

JESSICA HAIGNEY. *Walt Whitman and the French Impressionists: A Study of Analogies*. Studies in American Literature. Volume 10. Lewiston, Maine; Queenston, Ontario; Lampeter, Dyfed, Wales: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990. 109 pp.

Throughout his life Whitman displayed an avid interest in the changing visual culture of his day. As a reporter in Brooklyn in the 1840s and 1850s, he regularly reviewed art exhibitions in the local press and on the basis of his involvement in the arts and friendships with artists presented the keynote address at the annual exhibition of the short-lived Brooklyn Art Union in 1851. In later years Whitman repeatedly scrutinized the visual offerings in the popular press and occasionally used works of art as the starting point for some of his shorter poems. ("Death's Valley," for example, owes its inspiration to George Inness' painting, *The Valley of the Shadow of Death*.) Recent scholarship has begun to analyze the extent to which Whitman's interest in the arts of painting, sculpture and photography informed the structure and thematic content of his verse. (See especially, Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing* [Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989], 3-29; Miles Tanenbaum, "Walt Whitman and American Art," PhD dis., The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 1988; and Ruth L. Bohan, "'The Gathering of the Forces': Walt Whitman and the Visual Arts, 1845-1855," *The Mickle Street Review* 12 [1990], 10-30.) More typical, though, have been studies, like Jessica Haigney's *Walt Whitman and the French Impressionists*, which explore the intersections between Whitman's poetry and the changing visual arts culture of his own and later periods, generally by way of analogy.

One of the earliest and perhaps still the best known such study was F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* (London and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941), which proposed a range of affinities between Whitman's poetry and the work of three of his contemporaries: genre painter and fellow Long Islander, William Sidney Mount; Philadelphia portraitist, Thomas Eakins; and the French Barbizon painter, Jean-Francois Millet. In the ensuing half century, scholars have greatly expanded Matthiessen's focus, discussing Whitman's poetry in relationship to the work of painters as varied as George Caleb Bingham, Courbet, Van Gogh, Robert Henri and Jackson Pollock, as well as to the architectural practices and philosophies of Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright. So great, in fact, is the perception of Whitman's legacy in the visual arts that in 1974 critic Max Kozloff felt justified in declaring "much of our art . . . a dilation" of Whitman's "central themes" ("Walt Whitman and American Art," ed. Edwin Haviland Miller, *The Artistic Legacy of Walt Whitman* [New York: New York University Press, 1970], 29).

Jessica Haigney's *Walt Whitman and the French Impressionists* constitutes the latest offering in this small but expanding body of literature. A decade after Betsy Erkkila's illuminating investigation of Whitman's involvement in and importance for late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century French literature, *Walt Whitman Among the French* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), Haigney seeks to establish connections between Whitman and one of France's leading visual arts movements in the same period. The author takes as her point of departure a statement made by Wylie Sypher in his 1960 study, *Rococo to Cubism in Art and Literature* (New York: Random House), that "the experiment

most like Impressionism may have been that undertaken by Walt Whitman" (vii). Haigney acknowledges "no . . . direct influence between Whitman and the Impressionists" (vii), and, following Sypher's lead, approaches her subject from the perspective of the painters, whose first group exhibition, held in Paris in 1874, occurred nearly two decades after the initial publication of *Leaves of Grass*.

Haigney's method is to identify five principles which "encompass the thought and practice of the Impressionists" (4) and then, through a close reading of individual paintings, theoretical writings and selected poems, to suggest a range of affinities between the poet and the painters. Haigney's approach is essentially synchronic in nature, but unlike most of her predecessors, the author eschews iconographic and historical considerations to concentrate solely on formal and stylistic matters. Underlying the five principles and serving as an important subtext of the author's thesis is the concept of modernity. Haigney stresses, for example, their shared commitment to formal experimentation, to the autonomy of artistic expression, and to the greater role demanded of the reader/viewer.

