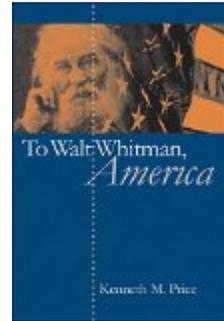


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Whitman's Multitudes

It is easy to forget how innovative Kenneth M. Price's *Whitman and Tradition* was when it appeared in 1990, for both its method and its major theses have been entirely absorbed into the mainstream of Whitman scholarship.[1] In terms of its method, the book was one of the first to demonstrate how an influence study should focus not just on the literary works that shaped the author but also the "broader social field" (p. 1). In terms of its theses, the book was the first to present Whitman as an independent poet in command of the poetic tradition, as opposed to a primitive genius or Emerson's disciple. Price also demonstrated the importance of Whitman on writers in the two decades after his death, before the onset of modernism, including a group of poets associated with Harvard as well as novelists as different as Hamlin Garland, Kate Chopin, and E. M. Forster.

Price's new book, *To Walt Whitman, America*, continues this last critical project, now examining the influence of Whitman throughout the twentieth century—and not just in the literary culture. In terms of method, Price has clearly outdone himself with this book, expanding his focus to include Whitman's influence upon Edith Wharton's correspondence, Ben Shahn's murals, D. W. Griffith's films, and even Muhammad Ali's rap. Given the utter impossibility of a comprehensive account of Whitman's influence on modern America, Price must be congratulated for selecting such a fascinating range of cultural artifacts to demonstrate the reach of Whitman's voice into most modern cultural media.

Similarly, several of Price's theses in *To Walt Whitman, America* deserve special mention, particularly those that develop and enrich themes first explored in *Whitman and Tradition*. In the earlier book, Price showed that the deconstruction of the old New England canon actually began at the institution that had once helped construct it, Harvard University, and that the Whitman who was enshrined in the process was not the messiah of Horace Traubel but indeed the same iconoclastic writer later celebrated by the modernists (p. 126). In *To Walt Whitman, America*, Price shows in the second chapter, titled "Edith Wharton and the Problem of Whitmanian Comradeship," how those Harvard readers had a hitherto unrecognized ally in Wharton, who planned as early as 1908 to compose an extended critical treatment of Whitman (p. 38). That study of Whitman's notions of sexual liberation and comradeship was never written, but Wharton still pursued it indirectly, Price shows, in her voluminous and still largely unpublished correspondence with her lover, Morton Fullerton, a member of the Harvard coterie.

Another theme that Price returns to with greater sensitivity is death in Whitman's poetry. Price had earlier contended that in the first three editions of *Leaves of Grass* Whitman's "treatment of predecessors is marked by interconnections between life, death, and democracy" and offered a reading based on D. H. Lawrence's well-known remark that "Walt's great poems are really huge fat tomb-plants, great rank graveyard growths" (quoted, p. 67). In *To Walt Whitman, America*, Price's interpretation of Whitman's treatment of death is much more

elaborate. In the third chapter, "Transatlantic Homoerotic Whitman," he focuses our attention on the fact that only in the revision and expansion of the "Live Oak, with Moss" sequence (drafted probably between 1857 and 1859) into the famous "Calamus" poems of the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* did Whitman "interject repeated and powerful meditations on death" (p. 57). Rejecting a biographical explanation as necessarily short on evidence, Price instead contends that Whitman, "[i]n preparing his homoerotic poems for publication, ... was drawn almost inevitably into the language of death because of the available discourses on homoerotic love," mainly the elegiac tradition as well as religious and legal prohibitions against sodomy (p. 58). Turning to a group of turn-of-the-century British authors drawn to the Calamus poems, Price shows that they were captivated precisely by Whitman's "later imposition [of death] on a sequence originally far more positive in its mood and overall attitude toward same-sex affection" (p. 59), most likely because they, too, "lack[ed] adequate social scripts for their love: at some level they felt themselves invisible, unrecognized, and, as it were, dead" (p. 67). This was a feeling that Whitman's poetry once powerfully conveyed to its homosexual readers, Price suggests, but no longer does, at least since the social revolution initiated at Stonewall. This is an interesting proposition sketched efficiently in an examination of Whitman's representation in the 1997 film *Love and Death on Long Island* (pp. 67-69).

