

All the Shadows / Whisper of the Sun: Carnevali's Whitmanesque Simplicity

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Abstract. Why did Carnevali submit that short poem to the 1919 Whitman issue of *Poetry*, if the only apparent connection with Walt Whitman is in the title? He did, I argue, because that poem is as Whitmanesque as one could possibly imagine. Carnevali's philosophy of the commonplace is more than just an *ars poetica* of sort. It is Philosophy with the capital "P". It is an endorsement of Whitman's perspective on things along with that sense of wonder which, as Aristotle said (and Plato before him), is the beginning of all philosophy.

Dear Harriet Monroe:—

Your recent issue of *Poetry* is quite interesting. The first poem of that young Italian chap is very good, the rest—unsuccessful. You are certainly the clearinghouse for a lot of mediocre stuff—so you should be: very democratic—keep up the good work.

Yours, / Williams

This is William Carlos Williams writing to the Editor of *Poetry* on March 12, 1918.¹ We know who the young Italian chap is: Emanuel Carnevali, age twenty, had just made his debut in Monroe's magazine with a six-page group of poems, "The Splendid Commonplace."² Less

1. Published in *Dear Editor: A History of Poetry in Letters. The First Fifty Years, 1912–1962*, ed. Joseph Parisi and Stephen Young (New York: Norton, 2002), p. 130.

2. *Poetry* 11, no. 6 (Mar. 1918): 298–303. That was only two months after the appearance of Carnevali's very first published verse, "Colored Lies," in *The Forum* (Jan. 1918): 83–84, and less than four years after his arrival in New York from Bologna, with no knowledge of English, on April 5, 1914.

clear, perhaps, is what Williams means by “the rest”—the unsuccessful, mediocre stuff. “The Splendid Commonplace” consists of six poems, the first of which is called “In This Hotel.” Williams might be referring to the rest of the group, i.e., the other five poems, or he might be taking the whole group as a single body of poetry (the first in order of appearance, after a dance play by Alfred Kreymborg) saying “the rest” for the remainder of the issue; after all, “The Splendid Commonplace” will eventually win the Young Poet’s award for that year, a prestigious prize indeed.³

As it turns out, the first hypothesis is more likely. Williams was hard to please. Yet the young Italian chap did make a big impact on him—so big that only a year later Williams would dedicate to Carnevali no less than the editorial with which he announced the end of his own magazine “of the new verse,” *Others*:

Emanuel Carnevali, the black poet, the empty man, the New York which does not exist, the end of *Others*. [...] I celebrate your arrival [...] you show us what we are, rats. [...] What do I care if Carnevali has not written three poems I can thoroughly admire? [...] He is wide, Wide, WIDE open. He is out of doors. He does not look through a window.⁴

Sadly, we will never know how strong a difference Carnevali’s wide open genius might really have made to American poetry, had the terrible illness he contracted in Chicago in 1922 not forced him to return to Italy and live out the rest of his days in hospitals, boarding houses, and poverty-level sanatoriums.⁵ Any counterfactual speculation would be as

3. The prize, awarded annually “for a poem or group of poems by a young beginner in the art,” was announced in *Poetry* 12, no. 2 (Nov. 1918), at pp. 112–13.

4. “Gloria!” *Others* 5, no. 6 (July 1919): 3–4, at p. 3. The last poem included in the issue was Carnevali’s “Serenade”, at p. 19, which ends with the lines “Come on, open that window / or I’ll go home.”

5. Carnevali returned to Italy in September 1922 after being diagnosed with encephalitis lethargica and spent the last twenty years of his life between the hospital and boarding houses of Bazzano—the small town where his father worked for a while—and a sanatorium in Bologna, where he died on January 11, 1942, choking on a piece of bread. Much of what we know about his life comes from *The Autobiography of Emanuel Carnevali*, compiled by Kay Boyle (New York: Horizon, 1967), which includes the unfinished autobiographic novel *The First God* (partly published

inconclusive as it would be sorrowful, and I do not intend to engage in the exercise. What we do know is that while Carnevali's voice was well heard during the time he spent on the American side of the ocean, it was soon forgotten afterwards, and the potential difference he could have made turned into actual oblivion. A line in Ken Rexroth's "Thou Shalt Not Kill," of 1956, says it all: "Carnevali, what became of him?"⁶ It's not that Williams changed his views; on the contrary, he continued to be a friend and a supporter throughout Carnevali's difficult years back in Italy. I also do not think the oblivion was caused by Monroe's harsh review of the book Carnevali published in 1925, *A Hurried Man*.⁷ She certainly was not pleased with it, calling Carnevali himself a "hurried poet" and the book—which included most of the verse and prose he had published in her magazine—"a mere beginning, and a shapeless beginning at that."⁸ But she did acknowledge the "hint of power" that

