

(Editor's note: The following interview took place in March, 1981, between Mickle Street Review Associate Editor Frank McQuilkin and poet Daniel Hoffman, upon the publication by Random House of Hoffman's book-length narrative poem about William Penn, Brotherly Love. The book is available in hardcover for \$10, or as a Vintage Paperback for \$5.95.)

Frank McQuilkin: Since you mention Whitman twice-- in the first poem, and the next-to-last poem--you must have had Whitman on your mind when you were working on the book.

Daniel Hoffman: Of course I did, Frank, Whitman figures in several ways. In the first section, Whitman is invoked as a poetic ghost of Philadelphia, along with Poe and Brockden Brown.

In the other section you refer to, "To the Maker of A Peaceable Kingdom," the speaker of the poem is addressing Edward Hicks, the painter and Quaker preacher:

. . . as your cousin
Elias,
Whitman's father's friend
on Long Island preached,
and in whose stead
you testified
in Pennsylvania . . .

We know that Whitman's father was indeed a friend and disciple of the radical Quaker theologian and leader, Elias Hicks, who attempted to return the rather staid and orthodox Quakers of the early 19th century to the fiery spirit of George Fox. Hicks was preaching a life of active social commitment rather than simply following the Bible in the traditional way.

FMcQ: Although Whitman never joined any church, he was very positive towards the Quakers.

DH: There's a great deal of Quaker spirit in Whitman, if not actual conformity to Quaker doctrine. The Quaker element turns up now and then in the very language, "ninth month, midnight,"-- numbering the months and days instead of naming them.

But the main element of Quaker heritage Whitman reflects is, I think, intrinsic with those elements in Whitman generally thought to derive from Emerson and the Transcendentalists. If you look through the passages in Emerson in which the heroes of the imagination are listed along with Christ, Luther, and Wesley, you'll find George Fox. Emerson greatly respected the freedom of spirit of George Fox and the early Quakers-- their openness to divine experience. By this I mean what the Quakers call the "openings of joy," the infusion of the divine spirit without the intercession of churchly apparatus, costumes, a particular building or time. The spirit should always be open to an infusion of the Lord. And of course this is very much like Whitman's accessibility to ecstasy.

FMcQ: One epigram you use for the poem is Emerson's "America is a poem in our eyes." This idea appeared in Whitman's 1855 Preface, "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem." Do you feel yourself--especially in *Brotherly Love*--following an Emerson-Whitman tradition?

DH: Well, let's say I hope so. It's a little hard to ticket oneself into a particular tradition. There are various aspects of *Brotherly Love* that I hope will be seen as reflecting that strain in American life and feeling. Perhaps to call it the Emerson-Whitman strain is to narrow it a bit. It's the visionary strain.

Part of my problem here was to write a poem that would somehow embody a vision of society and then show that this derived from a religious experience. I think anyone who has tried or thought about it would have to conclude-as I did--that writing a believable religious poem is a very difficult thing to do in the end of the 20th century. One doesn't want to recycle *The Four Quartets*, *Ash Wednesday*, or Allen Tate's Christmas sonnets. So I had to work out my own ways in dealing with William Penn's religious experience.

FMcQ: Since you do see yourself fitting in with this Emerson-Whitman visionary tradition, do you see this as a step away from the direction that Eliot and Pound wanted to move American poetry?

DH: I'd rather not put the question to myself: is it in the Whitman tradition or the Pound-Eliot tradition.

In *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, Eliot advised the poet to master the mind of Europe and the mind of his own country. People assume he's speaking to poets in England. But it certainly applies equally to America. And one could say that Whitman represents the mind of America.

One essential facet of the mind of America--if I may use that phrase--is declaring independence from the mind of Europe, throwing off the past. There are many allusions to European literature--many of them quite wrong-headed, I think--in Whitman's work. One could say that Whitman's representing the American mind and experience is a foretelling of Eliot's dictum that a poet has to do this.

In *Brotherly Love*, America hasn't started yet. This is the very beginning. Action in the poem takes place in 1665, 1682, 1683, 1737, and 1820, though not in that sequence. The whole second section is set in England where Penn is rebelling against his father, finding a new faith, and suffering for it. I even have a description in Drydenesque couplets of a sea battle that Penn's father fought in. It might seem that this is very far from Whitman, but didn't he give us a sea battle in *Song of Myself*? --

'Stretch'd and still lies the midnight;
Two great hulls motionless on the breast
of the darkness;
Our vessel riddled and slowly sinking...'

I am a little uncomfortable saying I want to be in the Whitman tradition and reject the Pound-Eliot tradition. I don't see how anyone in the 20th century could do that. And I don't see how any American poet can write as though Whitman had never lived. I guess what I'm saying is that my own outlook is eclectic and I'm trying somehow to grasp what I find usable in both of these approaches.

FMcQ: *Brotherly Love* uses an amazing number of forms: the ballad, heroic couplet, the prose poem, dramatic monologue--just to name a few. But many sections of the work have an unmistakable Whitmanesque line. Was this conscious?

DH: Since I'm appropriating Whitman to the Quaker tradition, there were times when I wanted consciously--or maybe unconsciously--to suggest Whitman's presence by rhythmic allusions rather than by naming him. For instance, in the 40th section where Penn is in prison and is experiencing his vision, I wanted to encompass by rhythmic allusiveness a whole range of experience, from *Piers the Plowman*--the medieval Christian visionary poem--to Whitman, who would come later and would be firmly embedded in the American consciousness. The way that I found to do this was to use rhythms from the alliterative line of *Piers the Plowman* and the reiterative line and structure of Walt Whitman.

