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Abstract

Review of Ed Folsom, ed., *Whitman East and West* (2002)

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EZRA GREENSPAN

ED FOLSOM, ed. *Whitman East and West: New Contexts for Reading Walt Whitman*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002. ix + 243 pp.

READING THROUGH THE PAGES of *Whitman East and West*, a selection of the papers given by leading Western and Chinese scholars at the historic "Whitman 2000" conference held in Beijing, immediately took me back to prognostications about the changing forms of Western societies made by Alexis de Tocqueville more than a dozen years before the publication of the first *Leaves of Grass*. Everywhere he traveled during his nine-month tour of Jacksonian America, he contemplated the meaning of democracy, the system of social organization he saw as fundamentally transforming the structures of political, economic, and cultural life. What he saw, in two senses, was the future, the coming model of social organization and a model that cast a culture's eyes primarily forward: "Democracy, which shuts the past against the poet, opens the future before him." Furthermore, he predicted that the challenge confronting that forward-looking poet would be to register the teeming dynamic of democratic life: "In democratic ages, the extreme fluctuations of men, and the impatience of their desires, keep them perpetually on the move; so that the inhabitants of different countries intermingle, see, listen to, and borrow from each other. It is not only, then, the members of the same community who grow more alike; communities themselves are assimilated to one another, and the whole assemblage presents to the eye of the spectator one vast democracy, each citizen of which is a nation. This displays the aspect of mankind for the first time in the broadest light. All that belongs to the existence of the human race taken as a whole, to its vicissitudes and its future, becomes an abundant mine of poetry."

The future, as well as the past, was on clear display at the 2000 Whitman conference. The appearance of Whitman on the world stage in Beijing, the first American writer to be given such treatment in China, may be understood as a significant exemplar of the globalization of culture in our time. But, in point of fact, a global perspective on Whitman's poetry antedated by decades the emergence in academia of global studies. In 1955 Gay Wilson Allen published his *Walt Whitman Abroad*, a book that responded to and documented the extraordinarily broad international compass of Whitman's writings and ideas. In conjunction

with the 1992 Whitman Bicentennial Conference in Iowa, Ed Folsom organized a seminar of international scholars and translators to engage in a many-sided discussion of the reception of Whitman's writings into cultures and languages around the world, while also collaborating with Allen in updating *Walt Whitman Abroad* by assembling the accompanying formal assessments into an impressive volume, *Walt Whitman and the World* (1995). Already at that seminar and in its accompanying volume China emerged as a major presence in Whitman studies. Directly and indirectly *Whitman East and West* helps to explain why.

The Western scholars represented in the volume explore a wide variety of cultural contexts, some novel, others more established, for conceiving of Whitman's work. M. Jimmie Killingsworth considers Whitman, as earlier critics have Emerson and Thoreau, against the standards of ecocriticism, paying particular attention to Whitman's pervasive use of personification. Holding Whitman's poems up against these standards, Killingsworth renders a divided judgment, finding few poems more "reprehensible," ecocritically speaking, than "Song of the Redwood Tree" or more satisfactory than "This Compost." In one of the most original and fascinating of the essays, Walter Grünzweig evaluates Whitman in terms of normality studies, an emerging interdisciplinary field that "investigates normality [as opposed to "normativeness"] as a constructed, culturally produced phenomenon" operative in post-traditional societies. In effect, Grünzweig devises an alternative vocabulary to perform the traditional equation, made repeatedly during the Beijing conference, especially by the Chinese scholars, between Whitman, the United States, and modernity. Moreover, that vocabulary has an obvious usefulness for investigating one of the central issues in Whitman studies today: hegemonic and anti-hegemonic patterns in Whitman's writing and world. Turning to one of the most inviting subjects in our multimedia age, Kenneth M. Price discusses cinematic adaptations of Whitman's work over the course of the twentieth century. Just as interesting, he also explores "affinities" between Whitman's poetry, the experimental stage of sequential photography, and the earliest motion pictures. Joel Myerson draws on his extensive knowledge of American literary texts to discuss illustrated children's editions of Whitman poems, such as "Song of Myself," "I Hear America Singing," "I Sing the Body Electric," and "The Dalliance of the Eagles." Illustrators, he notes, have considerable power to re-present texts, often in ways that diverge sharply from the intentions of authors and the interpretations of critics. Whitman's illustrators are a case in point, and Myerson's essay opens an interesting new angle of analysis on an issue that goes back to the time of Whitman's 1855 self reviews, the representation of his poems. Robert K. Martin traces continuities and discontinuities between the gay legacies of F. O. Matthiessen and Whitman as mediated by Mark Merlis's 1994 novel, *American Studies*.