"in progress" in *Americans Abroad: An Anthology*, ed. Peter Neagoe, The Hague: Servire Press, 1932, pp. 73–82) and the Bazzanese diary "A History" (published in *This Quarter* 1, no. 4, Spring 1929: 127–48). See also the Italian edition of Carnevali's writings edited by his half-sister Maria Pia, *Il primo dio* (Milan: Adelphi, 1978), which contains a different reconstruction of *The First God*. Further information comes from Sherwood Anderson's portrait "Italian Poet in America," *Decision* 2, no. 2 (Aug. 1941): 8–15, from the memoirs in Williams's *Autobiography* (New York: New Directions, 1967) and in Robert McAlmon and Kay Boyle's *Being Geniuses Together: 1920–1930* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), and from Carnevali's epistolary edited by Gabriel Cacho Millet, *Voglio disturbare l'America. Lettere a Benedetto Croce e Giovanni Papini ed altro* (Florence: La casa Usher, 1981). A detailed "Cronologia della vita e delle opere" may also be found in appendix to Millet's Italian edition of Carnevali's *Racconti di un uomo che ha fretta* (Rome: Fazi, 2004), at pp. 171–94.

6. In Rexroth's *In Defense of the Earth* (New York: New Directions, 1956), pp. 52–59, at p. 55.

7. *A Hurried Man* (Paris: Contact Éditions & Three Mountains Press, 1925, with a Forward by Dorothy Dudley) was Carnevali's first and only book published during his lifetime. The title comes from the three opening pieces, which had appeared separately as "Tales of a Hurried Man" in vol. 6 of *The Little Review* (1919–20).

8. "A Hurried Poet," in *Poetry* 27, no. 4 (Jan. 1926): 211–15, at pp. 211 and 212. Cf. the reviews by Lola Ridge in *The New Republic* 46, no. 587 (Mar. 3, 1926): 51–52, and by Paul Rosenfeld in *The Saturday Review of Literature* 2, no. 33 (March 13, 1926): 629–30, which agreed in describing *A Hurried Man* as "disorderly in both thought and expression" (Ridge) and "a mixture of friable mortar and small building-stones" (Rosenfeld), though both reviews were otherwise sympathetic.

was there, she did praise the “glint and gleam of beauty” of the fragments, and she did continue to publish Carnevali’s work in the years that followed, until 1931.⁹ Besides, other reviews were more favorable, to the point of describing *A Hurried Man* as “something never before done” and his author as “more important than Keats.”¹⁰ The mystery of Carnevali’s rise and fall is just that—a mystery. We may still want to look for an explanation, just as we may acquiesce in silence or share Williams’s deep sense of frustration (and indignation) at the thought that Carnevali’s “superbly alive” work got “shoved under the heap of corpses.”¹¹ Much better, I think, is to go back and read his poetry and see for ourselves how wide, Wide, WIDE open Carnevali truly was.

As my title suggests, here I want to focus specifically on one poem, indeed on two lines from a poem. It is not the one that prompted Williams’s letter in 1918, nor is it from “the rest” of that collection, although I hope to show that it is closely connected to it. Rather, it is a poem Carnevali published separately fourteen months later, in the May 1919 issue of *Poetry* celebrating Walt Whitman’s centenary. By that time, Carnevali had already published four more pieces in Monroe’s magazine: a poem on modern poetry (May 1918),¹² a review of David O’Neil’s book of poems, *A Cabinet of Jade* (July),¹³ a poetic letter on the moods of city crowds on Armistice Day (December),¹⁴ and an essay on contemporary Italian poetry (January 1919).¹⁵ Meanwhile ha had

9. Carnevali’s latest contribution to Monroe’s magazine—which she continued to edit until her death in 1936—was the seven-poem collection “Castles on the Ground,” in *Poetry* 38, no. 5 (Aug. 1931): 237–44, now available in book form as *Fireflies* (Cambridge, MA: Sans Souci Press, 1970).

10. See Ernest Walsh’s review, “A Young Living Genius,” in *This Quarter* 1, no. 2 (Fall-Winter 1925–26): 322–29, at pp. 325 and 328.