FMcQ: Section #40--Penn's prison vision--seems to me the highlight of *Brotherly Love*. In a way, it's Penn's death and resurrection. In the latter part of the section, you describe Penn's vision of a city which brings to mind Whitman's words: "I dream a city invincible." Any connection here?

DH: It is the vision of the City of God. As Henry Adams said somewhere, every settlement of the American continent until about 1800 represented an effort to embody a religious ideal. It took all kinds of forms. All of this was part of this millennial impulse to found a city which would be a juster, wiser, and more spiritual foundation than ordinary life is.

Whitman, coming along in the 19th century, simply swallows this whole feeling of Christian millennialism as he swallowed everything else, and it becomes an intrinsic part of his great out-reaching optimistic sense of the infinite possibilities of life.

FMcQ: Do you sense a lack of vision in much of contemporary American poetry?

DH: Much contemporary poetry is self-oriented. The autobiographical and confessional impulses in American poetry seem to circle around the anxieties, sufferings, and problems of personal relationships, not necessarily opening out into the broader vista of the whole grounding of social life.

FMcQ: But Whitman surely spoke of the Self, so we need some distinction here. In his 1876 Preface, Whitman said *Leaves of Grass* had been about the "Body and Existence." He mentioned another volume needed to exhibit the "fully appointed Personality entering the sphere of the resistless gravitation of Spiritual Law." William Penn, in *Brotherly Love*, seems to fulfill this Whitman vision.

DH: Perhaps this derives from the essay in which Emerson says that history is the lengthening shadow of a few great men. William Penn was such a great man, and one of the things that led me to choose, or to be chosen by, Penn in this poem was my sense that he seemed remote, inaccessible and distant from most of us. Although many of his ideas were incorporated into American institutions and restated by the

Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the Constitution, the way he arrived at them and phrased them is foreign to most people's thinking today, since they were the result of the religious turmoil of the 17th century. We're not in touch with his times.

Penn presented all kinds of puzzles and problems, not all of which I was able to explore in *Brotherly Love*. On the one hand, his social ideas seem extremely modern. He even had a plan for something like the United Nations as an aid toward establishing world peace. But at the same time he was indeed a man of the 17th century, a man of the aristocratic and courtly class of his time.

FMcQ: But this second volume Whitman spoke about would be a kind of spiritual book that would record the events of heroes. That's how I see *Brotherly Love*.

DH: I hope you're right. But wouldn't Whitman have swept aside the problematical aspects of Penn's life and career? Well, in fact I guess I have done so too.

FMcQ: This was the time when Whitman wrote *Passage to India*, his last great monumental poem, in which he wanted to make Columbus such a hero. I see Penn, in *Brotherly Love*, fitting in to that tradition.

DH: Here, again, we go back to Emerson in his volume *Representative Men*, in which he gives the type of the philosopher, the man of action, the poet. So it is a continuing tradition.

FMcQ: The last section of *Brotherly Love* traces the betrayal of Penn's original treaty with the Indians-- the later deceptions, frauds, and even war. Yet it ends on an optimistic image, one which Whitman used:

Here possibilities of grace

like fragrance from rich
compost cling
to leaves where our each deed
and misdeed fall. The Seed
stirs, even now is quickening.

Were you conscious of the Whitman connection with
this compost image?

DH: That's one place where, if there is a Whitman
parallel or echo, it was not conscious on my part.
The compost image just seemed to grow out of things
that had occurred earlier on in the writing. For
instance, in Section #28, I come back to the whole
question of history, what it is, how do we know it,
how does it affect us:

Now I
Whom this tale charges

To gather clues, make out
Its ghostly trail

In forests long hewn down,
Buried deep beneath

A mulch of leaves
Once crisp as paper . . .

So the image of the leaves of history being at once
the leaves of paper on which history is written, and
the leaves of the forest under which the doings with
the Indians took place, was early in the poem.

Now that I think of it, the image of the tree
reappears again and again. It's the Tree of Life--
it's in Penn's vision--and also the great elm tree
under which the original treaty was made.

So at the end, when I refer to compost, it's been
accumulating and I hope enriching the poem all along.

And I'm planting in the compost of history what the
Quakers call the Seed of Light--the vision of God's
grace. This optimism at the very end may not be
borne out by the action which precedes it. But
although the message of history would seem to be
tragedy, there must be room in our perception for the
hope that we can escape from the prison in which
history encloses us. That's certainly the faith of
William Penn. I think it's true to the feeling of the
Society of Friends today, and true to the optimism
of American democracy that no matter how badly things
are developing, we can always turn them around
somehow.

FMcQ: That's surely Whitmanesque.

DH: True, and it is this element that Whitman most
strongly represents. In *Democratic Vistas*, he took
the measure of all the self-grown flaws in the
American system and rightly pointed to its great
danger as being a kind of moral decay from within,
rather than our being mastered or overthrown by any
outside threat.

FMcQ: Your optimistic ending, "The Seed/stirs, even
now is quickening," makes me recall Whitman's "spinal
Idea" of *Passage to India*: "That the divine efforts
of heroes, and their Ideas, faithfully lived up to
will finally prevail, and be accomplished however
long deferred."