Two other contributors investigate the politics of gender in Whitman's poetry: Sherry Ceniza in terms of applied pedagogy, and Betsy Erkkila in terms of applied theory. Ceniza elaborates on her classroom strategy of answering the inevitable student question, "Was Whitman gay?" with the question, "What does gay mean?" as a way of opening the subject to more open-minded, give-and-take discussion. In the most sophisticated, intellectually ambitious essay in the collection, Erkkila invokes a Habermasian public-sphere politics of print to read Whitman as an agent of homosocial and homosexual cultural discourse and political change. But her impassioned championing of Whitman as a culture hero for his time and ours comes at the price of simplifying Whitman's own ambivalent, sometimes contradictory beliefs and practices and, more seriously yet, conflating the emergent privatized, celebrity-based model of antebellum literary culture with a Habermasian republican sphere fast receding by 1855 (though Whitman himself sometimes failed to keep the two separate). Employing a different model of literary historical analysis, M. Wynn Thomas gives a historicist reading that links Whitman's cultural politics in the 1840s and 1850s to policies of controversial New York City mayor Fernando Wood. That approach raises interesting questions not investigated here about the relations between other mayoralty administrations and the local cultural scene more generally.

Framing their essays, and those of the Chinese scholars that follow, are the more personal assessments, both eloquent, by the two senior Whitman scholars, James E. Miller Jr. and Roger Asselineau, whom Folsom tactfully positions as ancestor figures. Miller recalls his long-time acquaintance with Zhao Luorui (better known in the West by her English name Lucy Chen), the premier Chinese translator of *Leaves of Grass*. Miller recounts poignantly that the cost of an independent intellectual life had been to her (and many of her generation) the loss of physical and literary possessions during the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath. One compensation, as she told a *New York Times* reporter in 1988, was that "I've poured everything into Whitman" (7). The result, delayed by the political instability accompanying the student demonstrations of the late 1980s, was the publication in 1991 of the mass market edition of her translation of *Leaves of Grass*, as well as of various miscellaneous writings. Asselineau, who has himself translated Whitman into French, applies Gaston Bachelard's notion of "the material or dynamic imagination" suggestively to Whitman. What he finds is a poet so pervasively attuned to the element of water and the movement of tides that his finest poetry is characterized by a rhythmic and imagistic liquidity.

The five essays contributed by their Chinese colleagues congregate around a more neatly centered set of issues. Guiyou Huang, a fine Chi-

nese-American scholar and translator now resident in the United States, gives a measured analysis of Whitman's treatment of immigration. Liu Rongqiang, a learned professor of English at China's Hebei Normal University, traces Whitman's profound influence on the poetry of Guo Moruo, a pioneer of the New Culture Movement who discovered Whitman during his residence in Japan after World War One and turned Chinese poetry toward a more vernacular use of language and creative freedom of expression. Some of Liu Rongqiang's translations of Guo Moruo's poems are striking (and strikingly Whitmanian), such as this address to his homeland in "Good Morning":

Good morning! My youthful motherland!
Good morning! My reborn compatriots!
Good morning! My mighty Yangtse River in the south!
Good morning! My icy Yellow River in the north! (p. 177)