11. *Autobiography*, p. 267.

12. “As He Sees It,” *Poetry* 12, no. 2 (May 1918): 113–14.

13. “Mr. O’Neil’s Carvings,” *Poetry* 12, no. 4 (July 1918): 225–27. O’Neil’s was a regular contributor to *Poetry* and his book had just been published that year by The Four Seas Company (Boston).

14. “The Day of Victory,” *Poetry* 13, no. 3 (Dec. 1918): 171–72.

15. “Five Years of Italian Poetry (1910–1915),” *Poetry* 13, no. 4 (Jan. 1919): 209–19, with translations from Corrado Govoni, Salvatore Di Giacomo, Piero Jahier, Aldo Palazzeschi, Umberto Saba, and Scipio Slataper.

also published his first piece in Williams's magazine *Others* (a passionate essay on Rimbaud, March 1919)¹⁶ and two more poems elsewhere: "Nocturne," in the February 1919 issue of *Youth*,¹⁷ and a New York "variation" on Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, in the first April issue of *The Dial*¹⁸ (where, by the way, Carnevali's short bio at the end of the issue announced that he was already about to publish his first book, *The Rhythmical Talk of E. C.*¹⁹). So he was on a roll, so to speak. And he was coming to terms, not only with his own heart and the power within, but with the work of other writers as well, American and European. It is, therefore, significant that he would now publish a piece devoted to Whitman, an American poet no one could ignore those days. Or rather, it is significant that he would publish a poem whose *title* is a tribute to Whitman. Let me reproduce it in full; then I will try to explain why I believe this poem is very special in many ways, over and above its exquisite beauty.

Walt Whitman

Noon on the mountain!—

And all the crags are husky faces powerful with love for the sun;

All the shadows

Whisper of the sun.²⁰

The first thing I want to say is that in all probability the title was added afterwards. Carnevali loved Whitman, we know that. Harriet Monroe knew that, too, for Carnevali had explicitly mentioned Whitman in the letter he wrote to her back in 1918, when he submitted "The Splendid Commonplace" to *Poetry*:

I want to become an American poet because I have, in my mind, rejected Italian standards of good literature. I do not like Carducci, still less d'An-

16. "Arthur Rimbaud," *Others* 5, no. 4 (Mar. 1919): 20–24, where Carnevali fully endorses the view that "the attainment of poetry is the attainment of life" (p. 20).

17. "Nocturne," *Youth: Poetry of Today* 1, no. 3 (Feb. 1919): 65.

18. "Synge's Playboy of the Western World: Variation," *The Dial* 66, no. 787 (5 Apr. 1919): 340 (after John Millington Synge's play *The Playboy of the Western World*, Dublin: Maunsell, 1907).

19. *Ibid.*, p. 374.

20. Emanuel Carnevali, "Walt Whitman," *Poetry* 14, no. 2 (May 1919): 60.

nunzio [...] Of American authors I have read, pretty well, Poe, Whitman, Twain, Harte, London, Oppenheim and Waldo Frank. I believe in free verse. I try not to imitate.²¹

So, now Monroe wants to have a special Whitman issue to celebrate the poet's centenary and asks Carnevali to contribute a piece. He accepts. But I bet he had already written those four lines; he just added the title. For although the poem is not *about* Whitman, it is as Whitmanesque as a poem could ever be. It is the best tribute the young Carnevali could think of for one of the poets who inspired him the most, at least during the early days of his transition from shoveling snow and washing dishes in Greenwich Village to writing poetry.

We could, of course, just take the piece as it stands. By 1919, there was already a long list of poems devoted to the figure of Walt Whitman, beginning with Algernon Charles Swinburne's "To Walt Whitman in America," of 1871.²² In fact, it had become fashionable to give such poems no other title than "Walt Whitman," or "To Walt Whitman." The list of authors includes Scottish poet Robert Williams Buchanan, the "Poet of the Sierras" Joaquin Miller, Dora Read Goodale, Francis Howard Williams, Sir Rennell Rodd (a friend of Oscar Wilde), Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío (the initiator of Spanish-American "modernismo"), Sam Walter Foss, Harrison Smith Morris, Annie Thomas, Albert Edmund Lancaster, Hamlin Garland, Louis James Block, Rowland Thurnam, multiple Pulitzer Prize-winner Edwin Arlington Robinson, Mary Stoddart, Gustav P. Wiksell, Ray Clarke Rose, William Struthers, May Morgan, Estelle Duclo, George M. Hartt, German expressionist poet Arthur Drey, and eventually Fernando Pessoa, whose "Saudação a Walt Whitman" was written in 1915.²³ A very long list in-

21. Letter quoted by Harriet Monroe in the "Notes" at the end of *Poetry* 11, no. 6 (Mar. 1918): 343.

22. In Swinburne's *Songs before Sunrise* (London: Ellis, 1871), pp. 143–49. The poem is reprinted in *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*, ed. Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom, and Dan Campion (Minneapolis: Holy Cow! Press, 1981, 2nd ed. 1998), which also includes reprints of some of the poems listed in note 23 along with Carnevali's and many others.