Haigney's book appears at an exciting moment both for the study of Impressionism and for interdisciplinary approaches to art and literature. Richard Schiff's *Cezanne and the End of Impressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), T. J. Clark's *The Painting of Modern Life, Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985) and Robert L. Herbert's *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988) are among a growing number of recent publications that are significantly expanding our knowledge of both the socio-cultural context and the aesthetic assumptions underlying Impressionist practices. Similarly, books like Murray Roston's *Renaissance Perspectives in Literature and the Visual Arts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987) are reinvigorating the study of periodized interart relationships.

Haigney demonstrates considerably greater familiarity with the critical literature on Whitman and the interart tradition (although I question many of her conclusions) than she does with that on Impressionism. Only one of the five sources she credits with having provided her with her understanding of Impressionism was published in the last decade. As a result, the author repeatedly stresses the Impressionists' indifference toward subject matter (one of the traditional assumptions that revisionist historians have overwhelmingly rejected), history and social commentary. She states, for example, that landscapists like Monet and Pissarro preferred to paint "straw-roofed shanties" over more "impressive structures" because "they were more adaptable to effects of light and shade" (8). In her strictly formalist reading of impressionist canvases, "the subject is important only insofar as it provides the initial stimulus" (9). The painters' primary concern, she states, was with capturing the effects of light and atmosphere. In this view the "fixed value of the momentary light filtered through atmosphere becomes the subject matter. The motif (or ostensible subject) is chosen because it is an agent that absorbs or refracts light" (11).

By thus denying to the painters the importance of their subjects, Haigney denies them the same level of complexity and sophistication that she accepts without question in Whitman. By isolating form from content, Haigney sepa-

rates the Impressionists' technique from the scenes depicted as if the two had no real bearing on one another. "Unlike Impressionism," she writes, "Whitman's subjects are of importance in and of themselves; yet, these subjects are also objects that reflect and refract—not light as in Impressionism—but language" (41).

In her emphasis on formal over historical and iconographic considerations, Haigney follows the path established more than a decade ago by Barton St. Armand in his article, "Transcendence through Technique: Whitman's 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' and Impressionist Painting," (*Bucknell Review* 24 [1979], 56-74. Yet surprisingly, the author makes no mention of St. Armand's work, and, in fact, seems unfamiliar with it. (The article does not appear in her bibliography.) Like St. Armand, Haigney equates the Impressionists' activated surface treatment with Whitman's innovative use of language. She likens the Impressionists' broken brush work to the "juxtaposition rather than subordination and logical ordering of the images" in Whitman's catalogues (49). Whitman's words, she writes, "are detached fragments of reality as daubs of color are detached fragments of light" (87). Elsewhere she compares the painters' "perceived experience of light broken into separate colors" with "the sum total of experiences in the poem [separated] into images" (49). All of which leads Haigney to conclude that Whitman's use of language is "distinctly modern and impressionistic" (42).

In her eagerness to demonstrate an affinity between the spatial and temporal disjunctures evident in the art of both Whitman and the Impressionists, Haigney compares unlike elements. Broken brush work does not equate to the juxtaposed words and images of Whitman's catalogues; the two are carriers of very different levels of significance and are not synonymous. If anything, the radical shifts in mood and image evident in Whitman's catalogues share more in common with the spatial and temporal disjunctures of Cubism and Futurism than they do with Impressionism. No matter how "patchy" and kinetic the surface of an Impressionist painting, the scene depicted is still limited in both time and space in ways that Whitman's catalogues definitely are not.

Given the nature of the author's project, a word must be said regarding the complete absence of reproductions. The absence of visual imagery, particularly in the first chapter, makes the reading tedious and difficult to follow. It also serves implicitly to reinforce old prejudices which value verbal over visual means of communication. Despite the high costs involved in reproducing works of art, efforts should have been made to reproduce at least some of the paintings discussed.