‘Have the elder races halted?’: British socialist readings of ‘Pioneers! O Pioneers’

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First published in *Drum-Taps* less than a month after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, ‘Pioneers! O Pioneers!’ (1865) has often, and with good reason, been read in the context of national reconstruction after the American Civil War. As Eric Mottram has suggested, the poem ‘loudly articulates healing nationalism through the tradition of westward expansion’.[1] Whitman employs the rhetoric of manifest destiny and expansionism as a unifying strategy to counter the perceived threat of disunion and division to the American democratic ideal: the development of western America is presented as a common goal able to heal the nation’s wounds after the Civil War. The frontier era did not draw to a close until the end of the nineteenth century so the figure of the pioneer could be read both literally and symbolically. In ‘Pioneers’ the myth of the west, so embedded in the development of the United States, functions as a continuum linking the past to the future; expansionism encompasses both tradition and potential. In national terms, the speaker’s vision is resolutely inclusive: ‘All the hands of comrades clasping, all the Southern, all the Northern’. The image of unity is reinforced by Whitman’s insistent use of the plural pronoun ‘we’. Throughout *Leaves of Grass* Whitman makes use of the catalogue to stress the variety of individuals and occupations that make up both the social whole and the poet’s own capacious self, but in ‘Pioneers’ there is no such division of labour. The ‘conquering’, ‘holding’, ‘daring’, ‘venturing’, ‘felling’, ‘stemming’, ‘vexing’, piercing’, ‘surveying’ and ‘upheaving’ are all carried out by an integrated and undifferentiated ‘we’.

This inclusivity only extends so far as the national borders:

> Have the elder races halted?
> Do they droop and end their lesson, wearied over there beyond the seas?
> We take up the task eternal, and the burden and the lesson
> Pioneers! O Pioneers!

The speaker’s progressive ideal unifies his compatriots by setting them apart from other ‘lands’ and ‘races’, at the vanguard of a progressive westward movement. Despite such overt Americanism, the poem was included in the two British editions of Whitman’s poetry published during his lifetime: William Michael Rossetti’s *Poems by Walt Whitman*

(1868) and Ernest Rhys's *The Poems of Walt Whitman* (1886).[2] Rossetti's editorial decisions were motivated more by aesthetic criteria than Rhys's, and his inclusion of 'Pioneers' can be understood as part of his stated aim to present Whitman to the British in such a way that 'a fair verdict on Whitman should now be pronounced in England on poetic grounds alone'.[3] Rhys's editorial criteria were more avowedly socialist; indeed, these were the grounds on which he appealed to Whitman for permission to publish his work in the Canterbury poets:

> What I – and many young men like me, ardent believers in your poetic initiative – chiefly feel about this, is, however, that an edition at a price which will put it in the hands of the poorest member of the great social democracy is a thing of imperative requirement. You know what a fervid stir and impulse forward of Humanity there is today in certain quarters! And I am sure you will be tremendously glad to help us here, in the very camp of the enemy, the stronghold of caste and aristocracy and all selfishness between rich and poor![4]

Rhys used 'Pioneers' within this democratic social framework; not only did he include the poem in his selection but he also gave the 'elder races' stanza as an epigraph, made allusions to its rhetoric and themes in the final paragraphs of his preface, and concluded with a 'call to arms' that echoed that of Whitman's speaker. By not directly acknowledging the nationalist elements of the poem, 'Pioneers' could be adopted in such a way that its Americanness was largely side-stepped and it could be used instead to further the socialist cause within Britain.

The letter quoted above shows that Rhys shared the speaker's critical attitude towards the 'elder race' to some extent: the structure of Britain's socio-political systems was perceived as being outdated and unjust. Edward Whitley proposes that 'Rhys seems to position America as the geographic site of democracy and Whitman's poetry as the means for accessing it for British ends. He seems to be trying to recuperate from Whitman and America the democracy he saw lacking in Victorian England'.[5] Certainly, this is one way in which the progressive march of 'Pioneers' is invoked. Whitman is offered as a source of democratic inspiration:

> And with his tones of heroic incitement and earnest remonstrance ringing in our midst, we who are young may do much in the stress and tumult of the advance to a new and endangered era for the high order of love and truth and liberty.[6]

Again: 'We who are young may well respond to him, too, in turn, and advance fearlessly in the lines of his unique initiative.'[7] The tone and the martial imagery recall that of 'Pioneers'. This is epitomised in the double meaning of the word 'lines' which conflates the military with the poetic. Luke Mancuso notes that the word 'pioneer' can be traced back to the French *peonier*, or 'foot-soldier', and usefully suggests that in 'Pioneers' it 'denotes an imagistic parallel to the martial images of the war troops'.[8] Indeed, this parallel is the poem's core premise; Whitman exploits the semantic duality of the word and presents the notion of westward expansion in military terms. The rhetoric and imagery of war is reshaped and directed towards a reconstructive unifying purpose. This trope frames the poem: in the opening stanza the pioneers are not called to get tools ready but 'weapons'; in the final stanza the trumpet sound at daybreak calls the 'army' of pioneers to their places. Many words with military overtones are chosen, such as 'debouch' and 'detachments', and the extended metaphor of the war march is employed.