Is the modern reader's gradual loss of interest in Whitman's use of death in the Calamus poems part of a larger trend, a more general loss of interest in Whitman's complete vision over the course of the twentieth century? Here Price is agnostic, a notable difference from *Whitman and Tradition*. That earlier book ended with a judgment about the difficulty Whitman's early-twentieth-century readers had in productively "channeling" Whitman's revolutionary work. "While *Leaves of Grass* is encompassing and sustain[s] a very positive attachment to the culture he was revolting against," Price observed that "the early-twentieth-century mind seems to be built instead on exclusiveness or a sense of partition," divisions like highbrow versus lowbrow or Brahmin versus vulgarian, or traditional versus innovative, all "obscur[ing] the true gift of Whitman," the poet as "a synthesizer" (p. 150). In *To Walt Whitman, America*, one awaits a similar judgment of the later decades of the twentieth century, but in vain, a silence on Price's part that is somewhat perplexing when one sees (thanks to the evidence Price provides) just how much readers since the

modernists have continued to partition and thus obscure that "true gift of Whitman."

In a book so penetrating in its particular assessments of Whitman's modern readers, Price's reluctance to judge the overall character of Whitman's twentieth-century influence is provocative. Has something happened to the field of literary studies between 1990 and 2004 to explain Price's new reticence? Every now and then in *To Walt Whitman, America*, there are clues. Consider Price's description (at the close of the introduction) of the contemporary debate about Whitman's vision of an inclusive democracy.

For many thinkers, Whitman's inclusiveness makes him crucial in efforts to build toward a harmonious American society. Nonetheless, Peter Erickson argues that Whitman does not offer a useful model for contemporary multiculturalism largely because his sympathy too often becomes appropriation. There is a way in which Whitman imposes his views on others and presupposes the rightness of his own structures and modes of perception. To some degree, Whitman can be said to be coercive. Yet if he asked readers to accede to his version of America, it was also with the belief that these very readers and writers, paradoxically, must revise him as they strive to realize themselves and remake America (p. 8).

Like a few other moments in the book when he directly confronts this question of the value of Whitman's original vision, Whitman's "true gift" as he put it in the earlier book, Price's defense of that vision now is somewhat strangled with conditions. Indeed, his main conclusion about Whitman's true gift seems to be the opposite of the one he drew in 1990. At that time, Price contended that Whitman's synthesizing was his gift, and the modernists' subsequent division of Whitman into various topics an unfortunate balkanizing. In 2004, though, Price seems somewhat cowed by the contemporary contention that Whitman's syntheses are "coercive," so much so that Price's final "defense" of Whitman's syntheses (now coercions) in this passage concludes with a practical admission of defeat, i.e., (as cited above) "if he asked readers to accede to his version of America, it was also with the belief that these very readers and writers, paradoxically, must revise him as they strive to realize themselves and remake America" (p. 8). But there is no paradox here, only two opposing points of view, and if Whitman's political and philosophical ideal of synthesis and completion triumphed for Price in 1990, it is the political and philosophical ideals of balkanization and end-

less revision that now seems more authoritative for Price in 2004. Now and again, Price objects to these new ideals, but generally in the same heavily conditioned manner, and in any case these objections are outweighed by Price's general silence about the various ways Whitman's vision has in the last century been carved up into little pieces, revised into anything any group of readers prefer, a kind of dispersion of the multitudes that Whitman famously boasted (in the 51st section of "Song of Myself") he contained.