23. See Robert Buchanan, "Walt Whitman," *The Saint Pauls Magazine* 10, no. 5

deed—and certainly incomplete. It would not be wrong to see Carnavali's 1919 poem as yet another contribution to this tradition, especially in the context of a celebratory issue of *Poetry*. And the tradition will continue, with dozens of further tribute poems by such writers as D. H. Lawrence, Zona Gale, Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, Federico García Lorca, Edwin Markham, Mike Gold, Stephen Vincent Benét, and of course Pablo Neruda, whose "Oda a Walt Whitman," of 1956, includes the famous lines "me enseñaste / a ser americano."²⁴ (In a later context Neruda even called Whitman his "más grande acreedor," his "primary

(May 1872): 516; Joaquin Miller, "To Walt Whitman," *The Galaxy* 23, no. 1 (Jan. 1877): 29; Dora Read Goodale, "To Walt Whitman," *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* 37, no. 4 (Apr. 1886): 363; Francis H. Williams, "To Walt Whitman," *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* 39, no. 1 (Jan. 1887): 132; Rennell Rodd, "To Walt Whitman," *The Oxford Magazine* 6, no. 3 (Nov. 1887): 51; Rubén Darío, "Walt Whitman," in the 2nd edition of his *Azul* (Guatemala: La Unión, 1890), p. 188; Sam W. Foss, "Walt Whitman," in his *Back Country Poems* (Boston: Potter, 1892), pp. 251–52; Harrison S. Morris, "Walt Whitman," *The Conservator* 3, no. 4 (June 1892): 26; Annie Thomas, "To Walt Whitman," in Julia and Annie Thomas's *Favorite Selections* (New York: Werner, 1892), pp. 194–95; Albert E. Lancaster, "To Walt Whitman," in *In Re Walt Whitman*, ed. Horace L. Traubel, Richard M. Bucke, and Thomas B. Harned (Philadelphia: McKay, 1893), p. 212; Hamlin Garland, "Walt Whitman," *ibid.*, at p. 328; Louis J. Block, "Walt Whitman," *Poet-Lore* 5, nos. 8/9 (Aug.-Sept. 1893): 422–23; Rowland Thurnam, "To Walt Whitman," *The Conservator* 6, no. 4 (June 1895): 55; Edwin A. Robinson, "Walt Whitman," in his *The Torrent and the Night Before* (Cambridge, MA: Riverside, 1896), pp. 31–32; Mary Stoddart, "Walt Whitman," *The Conservator* 8, no. 2 (Apr. 1897): 20; Gustav P. Wiksell, "To Walt Whitman," *The Conservator* 10, no. 4 (June 1899): 52; Ray C. Rose, "Walt Whitman," in his *At the Sign of the Ginger Jar* (Chicago: McClurg & Co., 1901), pp. 45–46; William Struthers, "To Walt Whitman," *The Conservator* 15, no. 6 (Aug. 1904): 84; May Morgan, "Walt Whitman," *The Critic* 49, no. 2 (Aug. 1906): 148; Estelle Duclo, "Walt Whitman," *The Conservator* 18, no. 2 (Apr. 1907): 29; George M. Hartt, "Walt Whitman," *The Conservator* 18, no. 4 (June 1907): 52; Arthur Drey, "Walt Whitman," *Die Aktion* 1 (Feb. 1911), col. 907; Fernando Pessoa (under the heteronym Álvaro de Campos), "Saudação a Walt Whitman," dated 11 June 1915, first published in Pessoa's *Poesias de Álvaro de Campos* (Lisbon: Ática, 1944), pp. 202–12 (trans. Edwig Honig, "Salutation to Walt Whitman," in *Selected Poems*, Chicago: Swallow Press, 1971, pp. 56–71).

