The Poetry of Walt Whitman

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INTRODUCTION

Discusses the ways in which Walt Whitman's poetry can be seen to engage in a debate about American culture and ideology. Extracts from Emerson's essay 'The Poet' (1844) and from Whitman's 'Preface' to the first (1855) edition of Leaves of Grass are included, and demonstrate that Whitman's poetry explicitly answered Emerson's call for a truly new American poet, a bard of democracy. It is suggested that the rich history of critical debate about Whitman's work speaks of his desire to 'contain multitudes' and to remain one step ahead of his readers.

CHAPTER ONE

Early Reviews

Surveys the initial critical reaction to Whitman's poetry. Emerson's famous letter praising the first edition of Leaves of Grass is included alongside extracts from Whitman's own - though unsigned - review of Leaves of Grass in order to examine Whitman's role as self-publicist. These are followed by a survey of good, bad and indifferent reviews of Whitman. Charles A. Dana's review written for the New York Daily Tribune sets a tone of bemused ambivalence towards Whitman's poetry that also expresses ambivalent attitudes towards America itself. This is also seen in the reviews by Charles Eliot Norton for Putnam's Monthly, in the snobbishly English attitude of the London journal The Critic, and in the scandalised tone of the anonymous reviewer for the Criterion. The final three extracts, however, are much more sympathetic towards Whitman's efforts. These are by Edward Everett Hale, Henry David Thoreau and John Robertson. All three see freshness and vitality as being at the heart of Whitman's new poetic vision of America and democracy. Robertson's was the first book-length discussion of Whitman and as such can be seen to herald many of the subsequent critical attitudes towards Whitman and his poetry.
CHAPTER TWO

Whitman in the Early Twentieth Century

The first two extracts in this chapter – by John Addington Symonds and George Santayana – were written in the years immediately following Whitman’s death. Though opposed in their actual estimations of the worth of Whitman’s poetry they do both struggle to come to terms with their own sense of bafflement with Whitman. Symonds’ essay (1893) on Leaves of Grass sees it as a poetic puzzle that raises difficult questions about selfhood and identity. Santayana’s essay ‘The Poetry of Barbarism’ (1900), though, describes Whitman’s poetics as barbaric, the uncouth expression of American populism. The other two extracts of the chapter see Whitman’s accommodation to modernism. A brief extract from Ezra Pound’s ‘What I feel about Walt Whitman’ (1909) is followed by a long extract from D. H. Lawrence’s influential book Studies in Classic American Literature (1923).

CHAPTER THREE

Whitman and the ‘American Renaissance’

Examines Whitman’s central place in what F. O. Matthiessen describes as an ‘American Renaissance’ that took place in antebellum America. The first long extract is taken from Matthiessen’s American Renaissance (1941), and examines Whitman’s energetic and novel language-use. This is followed by an extract from Charles Feidelson’s Symbolism and American Literature (1953) that attempts to align Whitman’s poetry with New Critical models of reading. The third extract is from Randall Jarrell’s spirited and witty reading of Whitman, ‘Some Lines from Whitman’ (1955). Jarrell’s essay displays his fine ear for Whitman’s poetic complexities and delicacies, and is a model of the sort of patient and appreciative critical reading practice demanded by Whitman but often lost in critical bluster and exclamation.

CHAPTER FOUR

Whitman, Myth Criticism and the Growth of American Studies

The two extracts that comprise this chapter are crucial documents in the development of American Studies. This chapter examines the myths of America that have been employed in order to explain Whitman’s place as the poet of America. The first extract is from R. W. B. Lewis’ The American Adam (1955), a book which set the terms for ‘Americanist’ criticism, and which placed Whitman as central in a literary tradition in which America is mythicised as new Eden. The second extract is from Roy Harvey Pearce’s highly influential The Continuity of American Poetry (1961), a book that, along with Lewis’, finally sees Whitman established as the central and defining American poet.

CHAPTER FIVE

Whitman, Cultural Materialism and ‘Reconstructive’ Readings

Deals with the influence of ‘cultural materialism’ on Whitman criticism. The three extracts in this chapter place Whitman’s poetry in the context of the mid-nineteenth-century American culture of which it is a product. These critical extracts all examine Leaves of Grass in relation to specific aspects of ante-bellum American culture. The extract from M. Wynn Thomas’ The Lunar Light of Whitman’s Poetry (1987) examines the impact of the post-artisanal phase of capitalism on Whitman’s poetry, and the extract from Ed Folsom’s Whitman’s Native Representations (1994) discusses Whitman in relation to baseball. In the final essay, David S. Reynolds’ ‘Whitman and Nineteenth-Century views of Gender and Sexuality’, Whitman’s poetry is examined in relationship to contemporary views of gender and sexuality.

CHAPTER SIX

Ideology and Desire: Whitman and Sexuality

This chapter suggests that there is a long history of critical discussion of sex, the body, sexuality and desire in relation to Whitman’s poetry. The three extracts in this chapter all examine claims about Whitman’s sexuality and its importance and application to the reading of his poetry. Malcolm Cowley’s essay ‘Whitman: The Poet and the Mask’ (1948) was one of the first critical examinations of Whitman’s poetry to claim that it stemmed from (repressed) homosexuality. The second extract is taken from Robert K. Martin’s watershed book The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry (originally published in 1979), and which sees Whitman as central to an ‘underground’, homosexual tradition in American poetry. Nick Selby’s essay “Queer Shoulders to the wheel”: Whitman, Ginsberg and a Bisexual Poetics (1997) argues against such narrowly deterministic readings of Whitman and sexuality as that advanced by Martin, and offers a model of ‘bisexual’ poetics for reading Whitman as a product of nineteenth-century discourses of capital.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Ideology and Deconstruction: Whitman and 'New Americanist' Critiques

Presents some 'deconstructive' perspectives on Leaves of Grass. The three extracts in this chapter show the complicity of Whitman's poetry in an American ideological agenda. The extract from Karen Sanchez-Eppler's Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism and the Politics of the Body (1993) argues for a Whitman who is radically ruptured in his poetic attempts to render a democratic polity. His poetics of the body uneasily exposes, she argues, an agenda of white cultural superiority. Allen Grossman's essay (1985) measures Whitman's rhetoric against that of Abraham Lincoln and finds both to be scenes of political persuasion despite their claims for democratic freedom. And in the final extract of this critical guide, Jonathan Arac (1996) argues for a more 'internationalist' reading of Pound. Rather than reading him into narrowly formulated assumptions about America and its culture, he argues instead that Whitman's very poetic language itself is 'creolized' and that our critical endeavours with him should be to read him out of America and into a broader, trans-national, history of modernity.

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