

The Collected Poems of Philip Whalen

Edited by Michael Rothenberg

Foreword by Gary Snyder

Introduction by Leslie Scalapino

Wesleyan University Press 2007

\$49.95

Reviewed by Keith Kumasen Abbott

Zen Priest Philip Zenshin Ryufu Whalen lived so intensely that he often needed to share these experiences. He characterized his urge thusly: “My concern is to arrange immediate BREAKTHROUGH /into this heaven where we live / as music” (365). Toward his goal, he wrote enough for his large *Collected Poems* to display the startling breadth of his interests and talents.

Typically, chronological collected poems are for scholars, and editor Michael Rothenberg has performed those duties splendidly, especially by the inclusion of Whalen’s revealing Prefaces and Essays about his poetic and contemplative practices. In Whalen’s works the scholarship possibilities prove rich—encompassing artists of the San Francisco Renaissance and the Beat Generation, the history of West Coast Zen Buddhism, and Whalen’s uses of the American Song Book, jazz, and avant-garde music. This volume also illuminates Whalen’s constant engagements with past poetic and philosophical masters. As Gary Snyder notes in his Foreword, at Reed College Whalen went beyond “our official modernist mentors Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Williams and Stevens” to use “Pali Buddhist texts” to fashion “poetry out of the territory of those readings.” (xxvii)

Whalen’s stylistic roots were also nourished by 18th Century English writers Swift, Gibbon, and Johnson; then extended through Austen, Blake, and Whitman. From 1949 forward, his early poems emulated Eliot’s poetics, as is illustrated by “Advent”:

To make the necessary simplification
Of all the orthodox confusions
So elaborately wrought
In our bereaved seclusion (12)

Dry wit, abstract feminine rhymes, and the assonance of “**or-tho-dox**” with the unrhymed line’s last word “**wrought**” are reminiscent of Eliot’s “Burnt Norton.”

The influence of Williams Carlos Williams emerges in “November First”:

At the bus stop

I saw two crisp spiders

Each clamped onto his own slowly warming stones

Black stars in the unexpected sunlight. (14)

The precision of the spiders’ placement in an urban landscape first, then the spiders morphing into a cosmological metaphor, also resembles a Williams’ trope.

From the mid-1950s on, the Zen tradition of living in each moment fully (and often humorously) remained his main resource for his breakthroughs. Whalen continuously monitored and revealed his ecstatic and darkest contemplations.

Stylistically, his motto seemed to become “Why not?” In his guise of an acerbic yet delighted hermit, Whalen composed his idiosyncratic comedies of Zen arrows and errors meeting in the mid-flight. From his Kyoto book-length poem *Scenes of Life at The Capital*:

At home, the vegetable supply

A Dutch still-life set on reversed lid of *nabe*

Half a red carrot half a giant radish half a head of hokusai

A completely monumental potato

China will sail across big Zen soup to me

THE BAD NEWS INCUBUS SERVICE

They peer down through my ceiling

“Poor old man he’s too fat to live much longer.” (608)

In “Friday Already Half-” a 1963 meditation on *sunyata*, or the void, Whalen invents patterns very close to Zen philosopher Dogen’s remarkable paradoxical concatenations of negative logic years before his essays became widely available in English. (In the early 1980s Whalen became a co-translator of Dogen with Kaz Tanahashi.)

The unthinkable is not a blank, not a non-entity

Not to be dismissed as imaginary, not death, not sleep (312)

During his habitual deep doubts, Whalen can be as bleak as Hakuin during that master’s most blunt and scathing self-assessments, pointing directly at our tangles of desire and impermanence, exemplified by this passage from “Unfinished, 3:xii: 55”.

A single waking moment destroys us

And we cannot live without
Ourselves

You come to me for an answer? I
Invented it all. I
Am your tormentor, there no
Escape, no redress

You are powerless against me; You
Must suffer agonies until you know
You are suffering.

Work on that. (50)

These lines embody Whalen's dramatic version of the essential Buddhist truth that all our thoughts have no self but thoughts maintain that illusion, thereby creating the roots of our suffering.

Technically, Whalen's work sometimes resembles a funhouse mirror version of *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry & Poetics*. Some commentators call his freewheeling poems either mobiles or collages; in either case, the most diverting verse techniques commingle. A giddy cartoon bubble caption may link with highly complex poetry, as in "I Return To San Francisco":

RIGHT NOW
If I had a pet rabbit right now
I'd pinch it & make it squeak
NOBODY pays any attention to me & I really need LOTS
of loving

*

Since you won't come to me
I'll think about mountain cypress trees

Something has taken the bark away the wood weathers orange & twisty (130)
Such juxtapositions create a comic portrait of a forlorn narrator, one simpatico with Ginsberg's desperate yet slapstick narrator in "America" and with Kerouac's hapless yet eager amateur mountaineer in *The Dharma Bums*. All three authors shared an appreciation of *Krazy Kat* comics and their buoyant visual and verbal farces.

In the last stanza, Whalen's classical musical training, love of jazz, and

meticulous poetic ear produces improvisations on tetrameter rhythms with an evolving pattern of displaced accents, shifting meters and masculine and feminine rhymes. He expands from a condensed four-beat first line to an irregular iambic pentameter second line. In the third octameter line, a caesura divides it into two four-beat lines—the first slightly variable iambic tetrameter, the last compressed and beautifully irregular: “**Something** has **taken the bark away** / the **wood weathers orange & twisty**”. Of the Beat Generation writers, Kerouac, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, and Whalen display the most sustained skillful uses of jazz rhythms—i.e., condensed and expansive motifs and resolutions. All celebrated the heavenly bliss and energy that jazz aroused.

Truly spontaneous art arises from long hard practice, and for Whalen Western calligraphy was a daily routine. His works were first written in his Italic hand. Such disciplined exercises created his best concise lyrics but also fueled his most wayward and minor productions. Rothenberg’s inclusion of calligraphy may spark a revelation, i.e. in “March 1964” where the extravagant swash serif capital letters enhance the presentation of “What’s your platform? / Ressurexion / Renaissance / Total Paradise.” (354) Or these extravagances may irritate readers and verify for them Whalen’s indulgent self-absorption.

Most poems Whalen dated. But this is no poetic diary, like *The Pillow Book*, due to his intentions and compositional methods. Whalen’s longer poems arrange main themes and conclusions without benefit of Shonagon’s dramatic characters, domestic settings, and societal structures. However, their finales are assiduously imagistic and/or anecdotal, as in his longest poem, *Scenes of Life at the Capital*, the decayed temple trees.

Another propped up with poles and timbers
Part of it fixed with straw rope
Exploding white blossoms not only from twigs
And branches but from shattered trunk itself,
Old and ruined, all rotted and broken up
These plum trees function gorgeously
A few days every year
In a way nobody else does. (647)

His mid-size lyrics are organized around innovative rhetorical improvisations; usually rhythmic pictorial resolutions end those, too, as in “Birthday Poem”: “Awake or asleep I live by the light of a hollow pearl” (586).

In a late poem, Whalen himself denied his status as “a great POET!” and characterized that notion as “Misunderstanding brought on by overpayment.”

(694). He'd surely be as modest about these 799 pages. Still, in its scope, *The Collected Poems of Philip Whalen* is uniquely Zen, American, and Whitmanesque; it does contain multitudes and masterpieces.