24. For all these authors—and many others, up to the 1990s—see again *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*. Neruda's ode was first published in his *Nuevas odas elementales* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1956), pp. 171–75.

creditor,”²⁵ saying that he was barely fifteen when he discovered him and that he himself learned more from Whitman than from Cervantes.) We could continue, but let us stop here. What is so special about Carnevali’s four-line lyric, given such a remarkable tradition of poems and odes named after the poet of America? Why did the young Italian chap submit that short piece to *Poetry* magazine, if the only apparent connection with Whitman is in the title?

The answer, I think, comes in two parts. The first lies in the composite simplicity of Carnevali’s poem. True, Whitman was such a multifarious and controversial figure that it comes as no surprise that so many writers felt the need to express their tribute to his work. He was a poet but also a teacher, a journalist, a government clerk, a committed supporter of the Wilmot Proviso and fully opposed to the extension of slavery generally, and had volunteered as a nurse during the American Civil War. Like no one else, Whitman had succeeded in reaching out to the common person with an American epic. (According to some reports, his funeral in 1892 was a public event “wholly without parallel in America.”²⁶) No wonder Neruda’s *Incitación al nixonicidio* begins with another ode to his creditor: “Comienzo por invocar a Walt Whitman.”²⁷ A quick look at the poems of the other authors mentioned above will reveal that they, too, would generally praise Whitman as a “prophet,” a “priest,” a “pioneer,” a “Titan soul,” a visionary of sort.²⁸ Those are all

25. Speech given at the New York P.E.N. Club on April 10, 1972, first published as “Stand-by” in *El siglo* (April 14, 1972) and later reprinted as “El albatros asesinado” in Neruda’s *Para nacer he nacido*, ed. Matilde Neruda and Miguel Otero Silva (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1978), pp. 418–23, here at p. 419 (trans. Margaret Sayers Peden, “The Murdered Albatross,” in *Passions and Impressions*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983, pp. 375–79, at p. 376).

26. So say Richard M. Bucke, Thomas B. Harned, and Horace L. Traubel, editors of *The Complete Writings of Walt Whitman* (New York: Putnam, 1902), in their “Introduction” to Vol. 1, pp. xiii–xcvi, at p. xcii.

27. *Incitación al nixonicidio y alabanza de la revolución chilena* (Santiago: Qui-mantuú, 1973), at pp. 17–18 (trans. Steve Kowit: *Incitement to Nixonicide and Praise for the Chilean Revolution*, Houston: Quixote Press, 1974, 2nd ed. 1979, p. 6, where the poem in question is rendered as “I Begin by Invoking Walt Whitman”).

28. These sample phrases are from the poems by Darío, Hartt, Williams, and Miller (respectively) mentioned in note 23 above.

excellent reasons to love Whitman. But they were not Carnevali's reasons. It is not because of such legendary traits that at some point, in a 1921 essay, he would even say that American poetry that does not follow in "the great Walt Whitman way" is "fated to a short life."²⁹ Rather, the Whitman way, for Carnevali, was the way that leads to poetry starting from the small things, the simple things of life. It was the ability to capture the wonders that hide in those things—in every thing. And it is precisely that ability, I think, that Carnevali meant to honor with his small tribute poem of 1919.

In fact, "tribute" is not even the right word here. Carnevali's short poem is more like a present to Whitman, like a postcard. It is the watercolor of a moment—the sun at noon, a mountain, the shadows—with Whitman's name added at the top to reveal his double role as donor and donee, in the certainty that he would have been pleased to receive it. "All the shadows / whisper of the sun." What a difference from the usual way of tributing the poet of America. "Noon on the mountain!" What a contrast between Carnevali's exclamation mark and those of John Russell McCarthy in the poem that opens the whole celebratory issue:

WALT! Walt!
You burly old lover of men and women,
You hairy shouter of catalogues from the housetops,
Earth's prophet, through whom the Almighty chanted His works—
Walt! Walt! Up there! Do you hear us hallooing to you?³⁰

Yes, McCarthy's points his finger at Whitman's passion for "catalogues from the housetops." He knows that Whitman's poetry was bottom-up. But he doesn't feel the power that comes with it. He doesn't get it. He cannot get it, because McCarthy is looking through a window. With Carnevali it is exactly the other way around. He is wide open, he is out of doors, he knows what to look for—what to see—in everything.

29. "The Youngest," in *Youth: A Magazine of the Arts* 1, no. 1 (Oct. 1921): 22–25, at p. 25.

30. "Come Down, Walt!," *Poetry* 14, no. 2 (May 1919): 59–60, at p. 59.