Ou Hong, professor of English at Zhongshan University, also addresses Guo Moruo's indebtedness to Whitman, although his subject is primarily the common theme of pantheism in their work, as well as in a variety of Western and Eastern literatures. A major source of cultural mediation, he claims, is Taoism, which served as a bridge conducting the pantheism of Whitman and other Western writers into the work of Guo Moruo and later Chinese poets. Wang Ning, professor of English and comparative literature at Tsinghua University, reads Whitman's significance in a global context and credits him with "cross[ing] the artificial boundary between East and West" and "leap[ing] the aesthetic gap between different literary movements," especially romanticism and modernism. In fact, he sees Whitman as one of the most important influences on China's early twentieth-century awakening to literary modernism, a claim echoed by other Chinese scholars at the conference. Finally, Liu Shusen, co-planner and associate director with Ed Folsom of the conference and a senior professor of English at Peking University, contributes a comparable influence study of Whitman and the outstanding, post-Cultural Revolution poet Gu Cheng, who gave poetic expression (rendered here in Liu Shusen's translation) to how, during his rural residence at the time of the Cultural Revolution, he made his initial encounter with *Leaves of Grass*:

A lass
In a dream
Sent me a letter
With a twig of flower
Called eupatorium
...
Eager to unveil the page of heart,
But I happened to open
Selected Poems from Leaves of Grass

The main questions, to my mind, underlying these multiple contexts for reading Whitman are these: what do the Westerners and Easterners have to say to each other, and what do they have to say to each other with a portrait of Whitman hanging on the wall? And what can one deduce from this conversation about the global literary community? One useful way of responding might be to shift the situation and consider the way that Chinese American writer Maxine Hong Kingston portrayed the mediation of East and West through Whitman in her novel *Tripmaster Monkey* (1989). Her lead character is a 1960s era Chinese American poet-playwright named Wittman Ah Sing born and raised in San Francisco's Chinatown and educated at Berkeley who attempts to put on stage his Chinese American version of his self. The difficulty he faces throughout the novel in walking the ethnic immigrant line is foreshadowed in the opening pages when he walks bemusedly through Golden Gate Park and encounters an FOB (Fresh Off the Boat): "Heading toward him from the other end came a Chinese dude from China, hands clasped behind, bow-legged, loose-seated, out on a stroll—that walk they do in kung fu movies when they are full of contentment on a sunny day. As luck would have it, although there was plenty of room, this dude and Wittman tried to pass each other both on the same side, then both on the other, sidestepping like a couple of basketball stars." One immediately senses Kingston's own ethnic word dance, as dazzling, antic, complicated, and Whitman-saturated as Saul Bellow's in his breakthrough ethnic novel, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953). A novelist acutely conscious of and engaged with language, Kingston concocts a Chinese-inflected, English-centered discourse fit to express Wittman's hybrid experience—altogether, a language experiment, in its way, as rich and American as Whitman's own.

Taken as individuals or as geographic groupings, the Beijing conferees measured the meeting of East and West in less synthetic fashion. Virtually all the Chinese academics assayed it more or less directly, as doing so was in effect their designated task. By sharp contrast, the Western scholars, who lacked an equal comparative knowledge of the subject, took as their assignment the exploration of new contexts for reading Whitman in the early twenty-first century. Their approaches derived from issues important today in the West, such as ecocriticism, media, and gender politics, issues that I am tempted to say lack a comparable traditional relevance in the East. For example, translators such as Lucy Chen and critics such as Guiyou Huang have pointed out that China lacks a poetic tradition of sexual discourse, which complicates translating Whitman into Chinese or incorporating this aspect of his writing into a Chinese critical tradition. But this kind of explanation as

a broader interpretation of East-West literary studies becomes less satisfying with each passing year, as the gap between East and West narrows. Even the slangy slippage into basketball jargon in Kingston's writing functions less as a demarcation of national or regional cultural distinction today than it did a half-generation ago, and it seems reasonable to predict that the critical approaches taken by the Western conferees will spread to other regions in the near future.

To return to an earlier observation: not only Whitman but the future was on display in Beijing. If it is fair to extrapolate from the dynamics and content of this conference, one may conclude that gaps between national or regional literary traditions exist and will persist, but they will be narrowed by more broadly inclusive perspectives and methodologies, greater knowledge of alternative traditions, and increased appreciation of human commonalities. It is entirely fitting to think that Whitman, who was himself alternately nationalist and internationalist, should serve as a mediator and facilitator as well as a subject of that process.

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