'Pioneers', then, acts as a metaphorical rallying cry for the establishment and expansion of democracy, which is recalled in the final lines of Rhys's preface. However, in its position as epigraph, the 'elder races' stanza is removed from its national context; the opposition it implies between America and Britain is not so apparent. Additionally, the repetition of the word 'young', variants of which are used five times in the final paragraph, suggests that Rhys does more than reiterate the conceit that America was the nation of youthful democratic promise whilst Britain was that of aged decrepitude. In 'Pioneers' Whitman engaged with popular discourse that stressed the youth of the American nation: the terms 'children' and 'youths' that the speaker uses to address his countrymen and women also carry connotations of health, vigour and potentiality. In his appraisal of Whitman, Rhys expresses ideas similar to those of the 'elder races' stanza, but divides the old and young down generational rather than national lines. The 'elder races' were interpreted as the previous generations which had either directly or indirectly supported aristocratic and capitalist socio-political systems:

> It is the younger hearts who will thrill to this new incitement, – the younger natures, who are putting forth strenuously into the war of human liberation. Older men and women have established their mental and spiritual environment; they work according to their wont.[9]

This interpretation ensured that Britain was not excluded from a place in the movement towards the democratic ideal. Adopting the military metaphor used by Whitman, and

perhaps alluding to the commonly-held belief that the American Civil War had from the beginning been a war to free the slaves, Rhys uses Whitman to urge the British youth towards socialist action.

Rhys self-consciously recognised his role to be interpretive, as he explained in a letter to Whitman:

> This is my chief claim to be your interpreter at all in England then – that I stand with the band of young men who have the future in their hands, young men of the people, not academicians; not mere university students, but a healthy, determined, hearty band of comrades, seeking amid all their errors and foolishness to help the average, everyday man about them.[10]

Rhys presents the vision of comradeship depicted in 'Pioneers' and many of the other *Leaves of Grass* poems back to Whitman in his own terms: it is youthful and healthy and distanced from formal education. However, he reinterprets the purpose of such comradeship; the task of the 'band of young men' was not to expand and establish themselves, but to 'help the average, everyday man'. The patriotic becomes altruistic. In the introduction Rhys states this interpretation overtly: 'The spirit of comradeship, as opposed to the antagonism of class with class, and nation with nation, which has stirred men selfishly and cruelly so long: this were the salvation, cries Walt Whitman, of the new Democracy.'[11] For Rhys, the transformative potential of unified comradeship negates rather than relies on the discord between nations.

Rhys was not alone amongst British readers in adopting and adapting the military metaphor of 'Pioneers' to broader social ends. James William Wallace, the unofficial leader of a Bolton reading group with strong connections to the socialist movement which was devoted to Whitman, saw the Civil War as 'the pivot on which [*Leaves of Grass*] turns'.[12] In a speech to the group, given on what would have been Whitman's birthday the year after his death, Wallace stated: 'It is as well to say that great as the American War was in itself it was only as a symbol of still mightier battles, it was only a fractional part of the battles which were to follow and which we too have to engage in.'[13] Before he concluded by reading 'Pioneers', Wallace explained, with a reminder that he did not need to say much because 'Walt's words ought to be sufficiently strong', that he understood this 'mightier' combat to be 'a war for the great idea – that of perfect, free individuals' which each person is 'summoned to help in forwarding'. Wallace's synecdochal reading of the Civil War as symbol draws on the biblical discourse of spiritual warfare: each

follower is called to fight to further the message that leads to ultimate freedom for humankind. Wallace shared his interpretation of the 'message' of *Leaves of Grass* in socialist newspapers, corresponded about it with socialist activists such as Keir Hardie and Katherine Conway, wrote a book entitled *Walt Whitman and the World Crisis* published by the Labour Press, and spoke at Bolton branch meetings of the Independent Labour Party, believing that the spiritual dimensions of Whitman's poetics were of utmost importance to the developing socialist movement.

