

All simultaneous times
all places of the imagination
all forms of expression
are NEW.

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EVERYTHING YOU EVER WANTED TO KNOW

**A review of *The Collected Poems of Philip Whalen*,
edited by Michael Rothenberg; Wesleyan
University Press, 2007, 871 pages; \$49.95**

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A review of *The Collected Poems of Philip Whalen*, edited by Michael Rothenberg; Wesleyan University Press, 2007, 871 pages; \$49.95

“if you want a poem, find a blank page”

-- Philip Whalen

Everything you ever wanted to know about modern poetry is contained in this book. After a statement like that you might expect Johnny Carson to pipe up and say, “Wrong, iambic pentameter breath!” and go on to cite several specious examples. Be that as it may, *The Collected Poems of Philip Whalen* contains the quintessence of modern American poetry. Its 851 pages (not including the Index of Titles and First Lines) testify to a life dedicated to scholarship and meditation, revealing, as Joanne Kyger notes, “the pure ease of an ambling and mighty mind.” Leslie Scalapino’s well-intentioned introduction, marred perhaps by too many parenthetical assertions, is correct in arguing for Whalen’s radical and innovative method. However, all students know that the answers are in the back of the book where, in this case, Whalen’s unabashedly humorous and self-effacing comments on his process are easily accessible. In essence he is saying, I wanted to be a hack novelist making lots of money from my writing but instead I’ve inadvertently become someone whose poetry is admired. Go figure. We’ll forgive him for his modesty (and for putting on weight).

The idea for Philip Whalen’s collected poems had its inception at the time when Michael Rothenberg, the editor of the present volume, was selecting work for what would become Whalen’s first mainstream book of poems since *On Bear’s Head*. Whalen was adamantly opposed to a “collected” volume then. The result was the 1999 publication of his selected poems, *Overtime*, by Penguin. After Whalen’s death in 2002, and with Rothenberg as one of his literary executors, the real labor of love began. It is fortunate that the editor of Whalen’s work had such a personal relationship with him, as is amply demonstrated in Rothenberg’s own *Unhurried Vision* (La Alameda Press, 2003). The result is a volume that will serve as a reference, a handbook, and an illustration of what heights modern poetry can attain. Rothenberg has arranged the poems chrono-

logically in order of composition to give an accurate focus to a span of over 30 years. That Whalen thoughtfully dated all his writing is remarkable. He knew it would be useful one day.

Whalen's early work is an intellectually grounded, spare, taut poetry that errs, if at all, on the side of convention. Many of the poems were written while he was serving in the Army Air Corps in the southwest in the late 1940s early 1950s. Whalen's wide, esoteric, and voracious reading habits included not only Vedantic texts but also classical literature and the interpretations of poetic myth as put forth by Robert Graves in his *The White Goddess* (1948). His dissertation on Graves' idea of a druidic tree calendar from his Reed College days is included in the appendix. Perked by an avid curiosity and guided by scholarly pursuits, Whalen grasped the personal modernity of Whitman and Williams as well as the intuitive orphism of Graves. Whalen's subsequent embrace of Buddhism often obscures his roots in the muse or goddess poet tradition. One could count his many references to the muse, mock or not, as an indication that he was familiar with, and understood, the purpose of ecstatic invocation.

O Muse!

I don't dare summon you
All I ask is that I might come to you
Only to see you, only to look
 at your face
If you're too mad or busy for a talk
I'll go home soon

[from Plums, Metaphysics, An Investigation, A Visit, And A Short
Funeral Ode, p.304]

Robert Graves' pronouncement on poetry, especially on muse inspired poetry in *The White Goddess*, appealed to many poets of Whalen's generation. Perhaps harkening back to a pre-literate past counterbalanced the hectic summons of modern life. Readers unfamiliar with Whalen's work might be surprised

by his solid grounding in classical Western literature. His poem to Oxford don and mythographer, Jane Harrison, *Spring Poem to the Memory of Jane Ellen Harrison* [p.282], underscores a familiarity with *fin de siecle* scholarship on Greek religious culture. Whalen's fearless and unique excursion into classical forms also owes something to ol' Ez's propounding of classical learning. However, Graves' belief that the muse "inspired" poet should only be concerned with the task of writing poetry would seem to have colored Whalen's idea of what it took to be a poet. That concept has deep provenance. One had to be always at the ready for that breath of inspiration.

