

*Woolgathering*  
By Patti Smith  
New York: New Directions, 2011  
\$18.95; cloth

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*Everything contained in this little book is true, and written just like it was.*  
(Patti Smith, "To the Reader" [xii])

While Patti Smith's musical accomplishments were acknowledged when she was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2007, the literary world has largely neglected her poetry. Smith finally received the literary critical acclaim she deserves, not for her poetry but for her prose: the 2010 National Book Award for Non Fiction for *Just Kids*, her memoir of coming-of-age in the 1960s and 70s with artist Robert Mapplethorpe in the midst of the vibrant New York City arts scene. *Just Kids* is a conventional memoir that, as she tells it, is her effort to say goodbye to Mapplethorpe while also presenting him to the world. The book is dedicated to Mapplethorpe, to his art, "the corporeal body of the artist. It will not fall away." *Just Kids*, then, is memoir as factual retelling of events tending toward truth. *Woolgathering*, however, is a very different kind of memoir. It is a truthful work based on some facts. As the title suggests polyphonic readings, *Woolgathering* in its imaginative and creative intentions is a post-romantic gesture that challenges the self-imposed limits of aesthetic credulity. Truth as fact is only secondarily intended.

On her website, [www.pattismith.net](http://www.pattismith.net), I came across this blurb: *Woolgathering* was completed, in Michigan, on Patti Smith's 45th birthday and originally published in a slim volume from Raymond Foye's Hanuman Books. Twenty years later, New Directions presents the second revised edition of *Woolgathering*, a handsome "4.75" x "7" and augmented edition, featuring writing that was omitted from the book's first printing, along with new photographs and illustrations.

Whereas the romantic traditions from German Idealism to English Romanticism to American transcendentalism to variations of 20<sup>th</sup> century Neo-Romanticism stresses the loss of childhood innocence and the human dissociation from divinity and nature, Smith's post-romanticism announces the creative imagination's participation in wonder and love. Wonder is always tied to the sacred. In the pages of *Woolgathering* wonder is exscendent rather than transcendent. In romantic ideology, the artist evades the material conditions of life. Such a desire for escape, Emmanuel Levinas has argued,

Does not originate from the dream of the poet who sought to evade the 'lower realities'; nor does it arise from the concern to break with the social conventions and constraints that falsified or annihilated our personality, as in the romantic movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Escaping is the quest for the marvelous, which is liable to break up the somnolence of our bourgeois existence. (53)

Smith's *Woolgathering* "is the quest for the marvelous," artfully connected to childhood not as loss or a positing intentionality, but as an operative intentionality: "the mind of a child is like a kiss on the forehead—open and disinterested" (13). This holy indifference arises from direct experience of the wondrous world mediated by the creative imagination rather than an act of transcendence. Exscendence emphasizes the climb *out* from the world rather than a flight *from* the world. For Smith, woolgathering is wonder, in which the person is "mystified by the commonplace" (13).

The above hints at the suggestiveness of woolgathering. The original publication by Foye, Francesco Clemente, and George Scrivani at Hanuman Books in 1991 depicted Smith's sister Linda's photograph of a blue sky with clouds the kind of sight that would make even the most hardened urbanite want to lay down in the grass and, well, woolgather. New Directions' re-issue reprints the skyscape in black and white opposite the section titled "Art in Heaven" and replaces the original cover with Jean-Francois Millet's "Shepherdess with Her Flock" (c. 1863). This seems to be a literal rendering of woolgathering, but upon reading one finds out that the young Patti was given to visions of pastoralists inhabiting "Thomas' Field" across the way from her house.

In the introduction to the work entitled, "To the reader," Smith tells us that *Woolgathering* began when she was living in Detroit "with my husband [the late Fred Sonic Smith] and two children in an old stone house set by a canal that emptied into Lake Saint Clair" (ix). The work began in an "atmosphere" of the overgrown yard's proliferation of flora and her experience of "a terrible and inexpressible melancholy" (ix). Sitting for hours after the children were in school, chores done, and "lost in thought" *Woolgathering* began. So this is the exscendent dimension of woolgathering. The melancholia and lost in thought reveal Smith's expressive intentions: "[t]he writing of it drew me from my strange torpor" (xii).