I don't know what Carnevali thought of William Blake,³¹ for obviously one is reminded here of the opening lines from the "Auguries of Innocence":

To see a World in a grain of sand,
And Heaven in a wild flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.³²

This is certainly not Carnevali's style, or Whitman's. But the philosophy is the same, in the extreme form it attains when we learn how to see a whole world, not only in the romance of a grain of sand or a wild flower, but in *anything*. Whitman was candid about this and we can find traces of such philosophy throughout his writings, beginning with the "Song of Myself" (which Carnevali must have known well):

All truths wait in all things,
They neither hasten their own delivery nor resist it,
They do not need the obstetric forceps of the surgeon,
The insignificant is as big to me as any.³³

Sometimes even a single line can deliver the message, as in the following splendid verse from "By Blue Ontario's Shores":

Are you faithful to things?³⁴

31. To my knowledge, the only place where Carnevali mentions the English romanticist is his essay "Maxwell Bodenheim, Alfred Kreyborg, Lola Ridge, William Carlos Williams," written in March 1919 but published only in *A Hurried Man*, pp. 247–68 (and partly reprinted as "My Speech at Lola's" in *The Autobiography*, pp. 141–48), where he describes himself as a man "who wants all creeds to be his," from Laforgue's "beggarliness" to Blake's "voluptuous mysticism" (p. 265/148).

32. "Auguries of Innocence," from *The Pickering Manuscript*, c. 1803, published posthumously in Alexander Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake* (London: Macmillan, 1863), vol. 2, pp. 94–97, here at p. 94.

33. In the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (Brooklyn, NY: printed by Andrew and James Rome, 1855), at p. 33, where the poem is untitled. It was later titled "Poem of Walt Whitman, an American" in the second edition (1856), "Walt Whitman" in the third edition (Boston: Thayer & Eldridge, 1860–61), and finally "Song of Myself" in the sixth edition (Boston: Osgood, 1881–82), where the lines are on p. 53.

34. First published in the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass* as "Poem of Many in

Since Carnevali read a lot of Whitman, he might have been familiar also with his prose writings and notes, where again Whitman describes his conception of poetry explicitly—as in this passage from a short piece from his 1882 *Specimen Days and Collect* (a book whose title is itself a program):

At its best, poetic lore is like what may be heard of conversation in the dusk, from speakers far or hid, of which we get only a few broken murmurs. What is not gather'd is far more—perhaps the main thing.³⁵

Now, what evidence do we have that Carnevali, too, was conceiving of poetry along these lines? Plenty. His poem “Walt Whitman” was not a statement out of the blue. On the contrary, it was the natural culmination of the statement underlying the first group of poems he published in *Poetry* a year earlier, whose title, let us recall, was “The Splendid Commonplace.” That collection is *all* about the poetic strength of this Whitmanesque simplicity. Take the first poem, the one Williams liked so much, with the lines:³⁶

I would have a trumpet as powerful as the wind,
And I would trumpet out to the world
The splendid commonplace:
“Nice day to-day!”

Or take the second, “His Majesty the Letter-carrier,” with the unvarnished lines:

He is so proud
Because he's got my happiness in that dirty bag.

Or again, “Drôlatique-sérieux,” the third poem:

One” (with material from the prose preface to the 1855 edition), at pp. 180–201, here at p. 192. The poem was expanded and renamed “As I Sat Alone by Blue Ontario's Shore” in the fourth edition (New York: Chapin, 1867) and “By Blue Ontario's Shores” in the sixth edition of 1881–82, where the verse is on p. 271.

35. “After Trying a Certain Book,” in his *Specimen Days and Collect* (Philadelphia: Rees Welsh & Co, 1882–83), at pp. 198–99.

36. “The Splendid Commonplace,” at p. 298. The three quotations that follow are from pp. 299, 300, and 302, respectively.

Through the lowered awning's chink
The sun enters my room with the glad fury
Of a victorious dagger wielded by an adventurous child.

Indeed, even the closing piece of the group, "Sentimental dirge"—a poem in rhyme, almost an insult to Whitman and to Carnevali's own commitment to free verse³⁷—is simplicity at its peak:

Sweetheart, what's the use of you—
When the night is blue.

