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REVIEW

Ronald Wallace. *God Be with the Clown: Humor in American Poetry*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984. 235 pp. \$23.00.

Many critics have discerned two voices at work in "Song of Myself" and have identified them in a variety of ways: body and soul, single individual and societal self, vagabond and prophet, realist and transcendentalist, conscious self and unconscious self. In Richard Chase's well-known scheme, the two voices become "the wistful, lonely, hurt, feminine, erotically demanding voice which alternates with that of the bearded, sunburned, masculine, democratic 'rough.'" I mention Chase here because he is perhaps the best known of those who have seen "Song of Myself" essentially as comedy, a poem of "comic spirit." Ronald Wallace's work recapitulates Chase and brashly carries some of the implications to extremes. It will now be more difficult than ever to repeat the old charge that Whitman had no sense of humor, though we may sometimes question whether the humor cited here is really in Whitman or in Wallace's desire to find something funny. Whitman scholars may do a double-take at hearing Wallace characterize the two voices in Whitman's poetry as "repartee characteristic of Groucho and Chico Marx" where "the more intellectual words clash with common slang, the elevated, poetic words clash with the humble and the vernacular . . ." (p. 65; compare Chase's notion that "Song of Myself" is "a striking feat of hybridization" that "combines Dionysian gaiety and an impulse toward verbal artificiality with the tone and cultural presuppositions of American humor . . ."). Wallace has a way of framing his analyses with aggressively outrageous comparisons, so some readers may blanch at his juxtaposing the end of Section 33 of "Song" (the Mexican massacre) with Peter Sellers' *Return of the Pink Panther*—"Sellers remains unharmed while the entire contents of the room and the walls themselves converge on him in slow motion, so in this battle Whitman leans on his cane observing parts of structures, equipment, and people sail grotesquely in a 'whizz of limbs, heads, stone, wood, iron, high in the air'" (p. 70). Another unexplored angle of "Song of Myself"—the poem as slapstick comedy—now *has* been explored. The Whitman character, in Wallace's reading, becomes akin to cartoon characters who experience thudding defeat, squashed beneath the steamrollers of conventionality, only to troop forth again replenished, recovering in an instant, like a poetic Wiley Coyote, from death and dismemberment, healthier and more robust than ever.

Wallace's general thesis (and he develops the thesis through extended analyses of Whitman, Dickinson, Frost, Stevens, and Berryman) is that American poetic humor is based on various appropriations of and conflations of the two ancient comic types, the *ieron* and the *alazon*. Following Constance Rourke, Wallace equates the self-deprecating, witty *ieron* with the American "Yankee" and the boastful, posing, bragging, foolish *alazon* with the "Kentuckian" or tall-tale backwoodsman. Emily Dickinson, with her "silence and frugality" becomes the Yankee poet, while Whitman with his "boast and blab" becomes the great poet of the backwoodsmen. With an undeveloped nod toward a third character (the minstrel), Wallace sets up a tradition of American poetic humor based on the two main types: "Backwoods humor made people feel big enough to deal with a terrifying new country; Yankee humor made them feel small enough to view themselves in proper perspective" (p. 48). He explores the subtle ways that each of these roles undermines itself, laughing at its own

image while simultaneously using that image for positive results. Eventually Wallace demonstrates how our best poets use *both* the *eiron* and *alazon* in a charged dialogue; in Whitman's poetry, Wallace proposes, the *eiron* is "an offstage voice to which Whitman responds throughout the poem" (p. 68), the voice of conventionality, reason, civilization, finally the voice of the implied reader whom Whitman (as ironist, satirist, and parodist) has to cajole, blast, and bluff out of deadening habits of mind: "The implied dramatic conflict between Whitman and the conventional reader helps structure the comedy" (p. 69).

So, in the first part of "Song of Myself," Whitman acts out an "exposure plot," allowing the *eiron*-reader to unmask the boastful narrator as a fool, but then, instead of falling into the traditional "integration plot" where society's values are reconfirmed in ritual celebration and marriage, Whitman undoes the conventional plot by having his *alazon*-narrator actually court the *eiron*, woo the very reader who mocks him, turn the tables and "convince the reader that the 'aberrant' is good and the 'normal' is bad" (p. 73). According to Wallace, then, Whitman initiates a distinctive American comic tradition—a radical reversal of the traditional comic plots that are out to reaffirm societal conventions: an anti-tradition that would come to embody writers like John Hawkes, John Barth, Vladimir Nabokov, and Ken Kesey. Wallace even adds to the ever-growing list of "structures" that underlie "Song"; he sees it as a "five-act comic drama, combining two traditional comic plots," with Act 5 (Sections 50–52) the comic resolution where "the speaker waits confidently for the reader-lover, who is purged of pretense and negativity, to catch up and join him in a harmonious union" (p. 74).

Wallace's readings are often challenging and suggestive. He runs into problems, though, in that virtually everything in "Song to Myself" has to be read as *funny*, as a joke, for his scheme to work. There are times when we wonder if Wallace is putting *us* on in much the same way he insists Whitman is deadpanning in his poetry: "Whitman adopted the mask of the clown, not letting on that what he was doing was funny, keeping a deadpan seriousness in the face of absurd pain, humiliation, and joy. Perhaps Walt did know Charlie [Chaplin] after all" (p. 66). Wallace is intent on making poetry appear not just humorous but vaudevillian; his is a linguistic landscape of silly words, dressed up funny and squirting seltzer at each other: "With its blab, yawp, hoo, gurgle, and strut, language must do tricks, perform comic dances, parade around and fall on its face, put on outlandish costumes and prance naked. Highfalutin words must bump up against the humble and meek" (p. 31). When he has a problem with any particular passage in "Song," Wallace is quick to laugh it away: "Throughout the poem, language gets out of hand, undercutting the speaker in ways he does not see" (p. 65). So when in Section 41, Whitman measures himself against Jehovah, Kronos, Zeus, and the other gods, Wallace finds it difficult to "keep a straight face" (p. 9) and sees the passage as an example of Whitman's comic genius, adapting legendary figures like Mike Fink, Davy Crockett, and Paul Bunyan for his own uses, making himself the backwoods superhero, his palms covering continents, his elbows resting in sea-gaps. Wallace goes so far as to propose (jokingly?) that Whitman may indeed have had a New Orleans romance, not with a woman or a man, but rather "an affair with the comic spirit" (p. 58), revealed in his New Orleans *Crescent* writings where he created his own fictional frontier braggart, Daggerdraw Bowiekknife, Esq., a character he would simply develop into the exaggerated main voice of "Song of Myself."

Inevitably, Wallace falls into the trap of having to explain a joke to people who may not find it funny, or of straining to make a joke out of something not intrinsically laughable; at such times, whatever might have been funny is analyzed away (see his discussion of the "comic conundrum" in Whitman's "Copulation is no more rank to me than death is" on pp. 26-27). But the book is well-written and never dull to read; it is handsomely illustrated with David Levine's great caricatures of the poets (including the wonderful one of Whitman raking leaves into a pattern of America). This is, finally, an intelligent and admirable attempt to chart out an important and overlooked aspect of the American poetic tradition; there are excessive claims made for the comic elements of the poetry, but sins of excess, of course, are the very fiber of Wallace's subject and approach.

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