*Woolgathering* as an act of expressionistic composition includes the romantic aspects of fanciful day dreaming, imaginative revelry, and the immersion in natural and open spaces. In remembering walks with her mother and siblings, Smith describes these meanderings as walks that "filled us with joy" (8). Unlike William Wordsworth's wanderings with his sister Dorothy across the hills of the Lake District or Dylan Thomas' anamnesis of his childhood in Wales, Smith's woolgathering highlights the meditative and contemplative experience of being in "Thomas' Field" across from her home as the place for woolgathering in which "one could hear a seed form or the soul fold like a handkerchief" (9). Such imagery is clearly religious. Thus, Smith can write: "I never failed to bow my head as we passed by the bush" (9). As her admissions of melancholia reveal, this is not a work recollected in tranquility. In this respect, then, it might be argued that Smith's work has more in common with Friedrich Holderlin's poetry, but then again melancholia is not madness.

Whether Smith is recounting her early experiences of drawing, wandering the streets of London or across Nepal, or meditating on the elements of her aesthetic, we are offered in *Woolgathering* a narrative that is both elusive and suggestive. *Woolgathering* is aphoristic, appreciative and lovingly crafted poetic fragments that often frustrate a strictly chronological or otherwise conceptual reading. Episodic in structure and lovely in its musings, *Woolgathering* elides simple categorization.

For all of its painterly figurations, *Woolgathering* also teases at the edges of a post neo-romantic philosophical literature:

Not long ago I had a dream. If one must call certain experiences dream. In Thomas' Field on a clear autumn afternoon. On this patch of land, seemingly abandoned, while my brother and sister sat watching in wordless admiration, I leapt suspended a few feet above the ground. I did not fly but hovered, like a saucer, like Nijinsky, and somehow it seemed in its simplicity all the more miraculous. Still not a word was spoken, as was common between us. A communion bred of love and innocence. (59-60)

Dreams, flights of fancy, imaginative musings mixed with the facts of Smith's existence are the stuff of *Woolgathering*. Yet, her romantic insinuations owe less to romantic and neo-romantic presuppositions than a post-romanticism informed by exscendence. Unlike the transcendent flights on the wings of poesy that fill the poems of John Keats and his contemporaries or even the loss at the heart of *The Town and the City* or *Visions of Gerard* by Jack Kerouac, Smith's emphasis is on how we still, no matter the loss or grief at work in our life, have access to the visionary that can lift us out from the depths of self-consciousness and despair. As she writes at the close of *Woolgathering*:

And these words of advice, imparted with such undivided grace, filled my limbs with such a lightness that I was lifted and left to glide above the grass, although it appeared to all that I was still among them, wrapped in human tasks, *with both feet on the ground*. (my emphasis, 65-66)

Why should scholars interested in Beat culture artists care about Patti Smith and *Woolgathering*? One could point out her relationship with William S. Burroughs or Gregory Corso's early poetic mentoring of Smith. As she writes in *Just Kids*, "I took a great liking to him [Corso], to say nothing that I felt he was one of our greatest poets. My worn copy of his *The Happy Birthday of Death* lived on my night table." . . . When I mourned my inability to finish any of my poems, he quoted Mallarme to me: 'Poets don't finish poems, they abandon them', and then added, 'Don't worry, you'll do okay, kid'" (137). We also learn that it was Corso who first took Smith to the St. Mark's Poetry Project and that he "made lists of books for me to read, told me the best dictionary to own and encouraged and challenged me" (138). Her connections to Beat Culture don't end here as she was also involved deeply with the second wave currents of the New York School including rocker and poet Jim Carroll and Lou Reed of the Velvet Underground.

One way that I think about Smith and her work in relation to Beat Studies is that just as *Woolgathering* (both title and act) pushes the borders of truth far beyond bare fact, so do the terms "Beat" and "Beat culture" challenge us to push the boundaries of conceptualization beyond the facts of post-World War II American Art. This is a challenge to attend to the details in which we, too, proceed in our study "with both feet on the ground," and a caution to remember that the categories introduced by James E.B. Breslin (Beat, Deep Image, Confessional, San Francisco Renaissance, New York School, and Black Mountain) are useful fictions that may, if we take them too seriously, obscure the interpenetrations and convergences barely understandable by a term like "consociate." As Diane di Prima recalls in her memoir, *Recollections of My Life as a Woman: The New York Years*:

The worlds overlapped in a million ways and places. The art world, the worlds of jazz, of modern classical music, of painting and poetry and dance, were all interconnected. There were endless interweavings, they happened slowly, over several years, and they were the stronger for that slow growth. (186-7)

Thus, as scholars we might find Paula Gunn Allen's typology of "waves" to understand the ways by which artists mixed and mingled during those tumultuous and vital decades following the war. In this sense, then, Smith is very much part of the second wave of New York School artists which saw rockers, painters, dancers, poets and political activists working together to extend consciousness.

#### Works Cited

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