Price's sixth and final chapter "Whitman at the Movies" is the most dramatic illustration of his new reluctance to judge this diaspora of Whitman's multitudes. As Price notes, Whitman's relationship to film is only beginning to be explored by scholars (p. 168n), and Price's sketch of that relationship is helpfully annotated with references to this important new commentary. Particularly fascinating is Whitman's consistent role in the earliest American films. In 1913, in the now extant *The Carpenter*, the Whitman figure is the titular character, appearing as nurse and healer of the nation. With Christ-like powers, Price writes, the Whitman figure "unit[es] a family torn apart by sons fighting for opposing armies" (p. 114). As Price helpfully recalls, Van Wyck Brooks presented Whitman in virtually the same light that same year when he wrote that Whitman fused together in his poetic persona "the hitherto incompatible extremes of the American temperament" (quoted, p. 115). Remarkably, Vachel Lindsay's *The Art of the Moving Picture*, also from 1915, made the same point yet again, this time with the contention that filmmakers will in fact finish Whitman's grand synthesis. "Whitman brought the idea of democracy itself to our sophisticated literati," Lindsay wrote, "but did not persuade the democracy itself to read his democratic poems. Sooner or later the kinoscope will do what he could not, bring the nobler side of the equality idea to the people who are so crassly equal" (quoted, p. 115). Price points to no less than three more films from roughly the same period—D. W. Griffith's 1916 *Intolerance*, Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand's 1921 *Manhatta*, and King Vidor's 1931 *Street Scene*—that all invoke Whitman as a unifier of America and the world (pp. 115-120).

Later in the same chapter, though, Price turns to a set of films from "Reagan's America," which "have appropriated Whitman as a relatively unthreatening entryway into consideration of same-sex love" (p. 125). The films he examines in detail—*Down by Law* (1986), *Dead Poets Society* (1988), *Beautiful Dreamers* (1991), *Sophie's Choice* (1982), and *Bull Durham* (1988)—all prove that "Whitman has now become a convenient shorthand in American

film culture, in a way analogous to his function for British readers at the end of the nineteenth century, when ... a picture of Whitman or a letter from him served as a homosexual badge of recognition" (pp. 137-138). Despite Price's analogy to those brave late-nineteenth-century British readers of Whitman examined in the third chapter, the narrow focus of these films, particularly in contrast to the early films, seems an obscuring rather than celebrating of the true gift of Whitman. But Price draws no such a conclusion. His description of the disappearance of Whitman the sage from film is not only resolutely neutral but a little misleading, too, for it suggests inaccurately (at least on the evidence provided) a consistent liberality of uses of Whitman throughout twentieth-century American filmmaking, i.e., "the religious aspect of Whitman ... would fade in importance as the dominant threads in Whitman's reception became not the political radical and the religious prophet but the secular poet and spokesman for mainstream liberal American democracy" (p. 114). The chapter's evidence seems to support a different and more regrettable conclusion: mainly, that Whitman's significance to American filmmakers and (by implication) their audiences has been dramatically attenuated.

In other parts of the book, Price's apparent neutrality about rival uses of Whitman across the century looks to be on closer examination a function of his new (if reluctant) submission to the now dominant critical ideals of balkanization and constructivism. Consider how Price handles three particular facets of Whitman's true gift: his humanism, his radical politics, and his spirituality.

In *Whitman and Tradition*, Price showed how the young Whitman's reaction to contemporary English theories of criticism revealed the poet's humanist program of sympathetic identification (p. 20). In *To Walt Whitman, America*, Price only occasionally endorses this program. He cites approvingly George Frederickson's contention that "Whitman's intellectual problem"—"the still unanswered question of how to give a genuine sense of community to an individualistic, egalitarian democracy"—is still ours (p. 8). He recalls Santayana's tribute to Whitman's exemplary ability to depict in our democracy "the charm of uniformity in multiplicity" (quoted, p. 34). He argues forcefully in the introduction that while "[s]eparatism ... has appeal as an ultimate goal for some multicultural theorists ... a less atomistic and essentialist goal remains vital for many, a goal based on [the] fluid and cross-culturally enriched identities" found in Whitman's "inclusive, future-oriented project" (p. 10). Price even asserts that Erickson's point about Whitman's