Certain teachings are whispered into the right ear,
others are murmured into the left; but the
most sacred and arcane of all must be blown into
the crown of the head, down through the sutures
of the skull bone. When the recipient of this
wisdom is able to convey it to another human being,
to a horse, to an ant, a spider, an owl, a goldfish
And a high cliff by words, gestures, actions
Which probably affect the lives of any
such beings I'll be happy to call him a
wise man, saint, successful poet, living man, etc.

[from Heigh-Ho, Nobody's At Home, p.274]

Whalen dedicated himself to the ideal of the classical scholar, a learned man of discerning erudition. He possessed an impeccable sense of rhetorical correctness as well. He knows he's a fuddy duddy but balances it nicely with a sense of playful goofiness that has a fine Kerouacian edge. And, no doubt, a keen self-awareness as accounts of his peyote experience would indicate; Huxley's *Doors Of Perception* had been ripped off the hinges.

A taste for marble in a wooden age
A weakness for the epic that betrays
A twiddly mind.

[from Out Of It, p.34]

Whalen's previously published books which include *On Bear's Head* inclusively through to *Heavy Breathing*, a few privately printed limited editions, and a handful of previously uncollected poems are successfully merged in this essential collection. Rothenberg's earlier selection of Whalen's work in

Overtime served as the appetizer for the main course, *The Collected*. The menu of a veritable Philip Whalen feast would also have to include the eventual publication of Whalen's letters, the reissue of his novels, and necessarily, reproductions of his hand written notebooks.

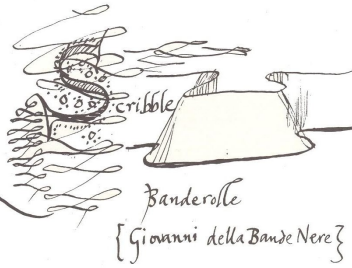
Of the latter, samplings of Whalen's calligraphy, sketches, doodles, and diagrams are reproduced throughout *The Collected*, including the entire handwritten text of the Italian edition of *Monday In The Evening*, and provide a glimpse into his compositional technique. A practicing calligrapher, he wrote in artist sketchbooks with calligraphy nibs or colored pens. Many examples appear to be warm-ups for his actual journal jottings, the shaping of letters determining the inclination of his musings in a totally open and free associative fashion. Whalen's writing by hand is as much meditation as it is literary practice. It is enlightening.

March 1964

more than welcome
more than enough -

of all things!

where's all this cold air
come from?



Banderolle
{ Giovanni della Bande Nere }

What's your platform?

Ressurrection
Renaissance
Total Paradise

I put down programmatical funk. { speaking, now,
absolutely off the record - my business isn't
really to put anything down - I want
a new life } I say **RISE AND**

FLOURISH

for all you're worth { it is all
you're worth ? }

SHINE, Radiate,

{ The night air! }

Joy bliss and whoopee vibrations!

{ The weather ! }

EXQUISITE

what did you say the message was?

That the poem could be a compendium of the daily troll of consciousness, “a continuous fabric” one might say, consisting of compact units of information, polemic, learning, rumination, tirades, and asides laid out serially in resonant relationships, exquisite samplings, and framed sentience is the real lesson of modern poetry. Whalen has taken the antecedence of Whitman, Williams, Stein, and Pound as well as other literary mavericks and made extraordinary use of their example. It is a poetry that is inclusive of all writing and all persuasions of mind.

xi.

Quite often when I feel I have an idea, a notion or an insight, I'm actually understanding something I once read or heard – or I find that I am now able to express an idea of Plato or of Whitehead in my own vocabulary, in which words correspond with exact feelings, with personal experience – I suddenly “see” something, comprehend.

[from *Minor Moralia*, p.269]

If you didn't know any better you'd think that you were riding shotgun with Samuel Johnson's subconscious. The glee of knowing and the act of painlessly imparting that knowledge is often what gives these poems their thought-provoking urgency. Now we know. Useless knowledge is useful and useful knowledge useless.