It is against this background that we should read "Walt Whitman." It is this ability to capture the splendor of the commonplace that constitutes the highest of Carnevali's early poetry, and Whitman's influence on it. As Monroe herself would write in her critical review of *A Hurried Man*,

The *Splendid Commonplace* group [...] is full of the spirit of youth—youth which makes its own adventures out of the daily routine; seeing both sides of them, their serious importance and their absurd littleness, and seeing also through and beyond them.³⁸

Of course, it would be a mistake to regard such splendor as necessarily pleasant. The commonplace is full of ugly things, too, and Carnevali would make a point of that. For example, in the 1921 essay mentioned above, where he says the American poetry must follow "the great Whitman way," he concludes his survey of the young emerging poets by describing himself ("last but not least") as someone who

mentions things unmentionable in any well-mannered self-respecting poem. [...] He seems to delight in writing on most unpleasant subjects—furnished rooms, slums, bad American food, and the like.³⁹

The point could not be more explicit. The splendor of the commonplace does not lie in the beauty of things, but in their surprising

37. See again Carnevali's letter to Monroe cited above (note 21) and *The Autobiography*, at p. 95: "All of a sudden I began to write: rhymed poems at first, absurd [...] It is difficult to say how rotten the poems were."

38. "A Hurried Poet," at p. 212.

39. "The Youngest," at p. 24.

poetic power. As in Whitman—and unlike Blake—it lies in what we can see and hear if we pay attention to its hidden side, its broken murmurs, *whatever* their source. It lies in the fact that the commonplace has all one needs:

I had a job at Lincoln Park once, cutting off the diseased branches from otherwise healthy trees and shooting arsenic and lead poisoning over everything to kill the pretty little colored caterpillars. There was all the poetry I needed in this job.⁴⁰

(Incidentally, the unpleasantness of furnished rooms is a distinctive, recurring trope in Carnevali's writings:

How much of myself have I left in furnished rooms?⁴¹

he asks in his *Autobiography*;

Who shall ask the furnished-room poets to write
A song for the dawn?⁴²

he asks in a poem published in September 1919—a poem dedicated to another favorite and friend of Carnevali's, Waldo Frank, but in which again there is a reference to Walt Whitman, this time in the main body of the lyric.⁴³ The trope is so central and pervasive, culminating in the "Furnished Room Rhapsody" of 1928,⁴⁴ that Dennis Barone decided to use it as a main title for the new edition of Carnevali's collected poetry he published recently.⁴⁵)

40. *The Autobiography of Emanuel Carnevali*, at p. 158.

41. *Ibid.*, at p. 87.

42. "The Day of Summer," *Poetry* 14, no. 6 (Sept. 1919): 314–27, at p. 317.

43. *Ibid.*, at p. 324: "O city, there lived in you once, O Manhattan, a man WALT WHITMAN" (all in italics). On Waldo Frank, see Carnevali's letter quoted by Monroe (note 21 above).

44. The "Rhapsody" is part of Carnevali's "Visiting Winds," *Poetry* 32, no. 4 (July 1928): 179–85, at pp. 180–82.

45. *Furnished Rooms*, ed. Dennis Barone (New York: Bordighera Press, 2006). The volume contains all the poems of *A Hurried Man* along with Carnevali's essay "The Book of Job Junior," something of a statement of his views on poetry, also included in the 1925 book (at pp. 61–79) and first published in *Youth: A Magazine of the Arts* 1, no. 4 (Jan. 1922): 7–13.

So much for the first part of my answer to the question I asked—why did Carnevali submit that short poem to the Whitman issue of *Poetry*, if the only apparent connection with Whitman is in the title? He did because that poem is the most Whitmanesque piece he could think of. Let me only add that, in my opinion, this philosophy of the commonplace is more than just an *ars poetica* of sort. It is Philosophy with the capital “P”. If we wish, it is where Poetry and Philosophy find their common origin. As Plato famously put it in the *Theaetetus*:

Wonder is the only beginning of philosophy, and he who said that Iris was the child of Thaumias made a good genealogy.⁴⁶

Aristotle said the same in the *Metaphysics*:

It is owing to their wonder that men now begin and originally began to philosophize.⁴⁷

And so did many others throughout the history of philosophy—all the way to Bertrand Russell:

Philosophy [...] keeps alive our sense of wonder by showing familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect.⁴⁸

This is what Philosophy is about, this is what Poetry is about: to let the world surprise us. “All truths wait in all things,” even those things that seem banal, uninteresting, unpleasant.

