

CARLA BILLITTERI.

LANGUAGE AND THE RENEWAL OF SOCIETY IN WALT WHITMAN,
LAURA (RIDING) JACKSON, AND CHARLES OLSON: THE
AMERICAN CRATYLUS (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) xx + 219pp.

Reviewed by Brian Reed

This book asks why so many American poets from the mid-nineteenth to the late twentieth century have persistently sought “a perfect language of words univocal in meaning” despite “unanswerable critiques” by philosophers as well as “extensive empirical evidence that language is imperfect and polyvocal in meaning” (xiii). They do so, Billitteri speculates, because of a utopian “social vision.” They dream of “renewing society” through “acts of a natural or organically conceived language” (6-7). They seek not to restore some imagined “prelapsarian condition” of simplicity and purity (11) but rather, by using words exactly and properly, to create a “germinal site”: an example of “linguistic immutability” that others can imitate when striving to make a “truthful utterance” (8). Once enough people learn to speak and write correctly, they will generate a “society founded on the real and true,” a society that is necessarily “democratic,” too, since “access to the real and true is not the privilege of the few, but within the reach of all” (31).

In labelling this general point of view the “American Cratylus” (6), Billitteri evokes of course Plato’s dialogue *Cratylus*, more specifically the eponymous character’s “belief that language, of divine origin, directly emanates from nature, intrinsically expressing the inner reality of things” (17). Plato, though, serves her more as a touchstone than an intertext. The poets that she discusses—Walt Whitman, Laura (Riding) Jackson, Charles Olson, and, in a coda, the Language Poets Bob Grenier and Lyn Hejinian—do not agree with Cratylus about, for instance, the existence of a “nomothete”: a “power more than human” who “guarantees that names belongs to things and express their innermost nature” (21-22). They do not even aspire to such a role, for, by elevating the figure of the poet above his or her fellow citizens, it would violate the democratic ethos they cherish. More often than not, in fact, when closely scrutinized, Billitteri’s favored writers turn out to be intermediate types whose beliefs concerning language fail to align fully with those expressed by any of Plato’s interlocutors. Although perhaps predominately “Cratylan,” they also tend to voice idealist opinions, as Socrates does, or, like Hermogenes, they sometimes make conventionalist pronouncements, treating the link between between words and things as the product of custom and habit.

This inconsistency could be considered a weakness in Billitteri’s thesis. Why invoke the *Cratylus* at all if none of her writers straightforwardly subscribe to

the positions that the dialogue outlines? She proves adept, though, at discerning and disentangling the different Platonic strands in an author's poetics as well as tracking their variations through time. Indeed, after an introductory chapter titled "The True Form of Things," she devotes almost all of her attention to this task. There are none of the extended, virtuosic close readings of individual lyrics that one might expect in such a study. She explains why in a concise but important statement about her methodology that opens the book. Her preferred unit of analysis is not a "set of works" but a "poetic project," a writer's gradual "articulation of a poetics" over the course of a career. When elucidating a project, she explains, "poems are not simply artifacts to be appreciated." They are best approached as "sites of intellectual and social labor." As such, they do not automatically outrank any other genres in which a poet might work, including "prose notes, letters, essays, and monographs" (2). Unpublished manuscripts, too, carry as much weight as oft-anthologized set pieces. Regardless of their genre or publication status, what these texts "say is subservient to what they *accomplish*," even when they fail at the task they set for themselves. "[I]naccuracies, faulty reasoning, and fantasies" should not be seen as "weaknesses to be identified, problems to be critiqued, or contradictions to be resolved" (1-2; her emphasis). Rather, they are episodes in a larger narrative, and one should investigate how and why an author made use of them to "support" an ongoing line of inquiry. In short,

the job of the critic is to track how certain ideas, attitudes, and ambitions “persevere” across a writer’s *oeuvre* despite setbacks, contradictions, and inconsistencies (3).

