literally, people themselves who have that choice. So then, as Lawrence said: 'Ahead of all poets, pioneering into the wilderness of unopened life, Whitman....'