coerciveness (cited above) is “anachronistic,” for “Whitman was not interested in developing multiple cultures in the United States but instead in helping to realize *one* culture, a complex yet unified and distinctive people” (p. 8, emphasis in original). And, most impressively, Price’s entire first chapter, “Whitman in Blackface,” is a masterful meditation on the real and necessary role of coercion in the achievement of democracy, the intense reciprocal sympathy required of slaves as well as masters (p. 13), the “circuit of pain” necessarily involved for all (p. 17), the profound and erotic physicality of our relationships (the feet of the trapper’s bride, the runaway slave, the soul’s body in “Song of Myself,” pp. 20, 25-27). With such a rich examination of Whitman’s ideal of sympathy so early in the book, Price seems poised in *To Walt Whitman, America* to mount an even more robust defense of the humanist vision he first examined in *Whitman and Tradition*.

Yet, Price’s fifth chapter, “Passing, Fluidity, and American Identities,” mostly drops this defense and takes up instead a strict neutrality about the balkanized versions of Whitman that now dominate various contemporary subcultures. The humanist democracy he endorsed in the first chapter is presented in the fifth chapter more circumspectly. “When contemporary thinkers yearn for a cultural space that is not racially and ethnically inflected ... we suspect that they really yearn for a white space” (p. 90), Price notes early in the chapter. Similarly, “[w]hen minority writers invoke a writer such as Whitman, are they seeking a raceless space of ‘humanity’ that we suspect is apocryphal?” (p. 90) Moreover, in this chapter focused on contemporary authors swept up in identity politics, Whitman’s humanity does indeed begin to seem “apocryphal,” his grand sympathetic imagination now at best just a version of “passing.” Sucked into this cramped politics of passing and outing, Price occasionally acknowledges that only pyrrhic victories are possible here. “If passing violates or overcomes racial and cultural boundaries, then the exposure of it, which can be thought of as ‘outing,’ enforces divisions even as it implicitly acknowledges their tenuous nature” (p. 94). But rather than recalling how deeply at odds such a politics is with Whitman’s vision of unity in multiplicity, Price emerges from the internecine battles of William Least Heat-Moon, Ishmael Reed, and Gloria Naylor over “authenticity” to conclude that “Whitman’s malleability, explorations of passing, and centrality as an icon have made him irresistible for writers, who, in extraordinarily creative ways, reinvent him for their purposes” (p. 107). That summation recalls Price’s earlier surrender to the “paradoxical” notion that somehow revising Whitman’s message into its

exact opposite is necessary if we are to “remake America” (cited above, p. 8). However, without denying that the remaking of America by identity politics has resulted in a culture more sensitive to the subtleties of racial and sexual bias, surely the enlistment of America’s great poet of synthesis into this politics deserves to be recognized as something other than “extraordinarily creative.”

Something similar happens in chapters 3 and 4, which include Price’s analyses of what modern readers have done with Whitman’s radical politics. The third chapter first acknowledges the utopian reach of Edward Carpenter’s reading of Whitman’s sexual transgressions as “part of a more ‘extensive pattern of transgressivity which challenged norms of social and class position and aesthetic value’ ” (pp. 60-61), but is subsequently nonjudgmental about the loss of that larger social challenge in the work of the increasingly homophobic Lawrence (pp. 61-65) and the increasingly private Forster (pp. 65-67). The fourth chapter, “Xenophobia, Religious Intolerance, and Whitman’s Storybook Democracy,” is again notably neutral, this time about the profound diminishment of Whitman’s political significance during the ideological extremism of mid-century. Price slights the many leftists of the period for whom Whitman was an icon (Horace Traubel, Emma Goldman, Newton Arvin, Mike Gold, Langston Hughes), quipping that “it seemed not to matter that Whitman had rarely given more than qualified support to political radicalism; he was nonetheless hailed as a prophet of socialism and communism” (p. 71). But are Dos Passos’s equivocations about Whitman’s “storybook democracy” really a more faithful rendering of Whitman’s political message? After reviewing Ben Shahn’s struggle to complete a mural featuring a very mild Whitman for the Bronx General Post Office against the most extreme anti-Semitism and anti-communism, Price turns to Bernard Malamud’s representation of a similarly neutered Whitman (in “The German Refugee”). “Malamud responds to the attractiveness of Whitman’s dream of brotherhood *and* questions whether it can have any meaning whatsoever in an age haunted by the Holocaust” (p. 85, emphasis in original), Price writes, but it is the latter claim that truly dominates this chapter, as he suggests in his conclusion:

If we think of *Leaves of Grass* as a living document accruing meanings that evolve with time and changing readers, the book was altered but not negated by the Holocaust. Malamud’s gloss on these lines from “Song of Myself,” as intriguing as any to be found in the critical literature, leaves us with a more sober and chastened Whitman, a sense that his affirmations can, at best, be

approved only as ideals, not as descriptions of reality (p. 89).

