

WALT WHITMAN AMONG THE FRENCH: POET AND MYTH, by Betsy Erkkila. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1980. 296 pp. \$16.50

In *American Poetry in the Twentieth Century* Kenneth Rexroth claims that "whether we like it or not, and most Establishment critics do not, America has produced only one world writer, Walt Whitman. His only competitor is Mark Twain, but Mark Twain's one great book, *Huckleberry Finn*, has had little direct influence, while Whitman's influence has been decisive on writers in almost every known literature--Turkish, Japanese, Bengali, Hebrew, Urdu." Is Rexroth providing here an example of the device of hyperbole? No doubt, but his comment is probably not the exaggeration it initially seems to be. At least some evidence for it has been advanced. Throughout this century there have been dozens, nay, scores, of notes, articles and books on Whitman's reputation and influence in foreign countries. With a wonderful frequency the accounts have appeared: Whitman in Europe, Whitman in Asia, Whitman in Latin America, Whitman in Australia, Whitman in Africa. By and large, these surveys have been informative, fascinating, plausible. To this body of criticism must now be added Betsy Erkkila's WALT WHITMAN AMONG THE FRENCH, a valuable study that begins with an examination of the poet's French background but which devotes most of its pages to a discussion of Whitman's influence on French literature from the Symbolist period to the present.

Professor Erkkila very early on sets out her basic premise: that Whitman, unlike his American predecessors and contemporaries, embraced a cultural tradition that was, in its essentials, French rather than English. He strongly identified with French social, sexual, and political attitudes and "looked to France as a model in his attempt to liberate American sensibility, with its deep roots in the Puritan past, into a new moral and political consciousness." Among the French writers and thinkers in whose work Whitman found important sources and analogues, Erkkila maintains, are Francois Voltaire, Constantin Volney, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Victor Hugo, Jules Michelet, George Sand, Auguste Comte, Hippolyte Taine, and Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve. Whitman's extensive use of the literature and philosophy of France doubtless helps to explain "why the profound 'shock of recognition' in response to Whitman was experienced first in Europe and only after, and with much less intensity, in America."

Following her overview of "France in Whitman," Ms. Erkkila turns her attention to Whitman in France, attempting to demonstrate that the American poet either anticipated or directly inspired many of the significant movements of modern French literature--Symbolism, Naturism, Unanimism, Futurism, and Surrealism, among others. She argues that Whitman's presence--in idea, in technique, or in spirit--may be detected in a *véritable parade* of prominent French writers, including Arthur Rimbaud, Jules Laforgue, André Gide, Paul Claudel, Georges Duhamel, Jules Romains, Valery Larbaud, Blaise Cendrars, Guillaume Apollinaire, Saint-John Perse, and Jean Giono. In an "Epilogue," she briefly speculates on an ironic development--Whitman's "return" to America via the influence of French modernism upon Eliot, Pound, and others. "The irony, of course," says Erkkila, "is that in their attempt to renovate

American and English letters by drinking at the source of modern French literature, Eliot and his coterie were absorbing the very same French tradition that Whitman had nourished." Concluding the study are two comprehensive appendices: a "Chronological List of French Translations of Whitman Since 1886."

Perhaps unavoidably, an "influence study" is prone to certain problems. It can overstate its case, making extravagant claims for the effect one writer has upon another. It can construe as direct borrowings matters that are actually products of a shared cultural inheritance. It can regard as a measurable influence something which is best described as a universal image or an archetypal pattern. Although Betsy Erkkila's WALT WHITMAN AMONG THE FRENCH does exhibit some suspect observations, it generally avoids these problems. Essentially, it is a well executed, carefully phrased, and persuasive book. And if it doesn't demonstrate that Whitman is America's "one world writer," it certainly lends strong support to the view that he belongs in any group of literary cosmopolites about which America can boast.

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