She does not make a grand show of it, but with these preliminary gestures Billitteri is laying the groundwork for a responsible “post-theoretical” study of American poetry. By elevating continuity over aporia, she is self-consciously moving away from deconstructive and other poststructuralist modes of critique. She readily acknowledges that if one looks for it in the three poets whom she discusses, one will find “ambivalence, conflict, or confusion” over the nature of language. As Jacques Derrida taught long ago, however, such messiness is commonplace, indeed almost inevitable whenever an author puts pen to paper. Consequently, she holds that the inevitable gaffes, breakdowns, and contradictions are ultimately less interesting than the poets’ “dreams of how language *might* be used and *should* function” (2; her emphasis). And their search for a “perfect language” proves to be an “enabling” activity with political and ethical ramifications worth close critical attention (5).

Billitteri’s stance here is recognizably pragmatist. For her, the irrationality of Cratylism is largely irrelevant. What deserves academic attention are the ramifications and corollaries of espousing, in however qualified or adulterated a fashion, such a perverse philosophical doctrine. Her account of her method also

helps to explain why she has written a book that can appear, at least in Whitman's case, to revisit well-trod ground. Nearly two decades ago, James Perrin Warren's *Walt Whitman's Language Experiment* (1990) anatomized the poet's career-long fascination with language and linguistics, and a few years later Ed Folsom's *Walt Whitman's Native Representations* (1994) directed attention to his readings in lexicography, especially Noah Webster and Joseph Emerson Worcester. Two other studies from the same period, Mark Bauerlein's *Whitman and the American Idiom* (1991) and Tenney Nathanson's *Whitman's Presence* (1994), subjected his verse to the kind of patient, exhaustive attention to language-use that characterizes deconstruction at its best. Over the last fifteen years, however, as densely historicizing studies of American literature have emerged as the norm, the early 1990s conversation about Whitman's understanding of language stalled. It was overtaken by a host of other topics, such as his involvement in the Locofocos faction of the Democratic party and his celebration of the figure of the Bowery B'Hooy. When the topic of language has taken center stage, as it memorably does in Andrew Lawson's *Walt Whitman and the Class Struggle* (2006), the goal has generally been to read *Leaves of Grass* as a document of a particular place and time.

While Billitteri is hardly opposed to placing texts in their historical contexts, neither does she find such a move an end in itself. She admires Whitman's vision

of a “modern,” “post-European,” and “multicultural” United States, a vision, moreover, that she believes can still inspire progressive political action (7). For that reason, she is content to reconstruct, not criticize, Whitman’s argument that “a proper American language” could be built on “two quite different linguistic foundations,” “Native American and Anglo-Saxon” (48). Similarly, she declines to use the word *compromise* to describe Whitman’s oscillation between a Lockean faith in the ability of “new societies to create new languages” as they see fit (51) and a [Humboldtian](#) “understanding of language as the historically unfolding expression of a nation” (64). In short, she is unusually forgiving in her account of Whitman’s premises—that “words can have inherent meanings,” that “names can have inherent characteristics”—because they serve as the logical antecedent to a conclusion that she respects, namely, that American “poems, institutions, [and] societies,” too, have unshakeable foundations and clear purposes, a “future-oriented” effort at achieving true “democracy” (71). So much of the scholarship in contemporary American Studies aims at demystification or indictment that it is surprising—even refreshing—to discover a scholar committed to isolating and affirming utopian potential in nineteenth century nationalist verse.

The later chapters on the modernist Laura (Riding) Jackson and the postmodernist Charles Olson extend Billitteri’s story of the “American Cratylus” up to the mid-twentieth century. First, she retells the story of (Riding) Jackson’s