Here again we see Price's concessions to the new constructivist ideal—that Whitman “accrues” new meanings over time—essentially amount to an endorsement of Whitman's severely narrowed significance over the last century.

Finally, there is the spiritual nature of Whitman's vision, the loss of which Price seems even more aggressively indifferent. While Price notes that the early twentieth century saw the rise of the radical Whitman, the comradely Whitman, and the “Whitman of ‘cosmic consciousness’” as well as the homosexual Whitman (p. 150 n), he never draws our attention to the twentieth-century fate of that cosmic Whitman, which may have been quite different than Price leads us to believe. Certainly the spiritual Whitman seems to have been more prominent in the early decades of the century than Price lets on. He buries in a footnote the intriguing detail that Wharton's planned study of Whitman was actually to focus upon the “Cosmic Whitman” (p. 149 n). And of course another of Whitman's most important fin-de-siecle Harvard readers was William James (as Price acknowledged in his earlier book, p. 125), who in *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) famously presented Whitman as the author of “the religion of healthy-mindedness.” There's an intriguing continuity between James's and Richard Rorty's use of Whitman in his 1998 *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*, a book with which Price hints his own to be in affiliation (pp. 8, 139n). But, in contrast to Price's book, Rorty's book endorses the same kind of cosmic Whitman that his fellow pragmatist James once did, a Whitman who (in Rorty's words) teaches us that America must “redefine God as our future selves” (p. 22).[2] There is nothing in Price's story to suggest this reading of Whitman survived even the first years of the twentieth century.

In his 1989 *Minor Prophecy: Walt Whitman's New American Religion*, David Kuebrich wrote that “[o]nce his work was placed in the bailiwick of English departments, it was predictable that Whitman would receive careful literary scrutiny but that his potential religious and political significance would be largely ignored” (p. 176).[3] Despite the kind of close attention to Whitman's historical contexts that Kenneth Price helped to pioneer in his 1990 book, subsequent studies of Whitman coming out of the disciplines of English and American Studies have

nevertheless largely retained an unexamined prejudice against the spiritual aspect of the poet's work as well as a parochial unwillingness to side with Whitman's radical humanist politics against today's anti-humanist politics of identity. An important contribution to our understanding of Whitman's influence throughout the twentieth century, Price's *To Walt Whitman, America*, in reflecting these same biases, is more a creature of its times than his groundbreaking book of 1990. In the first paragraph of *To Walt Whitman, America*, Price begins promisingly by reviewing the vast range of ways in which Whitman is “a foundational figure in American culture,” but just a few pages later he admits he has chosen in this book to “dwell on case studies that illuminate how Whitman mediates understandings of race and sexuality in American culture” (pp. 3, 6). Price's studied neutrality throughout the book about Whitman's twentieth-century readers is therefore somewhat misleading, as is his claim that these case studies together comprise an “eclectic approach” that “sketch[es], though it does not begin to fully portray, the poet's endlessly rich and surprising afterlife” (p. 6). Certainly there are some wonderful surprises in this book, but, especially for those familiar with the contemporary preoccupations of departments of English and American Studies, the Whitman that emerges in *To Walt Whitman, America* is too often utterly predictable, his “true gift”—which once was large, and contained multitudes—obscured by Price's deference to contemporary interpretive habits.

Notes

[1]. Kenneth M. Price, *Whitman and Tradition: The Poet in His Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

[2]. Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

[3]. David Kuebrich, *Minor Prophecy: Walt Whitman's New American Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

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