

DONALD D. KUMMINGS, editor. *Approaches to Teaching Whitman's "Leaves of Grass."* New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1990. x + 192 pp.

This is a useful book. Most of us know little about what our colleagues nationwide (and worldwide) do when teaching Whitman (or any other author); we can only surmise from current scholarship or from a tiny sampling of faculty at schools where we work or which we attended. The great value of the *MLA Approaches to Teaching World Literature* series, of which this volume is number 32, is to introduce teachers to the practices and methods of other teachers. "Classroom-oriented research" or "instruction-oriented research," as it is called, needs and deserves the encouragement afforded by this series.

In Part I, "Materials," Donald D. Kummings discusses a survey of over 100 teachers and scholars who were asked to provide information about editions and anthologies they select to teach *Leaves of Grass*, readings they require and recommend of students, books they value in their own libraries, and aids they rely on in the classroom. Kummings reports results of his survey in four short, clear, informative essays laced with his commentary and suggestions. "Materials" is, in fact, a group of narrative annotated bibliographies, each of which should help the beginning teacher of Whitman, several of which might assist the experienced teacher and scholar.

Part II, "Approaches," contains nineteen essays in four groups: "Teaching 'Song of Myself'"; "Teaching Other Major Works"; "Whitman in the Lower-Division Course"; and "Whitman on the Upper Level." I suspect these groups grew from the essays Kummings received rather than the essays arising from groups he had defined beforehand. Whatever the case, the nineteen introduce myriad critical and pedagogical approaches to *Leaves of Grass*.

Some of these essays—especially in groups one and two—address critical approaches without saying much about teaching these approaches. Three such essays represent exciting directions in current Whitman scholarship. "Linguistic Features of 'Song of Myself'" by C. Carroll Hollis and "'Song of Myself' and the Politics of the Body Erotic" by Betsy Erkkila deal respectively with linguistic and sexual/political elements of "Song of Myself." The vitality and clarity of these essays will encourage beginning teachers and fledgling scholars of Whitman to read *Language and Style in 'Leaves of Grass'* by Hollis and *Whitman the Political Poet* by Erkkila. Robert K. Martin's "The Disseminal Whitman: A Deconstructive Approach to 'Enfans d'Adam' and 'Calamus'" had the curious effect of reminding me how similar the literary qualities emphasized by deconstructionists can be to the "ambiguity" and "irony" prized by New Critics. Another essay in Part II, M. Jimmie Killingsworth's "Whitman's I: Person, Persona, Self, Sign," also alludes only briefly to the classroom. But by systematically presenting four ways to perceive the "I" in Whitman, Killingsworth helped me sort out the tangled ways in which my students and I discuss the speaker(s) in *Leaves of Grass*.

Every "classroom-oriented" essay in this volume repays careful reading. The range of both methodologies and subjects is particularly useful and is best illustrated by a partial (and democratic) catalog of titles: "Reconciling Varied Approaches to 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking'" by Dennis K. Renner,

"A Jungian Approach to the Self in Major Whitman Poems" by Lorelei Cederstrom, "Listening to Whitman: An Introduction to His Prosody" by Martin Bidney, "*Leaves of Grass* as a Sexual Manifesto: A Reader-Response Approach" by William H. Shurr, "Teaching Whitman's Old-Age Poems" by Donald Barlow Stauffer, "The Poetic Uses of Whitman's Prose" by Susan Day Dean, "Whitman's Use and Abuse of Poetic Predecessors" by Kenneth M. Price, "Whitman's Language as the Basis for a Scientific or Technical Report" by Sherry Southard, "Whitman and Democratic Women" by Sherry Ceniza, and "The Bard of Both Americas" by Doris Sommer.

In three of the essays most useful to me and my teaching, Robin Riley Fast writes about "Whitman in the Undergraduate Survey," Ed Folsom tackles " 'Scattering it freely forever': Whitman in a Seminar on Nineteenth-Century American Culture," and Alan Helms discusses "Teaching the Whitman Seminar." Each of these three teachers reviews problems encountered when presenting Whitman in a particular context, then discusses ways in which to overcome these problems and turn them to pedagogical advantage. I appreciate knowing the exact readings Fast assigns and the ways in which she connects *Leaves of Grass* with other works covered in the first half of an American survey. (I have never commented on Whitman in relation to Woolman, Paine and writers of their generation; in the future, I will.) I liked being reminded of the relationships Folsom discusses between *Leaves of Grass* and many disparate disciplines. (Often I don't "find" class time for such relationships; I should try harder.) I was excited by the journal-like description Helms gives of the week-by-week discussions in his seminar. His direct assault on homophobia is a paradigm for how this subject should be approached in class. (Sometimes I say too little, too late about Whitman's homosexuality.)

Though the nineteen essays in this volume will be of use to any teacher of Whitman, they ignore two essential elements involved in approaches to teaching *Leaves of Grass*. The first of these elements is contextual and intellectual, the second pedagogical and affective.