As for the second part of my answer, it is much briefer, and comes specifically from the last two lines of the poem. Again, the point is philosophical, and here perhaps my thoughts are driven by a reading that goes beyond Carnevali’s intentions. “All the shadows/whisper of the sun.” We can read these lines in many ways, depending on where we put the accent: *all* the shadows (not just some) whisper of the sun;

46. *Theaetetus* 155d, cited in the English translation of Harold N. Fowler, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 7 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921). According to Hesiod (*Theogony*, 267, 780), Iris was the messenger from heaven and her father was Thaumias, a sea god, whose name Plato interprets as “Wonder” (θαῦμα).

47. *Metaphysics* 982b12, cited in the English translation of William D. Ross, *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. 8 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908).

48. *The Problems of Philosophy* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1912), at p. 244.

all *the shadows* (not other things) whisper of the sun; all the shadows *whisper* (as opposed to speaking loudly) of the sun; all the shadows whisper of *the sun* (not of something else). The standard interpretation, I think, lies somewhere between the second and the fourth readings, with an emphasis on the symbolic meaning of “shadow” and of “sun”: shadows are dark, bad things, but if we pay attention, if we look closely, we’ll see that they all hint at something bright and beautiful. We can’t really gaze at the sun directly, for that would make us blind. Yet the sun is there, the light is there, and every bit of darkness in our lives is to remind us of that important truth.

I prefer a different interpretation, one that lies somewhere between the first and the third readings, where the accent is on “all” and on “whisper.” To me that is the reading that truly explains the title of the poem, for, again, that is how Whitman himself put it: all truths *wait* in *all* things. We get only a few broken murmurs, and what is not gathered is far more. But every murmur is significant. Every shadow has a story to tell, albeit *sotto voce*.

Now, why did Carnevali say “sun,” as opposed to “things”? After all, we can’t have a shadow without a light source, but neither can we have a shadow without something *of which* it is a shadow. Shadows are doubly parasitic, as it were.⁴⁹ They are the product of the subtle interaction between light and things, opaque things, and it would seem that a shadow has a lot more to say about the latter than about the former. We can learn a great deal about an object by looking at its shadow: its shape, for example, or its spatial relation to other things (though appearances may be misleading: my hands can cast a rabbit shadow, a rabbit can contort itself to cast a hand shadow⁵⁰). All we can learn about the light is that it must be there. If we are skillful, we may perhaps be

49. This is itself a source of deep puzzles: see Samuel Todes and Charles Daniels, “Beyond the Doubt of a Shadow,” in *Dialogues in Phenomenology*, ed. Don Ihde and Richard M. Zaner (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1975), pp. 86–93, and the extensive discussions in Roberto Casati, *La scoperta dell’ombra* (Milan: Mondadori, 2000; trans. Abigail Asher, *The Shadow Club*, New York: Knopf, 2003), and in Roy Sorensen, *Seeing Dark Things: The Philosophy of Shadows* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

50. As in John O’Brien’s cartoon in *The New Yorker*, Feb. 25, 1991, p. 37.

able to figure out also the direction whence it comes. But that is all. In a way, this is also the lesson of Plato's allegory of the cave in Book VII of the *Republic*. Because all we get to see in the cave are shadows, we tend to believe they are the real things—the only things in the world. Really they are just shadows, projections, and we should learn to *infer* the existence of the real things of which the shadows are mere projections. That is what knowledge is all about. So why did Carnevali say “sun” instead? I am not sure, but I think the answer is that here he is really writing like Whitman. It's noon on the mountain. The crags are there, they have been there all along and we could see them well before the sun rose. Not so their shadows. *Those* shadows—the ones we see now—those were not there before and will change as the sun will move. But right now—now they are telling us about the sun *at noon*. The shadows are whispering the moment, among themselves and to us. They are telling us something we must grasp now, or else it will be gone forever.

Or perhaps none of this. Perhaps the shadows are just *chatting sotto voce*. They are gossiping about Mr. Sun, who showed up on the mountain to celebrate noon. We don't know what they are saying; the contents of their conversation escape us. But so it is. It's a pretty scene. It is worth a sketch, a water color. One day we could make a postcard of it. I'm sure old Walt would like it.⁵¹

51. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the symposium *Emanuel Carnevali in Italy and America: A Poet “Out of Doors”*, held at the Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in New York, NY, October 3, 2014. I am thankful to the organizers for their support and to Barbara Carnevali for the many conversations that followed and for her help with some quotations and bibliographic details. I am also grateful to Aurelia Casagrande of the Archivio Storico Comunale di Bazzano for her kind assistance in consulting the valuable holdings of the Maria Pia Carnevali archives.