

REVIEWS

EZRA GREENSPAN. *Walt Whitman and the American Reader*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990. xi + 267 pp. Illustrated.

Ezra Greenspan's exciting and highly original study combines reader-response theory and historicism into a methodology that yields valuable insights into Whitman's poetics. Grounded on a close and thorough reading of Whitman's periodical writings as well as the poems, a sound knowledge of the publishing practices of Whitman's day, and a critical sensitivity to language, the book yields many challenging insights into Whitman and the print world of his day. Unlike those critics who see a sharp discontinuity between Walter Whitman the pedestrian journalist and Walt Whitman the inspired writer of *Leaves of Grass*, Professor Greenspan looks for and finds a continuum in Whitman's career; he argues that Whitman's poetics, his political stance, and his self-projection in the poems are deeply rooted in the world of journalism and publishing. For a decade or more, as Greenspan shows, Whitman had devoted himself "energetically and idealistically to the full range of literary professional roles of his time—as a printer, reporter, editor, freelancer, periodical poet and story writer, bookseller, and publisher," with little apparent success but with great significance for his poetic career. (67-68)

By the mid-nineteenth century, publishing had undergone major changes. It was the age of the printing press, New York had become a world publishing center, Cooper and Irving had proved that there was money to be made in literature, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Fanny Fern had written best sellers, and capitalist publishers were turning literature into a profitable commodity. Whitman acclaimed the development of modern printing presses, in poetry and prose alike, as the harbingers of the coming democratic era; the *Democratic Review* (to which Whitman contributed) endorsed "Poetry for the People"; and Park Benjamin (for whom Whitman had worked as a compositor) contracted with Whitman to write one of his series of best-selling shilling octavo pamphlets—*Franklin Evans*. In such a heady milieu, is it hard to imagine Whitman envisioning his own democratic "poetry for the people" as a potential best seller and reaching out to secure a mass audience?

Professor Greenspan's study is divided into two parts. The first four of his eleven chapters contribute markedly to our understanding of the publishing world in which Whitman occupied a respected, if minor, place. From his early apprenticeship to his successful editing of the New York *Aurora* at 22, to his minor renown as a journalist, to his successful editorship of the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*, certain salient traits emerged which would manifest themselves, much transformed, in *Leaves of Grass*. Thus Whitman of the *Daily Eagle* was a newspaperman with strong democratic, nationalistic, and cultural biases, a proclivity to instruct readers on manners, morals, and politics, and a strong literary bent. His journalistic exploitation of his own personality prefigured the "I" of the poems. And, as Greenspan points out, he developed a knack for

entering into a sort of dialogue with his newspaper readers. This early "I-you" reader-response technique would be highly developed in *Leaves of Grass*, where Whitman would expect his readers to attain an extraordinary degree of identity and intimacy with him. But Whitman's journalistic career faded about 1851, after an array of journalistic "sits" and freelancing. And to bridge the gap between journalist and inspired poet, Greenspan posits that Whitman turned in the fifties to the invention of his own literary personality and to a program of self-education, largely in terms of reading about literature and compiling the home-made notebooks filled with ideas about poetry. (Greenspan makes good use of these.) With the help of the theatre, opera, and oratory, Whitman was enabled to conceive his mission as a public poet—a performance artist who would employ the printed media. And he approached the first edition with a seasoned understanding of book-making and publication.

The last seven chapters of the book deal basically with the first three editions of *Leaves of Grass* and "the strongly reader-addressed quality of Whitman's poetry," which impresses Greenspan as "one of the most culturally significant and aesthetically cultivated features of Whitman's art" (viii). Greenspan lays claim to a distinctive reader-response/historicist analytical method:

In contrast to the attention paid by much recent literary criticism to the privatized encounter between writer, reader, and text, my own attention has been drawn primarily to the historicity of these agents and of their patterns of interaction, to the ways literary culture—and, in particular, the creation, production, distribution, consumption, interpretation, and critical evaluation of imaginative literature—is created out of and in response to the changing circumstances of human life lived in society. . . . (vii-viii)

Whitman's feverishly written preface to the 1855 edition constituted an advertisement of himself as a national spokesman, benefactor, and burgeoning poet-laureate of a democratic America—and a latent conviction that *Leaves of Grass* was destined to become a popular best seller. Despite his enthusiastic self-reviews (not a rare practice at the time) and some rather fair-minded reviews by others, circumstances militated against his receiving the sort of enthusiastic reception that he had apparently anticipated. Self-publication, limited distribution, and unorthodox format and contents, as he must have realized, hardly constituted the formula for best-seller success.

The 1855 poems are subjected to fascinating analyses in this study. Whitman had long anticipated the reciprocal roles of writer and reader in his private notebooks and in his journalistic writings (what Greenspan calls the "journalistic style of intimate address to the reader" that was a common feature in popular journalism). From their opening words, then, Whitman's poems make a verbal address to the reader and sustain that contact throughout. Yet, as Greenspan points out, Whitman's intended reader is not so much the common man or woman as an ideal reader whom he hoped *Leaves of Grass* would help to create; and Whitman would continue to fashion his concept of this ideal reader for the rest of his poetic career. He expected the ideal reader of his poems to engage in a dialogue with him, to wrestle with him (often through multiple readings of a poem). He wanted to teach him or her how to think independently, how to see, how to read. The poems, thus conceived, become strategies to shape the *reader* of the poems. Essentially, "from beginning to end—from

design to promotion, from opening to closing poem,” the first edition was “an ingeniously conceived, reader-directed venture,” anticipating modern poetic sensibilities by “its genuinely radical notion of the reader and the reading process. This was not simply a matter of philosophy, but equally one of poetics, of what perhaps began in the former finding its expression in the latter” (115). Greenspan analyzes the triumph of this “I-you” strategy in “Song of Myself,” which begins and ends with its intimate address to the reader, as well as in “A Song for Occupations” and “To Think of Time.”