First, the Transcendental/spiritual/mystical lineage of *Leaves of Grass* is largely absent. No essay details ways of teaching Whitman in relation to American transcendentalism. Neither Bronson Alcott nor Margaret Fuller is mentioned, nor is Jones Very or any other transcendental poet; Emerson's poetry merits one passing reference—in Fast's fine essay; the astonishing (and for some students revelatory) parallels and differences between *Walden* and *Leaves of Grass* are never addressed. The omission may be due in part to Kummings's approach. His discussion of "Editions and Anthologies," for example, contains this statement: "[N]either the 1855 nor the 1860 text is the *Leaves* that Whitman himself approved and recommended to future generations. Thus the Cowley and Pearce editions, which both contain excellent introductions, would seem to have limited and specialized uses. They are probably most appropriate in courses that study the evolution of *Leaves of Grass*" (4). This, of course, ignores the ways in which each of the three earliest editions represents a culmination of American transcendentalism—a spiritual, cultural, and poetic apotheosis. After teaching (and loving) the *Norton Critical Edition* for years, I find using the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* creates new contextual opportunities. The poetry gains in richness and vigor when compared to other

transcendental texts; Whitman, in turn, bridges a social and aesthetic gap between Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, Alcott and the sensibilities of most of my students. In our scientific, technological, materialistic, and relativistic age (an age, too, of relativistic cultural materialism in literary criticism), teachers need to talk more about how they approach the mystical roots of *Leaves of Grass*. "Much as critics might question the notion of universality, most undergraduates, in my experience, don't," writes Fast (120). Perhaps some of our students are more attuned to and accepting of the spiritual universalism informing the *Leaves* (especially the early editions) than are certain contemporary critical approaches and contemporary teachers.

Second, no essay discusses in detail what for me is *the* most important pedagogical strategy for teaching Whitman—reading aloud. Fast alone comments: "[W]e read the poetry aloud and discuss its formal qualities and the relations between form and content" (121); and later, "I ask a couple of [students] to read some passages aloud" (121). But reading aloud is not merely a means to a formal or thematic end. It is a way of perceiving, communicating, and creating "meaning."

Immediately after I was asked to write this review, my "American Literature 1830-1860" class, an upper-division course primarily for majors, spent two weeks on Whitman. I lectured about *Leaves of Grass* and *Walden* (which we had just read), later about Whitman and the form and textual history of the *Leaves*. My lectures took perhaps 30% of the class time spent on Whitman. I also read aloud passages of the 1855 edition, then commented briefly on each passage, several of which were close to ten pages in length. These readings also took 30% of time spent on Whitman. And we sat in a large circle to discuss questions concerning the text, many of them raised by students. These discussions comprised the remaining 40% of time spent on Whitman. Before moving on to Poe, I did some "classroom-oriented research" of my own. I asked my students to take about 20 minutes and write answers to four questions: 1) What did you like about *Leaves of Grass*? 2) What did you dislike about *Leaves*? 3) What would you like to do more of in class when discussing *Leaves*? 4) Of the things we did in class when discussing *Leaves*, what did you like best?

Thirty-two students answered (most anonymously) these questions. The range of responses to the first question was gratifying. No answer was repeated more than three times, though almost every student noted several things she or he liked about the poetry and a few listed over five. The second question elicited few lengthy responses. Only one comment was repeated more than twice, but it appeared in various forms nine times: nine students admitted being annoyed by the lengthy catalogs or lists in *Leaves of Grass*; two sounded angry at them. I had, of course, commented on what I take to be the strengths and value of the catalogs. At least 30% of my students were unconvinced. As if to prove once more its usefulness, *Approaches to Teaching Whitman's 'Leaves of Grass'* contains a fine essay that tackles negative student response to the catalogs. In "The Poet-Reader Relationship in "Song of Myself," John B. Mason discusses the conversational nature of *Leaves of Grass*, then suggests that students should skim what they refer to as the "boring" catalogs. His technique for illustrating the value of skimming is intriguing: "I sometimes take to class a turn-of-the-century 'flipbook' made to simulate the effect of a motion picture.

When the reader flips the corners of the pages, a motion picture results, but if the reader flips too slowly, the illusion is lost. Like the single pictures in this book, each item in a Whitman catalog is fully realized, but for there to be motion, there must be speed" (47). Mason adds, "Students need to accept their impulse to skim, but they should realize that the catalogs . . . are not haphazardly constructed. The best way for students to discover Whitman's great craft is to have them write catalogs for themselves" (47). These are exciting suggestions; I hope to incorporate them next semester.

Reading aloud appeared in my students' responses to the third and fourth questions. In response to question three, five students suggested we should have more classes on Whitman, four said we should spend more time discussing Whitman's life; three urged me to read aloud even more extensively than I had. But the surprise and excitement of the exercise came in the answers to question four. There *twenty* of thirty-two students replied that the thing they had liked best about our classes on Whitman was the time I spent reading the poetry aloud to them. Aloud, aloud, aloud: the word was written on sheet after sheet, outnumbering all other answers to the question by more than two to one. Many students gave extensive reasons for their preference; these reasons were alternately aesthetic, social, thematic, and affective. For most members of the class, the oral presentation of the *Leaves* was *the* most valuable and memorable classroom experience.

Surely it is time we apply the brilliant speech act and reader response analyses of C. Carroll Hollis and others to the everyday teaching of *Leaves of Grass*. The poetry is a performance at once private and public, conversational and oratorical; it transcends the "cold types and cylinders" and "wet paper" Whitman inveighs against in the second poem of the 1855 edition. The emotional, sexual, sensory, spiritual power of the spoken word lives more perfectly and joyfully in *Leaves of Grass* than in any other post-Renaissance English-language poem. For all its usefulness, I wish *Approaches to Teaching Whitman's 'Leaves of Grass'* included an essay—or several essays—that attempted to describe in detail how teachers might create an "oral" atmosphere in their classes on Whitman, an atmosphere of sayers and hearers, speakers and listeners.

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THOMAS B. BYERS, *What I Cannot Say: Self, Word, and World in Whitman*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989. x + 147 pp.

THOMAS GARDNER, *Discovering Ourselves in Whitman: The Contemporary American Long Poem*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989. x + 208 pp.

JEFFREY WALKER, *Bardic Ethos and the American Epic Poem: Whitman, Pound, Crane, Williams, Olson*. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1989. xvi + 261 pp.

Whitman addressed many audiences in addition to his contemporaries. One