In a speech given at the ILP conference in Bolton in 1894 that again concluded with the reading of 'Pioneers', Wallace urged towards 'moral advancement' in the sense that he had 'learned' from his 'master' Walt Whitman:

> Helping, serving, and educating all with whom he comes in contact – devout beyond all past devotion accepting no ecclesiasticism or priesthood being himself his own priest – seeing God in every object, in every moment and in every human being – letting the divine soul shine with increasing clearness and fullness through himself and all his works – knowing himself one with all others.[14]

Wallace book-ends his paper with references to the pioneer: towards the beginning he proposes that those who are morally advanced in the sense that they have a great capability for sympathy and love 'no matter what their political or other creed may be – no matter how indifferent or hostile they may now be to the Socialist movement – <u>are the true pioneers</u> of the Socialism of the future', and in closing he commented that 'we shall become the pioneers of the true, the <u>human</u> society towards which our Socialism itself is but a stage'. This suggests that, for Wallace, socialist agitation was merely one 'symbol', like the Civil War, of the movement towards 'true democracy'. Wallace shifts the pioneer *topos* away from its martial connotations, and champions instead the development of uncharted spiritual regions upon which the more overtly political manifestations of socialism should be founded. Before reading 'Pioneers', Wallace specified that it was 'addressed to each and all of us' indicating that, for him, the rallying cry of 'Pioneers' was intended for all, not only postbellum America.

Wallace's speech and Rhys's introduction are examples of how the process of remodelling 'Pioneers' to include the British was conducted publicly. Wallace's use of the poem was didactic; he drew on 'Pioneers' to teach socialists the divine message that he believed to underlie the political principles of socialism. The Labour Church used it more

explicitly as socialist propaganda, not simply overlooking the elements of American nationalism but actively editing them out. For example, the Church produced a pamphlet promoting the 'Labour Church Pioneers', an affiliation of individual supporters not living near a Labour Church, which opened with a quotation from Whitman's 'To a Pupil': 'Is reform needed? Is it through you? / The greater the reform needed the greater the personality you need to accomplish it'. The pamphlet outlines the principles of the Church, such as 'the Labour movement is a Religious Movement', and suggests the kind of 'work' that Labour Church pioneers could undertake and then prints twelve of the twenty-six stanzas of 'Pioneers'. The selection is telling: stanzas I, II, IV, V, VI, XII, XIII, and XXIII to XXVI are included which, once again, emphasise the martial elements of the poem, recalling the discourse of spiritual warfare and using it as a 'call to arms'. The 'gentler stanzas' such as 'Life's involv'd and varied pageants' and 'All the hapless silent lovers' are omitted, as are those which depict the development of the land. The impression given is insistently that of a hard-fought and enduring battle which the soldier must enter willingly. Stanzas such as 'Not for delectations sweet' and 'Do the feasters gluttonous feast' appeal to socialist sensibilities by contrasting the pioneer's 'diet hard' and 'blanket on the ground' with 'riches' and unnecessary consumption. Moreover, all references to specific geographic regions are edited out, thereby entirely removing the American framework of the poem; the 'task eternal' is presented as universal; its completion is no longer located in the American west but in the success of the labour movement.

In a *Labour Leader* article on the centenary of Whitman's birth Wallace claimed that 'of the era of true Democracy—Whitman is so far the greatest pioneer and exemplar'.[15] For many of Whitman's admirers associated with the developing British socialist movements, Whitman himself epitomised the concept of the pioneer; he was seen as a kind of idealised spiritual backwoodsman, able to overcome social injustice by exploring and communicating the true nature of comradeship. This 'message' had ramifications that extended beyond Whitman's American borders.

Endnotes

[1] Eric Mottram, 'Law and the Open Road: Whitman's America', in *Walt Whitman: Critical Assessments*, IV, ed. by Graham Clarke (Robertsbridge, East Sussex: Helm Information, 1994), p. 794.

[2] Walt Whitman, *Poems by Walt Whitman*, ed. by William Michael Rossetti (London: John Camden Hotten, 1868); Walt Whitman, *The Poems of Walt Whitman*, ed. by Ernest Rhys (London: Walter Scott, 1886).

[3] Rossetti, p. 17.

[4] Ernest Rhys to Whitman, 7 July 1885. In Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. 1 (New York: London and Littlefield, 1961), p. 452.

[5] Edward Whitley, 'British Editions of *Leaves of Grass*', The Walt Whitman Archive <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/published/foreign/british/intro.html> [accessed 15 March 2009]

[6] Rhys, p. xxxix.

[7] Rhys, p xxxviii.

[8] Luke Mancuso, *The Strange Sad War Revolving: Walt Whitman, Reconstruction, and the Emergence of Black Citizenship, 1865-1876* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1997), p. 82.

[9] Rhys, p. xxxviii.

[10] Cited by Harold Blodgett in *Walt Whitman in England* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1934), p. 193.

[11] Rhys, p. xxxix.

[12] James William Wallace, 'Speech given on Walt Whitman's birthday', 31 May 1893, Bolton Central Library.

[13] Wallace, 'Speech given on Walt Whitman's birthday'.

[14] James William Wallace, 'Paper read before ILP Conference at Bolton', 26 May 1894, Bolton Central Library.

[15] James William Wallace, 'The Walt Whitman Centennial: The Man and his Message', *Labour Leader*, 29 May 1919, John Rylands University Library Manchester.