The 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass* reasserts Whitman’s intention to establish himself as a national poet and a national rhetorician. (Particularly effective in this section of the study are Greenspan’s readings of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” and “Song of the Open Road” in terms of their daring and innovative strategies toward achieving intercommunication with the reader as well as a “continuum of experience” which merges the past and the present and the poet’s and the reader’s sensibilities into a sort of centered consciousness.) Greenspan perceives Whitman’s nativization and colloquializing of poetic language—no less than his daring use of sexual expressiveness and content—as a strategy for gaining new levels of communication with the reader. For Whitman’s intention to enthuse and elevate the reader through the transformational powers of his poetry is manifest. As he says in his 1856 letter to Emerson: “The time is at hand when inherent literature will be a main part of These States, as general and real as steam-power, iron, corn, beef, fish. First-rate American persons are to be supplied.” By implication, of course, poems like Whitman’s are required to “supply,” i.e., to inspire and create, a new race of ideal persons. When Whitman declared, with seeming modesty, that *Leaves of Grass* was “only a language experiment,” did he not mean to imply that his poems were a test to determine whether humanity—or at least the American portion thereof—could be transformed through the medium of such inspired language and poetic strategies as his?

The 1860 edition was published by commercial publishers and ballyhooed by the prestigious *Saturday Press*, yet both enterprises failed soon thereafter and again deprived Whitman of the mass audience he craved and predicted. Many of the edition’s poems are forward-looking and “public,” like those of the earlier editions. But poems like “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” and “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life” and many of the “Calamus” poems look backward and inward toward a sort of regressive mythobiography. In these innovative poems, Whitman reached his highest plateau of reader-response intimacy, Greenspan maintains. Something wondrous had happened. Paradoxically, by turning away from public address and privatizing his poetry, Whitman had opened up his poetry to the world: Whitman’s “I” had become more candid and human, probing more deeply into the universal wellsprings of human nature and enabling the reader to identify and “merge” with the writer. In terms of reader response, Greenspan sees the third edition as Whitman’s high water mark; but he maintains that this personal dialogic relationship with the reader was not maintained in subsequent poems, and hence he declines to analyze the later editions. He argues that by the end of the 1850’s Whitman had begun retreating from the reader-writer relationship that had made the 1855,

1856, and 1860 poems so innovative and that Whitman no longer sought to make poetry out of "two souls interchanging."

By way of a coda, Greenspan again poses the question of Whitman's "you." Goodness knows, Whitman's "I" (personal, historic, mythic, etc.) is problem enough for most critics. His "you" (the *en masse*, the individual reader, the idealized reader, the personality of the future, etc.) is at least as tantalizing. For starters, the English word "you" is neither singular or plural, but ambiguous. And Greenspan argues that Whitman's mastery and exploitation of this ambiguity is one of his great triumphs. The ingenious complexity of the "I-you" relationship which Greenspan propounds should be reckoned with by anyone who would interpret Whitman's poems afresh.

Greenspan's foreshortening of Whitman's literary history deprives the reader of some potentially astute insights into the later poetry and prose. In some of his readings, the reader-response approach overbalances the historicism. Because Greenspan does not conceive of Whitman as a "political" poet, for example, he appears to scant the political relevance of some of Whitman's poems. But, on balance, he has made a noteworthy and challenging contribution to Whitman scholarship, bringing fresh interpretations to many of the poems, to our understanding of Whitman's intentions, and to the concept of Whitman as a print-oriented artist. Greenspan's reader-related approach to Whitman is paralleled by his approach to his own reader: *Walt Whitman and the American Reader* encourages us to enter into a fruitful dialogue with its author.

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MICHAEL MOON. *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in "Leaves of Grass."* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991. x + 249 pp. \$32.50.

Not everyone will welcome the publication of Michael Moon's *Disseminating Whitman*. Some will be offended by its dustjacket, which depicts three and a half photographs of nude men identified as "Thomas Eakins and another man, 1883." Others will find the use of "disseminating" in the title unnecessarily vulgar. Specific scholars will probably not like the way Moon refers impolitely to their work on Whitman, especially Arthur Golden, who is described as "imperceptive (and/or homophobic) to ignore the phallo-anal language" Whitman is alleged to use in an early and recently discovered letter. M. Jimmie Killingsworth's "Whitman and Motherhood" is described as a "rather superficial survey." Both articles, incidentally, appeared in *American Literature*, where Moon, an assistant professor at Duke, has just been named Associate Editor. Gay Wilson Allen, one of Duke's most distinguished alumni and a recipient of its honorary degree, is taken to task for his *New Walt Whitman Handbook* (1975), which Moon deems "useful, if somewhat impressionistic." He also dismisses Allen's essay, "Whitman and Stoicism," as "typical of the simplistic notion of the significance of stoicism for Whitman's writing." Fortunately,