I, however, know nothing, I must look for everything,
I come up with all the wrong things (pudding, tickets,
crystals, maguey) and many which are uselessly beautiful and
wise which is to say discrete, disparate planets of different color
and variously interesting orbits, the formulae for which, ex-
pressed in mathematical terms and bright sticky honey

[from *Some Kind of Theory*, p.344]

Within this vast oeuvre, the reader encounters considered landscapes populated by trees, conclusions, clouds, flowers (nasturtiums), conversation (with self and others, imaginary or not), itemization (no ideas but in things), the clutter of an orderly mind (fuss budget) struggling to maintain order amid chaos (often self inflicted), subtitles, bon mots, quotations (some unattributed – you're supposed to know!) recipes, various onomatopoeic devices (some explosive), diagrams, direc-

tions (w/arrows), maps, schematics and postulations. Much is revealed, everything from masturbation to meditation with the unintended consequence of realizing that they are not all that different.

The energy level in Whalen's poems dating from the late fifties and sixties is astonishing. In them, the poet moves at the speed of thought. There is an authentic sense of being that is, in terms of consciousness and awareness, way ahead of its time. Clues to Whalen's inspired madness and method abound throughout his self-revealing compositions, but the oft-quoted *Since You Ask Me* provides the most obvious entry into his work.

This poetry is a picture or a graph of a mind moving, which is a world body being here and now which is history. . .and you. Or think about the Wilson Cloud-chamber, not ideogram, not poetic beauty: bald face didacticism moving as Dr. Johnson commands all poetry should, from the particular to the general. (Not that Dr. Johnson was right – nor that I am trying to inherit his literary mantle as a literary dictator but only the title Doctor, i.e., teacher – who is constantly studying). I do not put down the academy but have assumed its function in my own person, and in the strictest sense of the word – academy: a walking grove of trees. But I cannot and will not solve any problems or answer any questions.

[from *Since You Ask Me*, p.153]

The arc of Whalen's creativity is high and wide, peaking in excellence with the long poem, *Scenes of Life at the Capitol*, and writing accomplished in Kyoto in the late 1960s where, by his own admission, he was happiest. Of the 799 pages of poetry in this volume, 160 pages span the late 1940s to the 1960s, 497 pages comprise the work written in the 1960s, 112 pages reflect the work of the 1970s, and 28 pages accomplished through 1997. In later years, Whalen's failing eyesight and fulfillment in Buddhism resulted in a sparse yet exceptional output. It is almost heart breaking to note on the last page of this volume the distance in time between the last two poems: 1988, 1997.

DISCRIMINATIONS

Earliest morning hot moonlight

A catastrophe, the garden too theatrical

Feels wild, unearthly

H. P. Lovecraft could use his favorite adjective:

"Eldritch"

The "shooting star" flowers that Mama used to call "bird-bills"

Bloom around the Hogback graveyard
Suzuki Roshi's great gleaming monument
Wild cyclamen, actually, as in the Palatine Anthology
I go home to mend my rakusu with golden thread

Tassajara, 24:ll:78
[p.740]

The Collected Poems of Philip Whalen is a treasure trove of outrageous elegance. Whalen's oeuvre merits the rigorous attention befitting a high point in the landscape of modern poetry. Merely the insights into the progress from Western discipline to Eastern discipline, as well as their synthesis, is a fertile field for many years of rewarding scholarship*. This was his intention. Here, between two widely spaced covers, is, as Clark Coolidge remarks, "a masterpiece of the jump-start collected mind." In these pages are the tools and blueprints young poets can use to shape the poems of the future. The poetry of a grand mind would accomplish no less.

** Off to a good start, Keith Abbott's essay "RHYTHM-A-NING Philip Whalen's Rhythmic Inventions: Thelonious Monk, Calligraphy and Zen Principles" in NEW magazine 3_2007 (online) from Paris at http://www.new-mag.com/3_2007/abbott_keith/detailpage.htm brings out many fine points regarding Whalen's musical savvy, especially relating to musical composition. As well, Abbott's exposition of the Zen underpinnings in Whalen's *Metaphysical Insomnia Jazz* in the '07 edition of **Big Bridge** at <http://www.bigbridge.org/fictkabbott.htm> follows Whalen's seminal working through of Buddhist ideas.*

Pat Nolan lives along the Russian River in the redwood wilds of Northern California. His most recent book of poems is *Later* (On The Fly Press, 2007).