1955 announcement that she would no longer write poetry. Between 1938 and 1948, she loses faith in “the notion of poetry as rectification,” that is, as a means of elevating and purifying “everyday language.” She begins to advocate “a more attentive listening to the language of the mind,” an endeavor that eventually took the form of a quixotic crusade against post-Saussurean linguistics (79). While most discussions of (Riding) Jackson’s renunciation of poetry characterize it as a break or rupture, Billitteri wants to present it as simply a chapter in a longer story, the writer’s attempts to fulfill “America’s prophetic task—the renewal of society” by making it explicit that the “fate of the language” and “its people” are “bound . . . together” (83). Early in her career, (Riding) Jackson sought to use sound play, metaphor, and other poetic devices in the service of “destruction,” that is, the creation of a “cleared space” emptied of the corruptions that mottle and mar quotidian discourse (102). Later she came to see verse too as so tainted by misdirection and ambiguity that it could never be relied on to help a thinker achieve clarity and precision. In prose works such as *The Telling* (1972) and the posthumously published *Rational Meaning* (1997) she began to delve deeply into what she had earlier spurned: everyday language. She wanted to sort out the difference between “*preferred* usage”—the way people tend to talk and write—and the as-yet-unrealized “*proper* use” that would enable the “true renewal of society” (113).

This portrait of (Riding) Jackson's career is persuasive but also somewhat dissatisfying. The book's polemical focus on projects instead of works leads in this case to a missed opportunity. Although nowadays acknowledged as part of the modernist canon, (Riding) Jackson's verse remains understudied. Other than her self-imposed "silence," critics scarcely agree on what were the milestones in her career-or on the relative merits of her pre-World War II publications, their characteristic themes and techniques, or their distinctive achievements. "Rupture v. continuity" is not an antithesis that truly helps us to place the poet within the already well-populated firmament of early twentieth-century Anglo-American literature. Moreover, as Billitteri confesses, (Riding) Jackson pairs oddly with Whitman, since the "Americanness so prominent in Whitman's project becomes attenuated" in hers. Her theories are universalist, not particularist, and she would consider anathema his "belief that language is . . . an expression of national character" (114).

The final chapter, on Olson, restores coherence to the book's overall arc. Like (Riding) Jackson, he thinks that humanity as a whole has taken a wrong turn. More specifically, he holds that the "Platonic and Aristotelian systematization of thought" in the Classical era has gone on to poison societies around the globe, producing a toxic "culture of . . . mechanization, industrialization, and capitalist expansion" (121). More in the vein of Whitman, however, he imagines a salvific

mission for the United States. It is up to “all members of the body politic . . . in their daily activities” to overcome the dead weight of abstraction and “redeemistory” (152). Billitteri does an exemplary job tracing the ins and outs of Olson’s many versions of this argument. She handles well his confusing and shifting “terminology”—his idiosyncratic use, for example, of such words as “*speech, glyph, objectism, etymology, [and] logography*” (119; her emphasis)—and she is fully at home with Olson’s more anomalous writings in which “genre distinctions . . . break down” and it becomes unclear whether one is reading telegraphic verse, prose jottings, or lecture notes (123). She shows that, whether in his epic *The Maximus Poems* (1983), his correspondence, or his essays, his goal was constant, an exaltation of “the resistant primes’ of speech—syllables, glyphs, any unit of language that carries meaning prior to its abstraction from the body or experience” (129). These “primes,” he contends, offer an escape route from the horror of post-Aristotelian “Western thought” (123).

This book might be on the short side, but it is also closely, tightly argued and rich in its use of archival materials. Billitteri is intimately familiar with her chosen poets, as even a cursory glance at her bibliography will reveal. For readers whose primary interest is nineteenth century literature and culture, her book will likely be most valuable for its unusual approach to Whitman and his legacy. She takes him seriously as a philosophical thinker, and, having distinguished his arguments about

language from Emerson's, she endorses his. Then she positions him as the founder of an intellectual, not so much a poetic, tradition that extends down into (Riding) Jackson's publications of the 1980s and 90s. This is not the bardic Whitman generally seen as a forerunner of the Beats and their imitators, nor is it the "adhesive" Whitman celebrated in gay male poetry from Hart Crane to Mark Doty. Billitteri's Whitman could be assigned reading in a political science seminar on the same syllabus as John Rawls, Robert Nozick, and Michael Oakshott. Would he hold up well in such company, read not for sound and sentiment but chiefly for his ideas? Perhaps not, but Billitteri's success is making the scenario thinkable in the first place.

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