

## REVIEWS

MARION ALCARO. *Walt Whitman's Mrs. G: A Biography of Anne Gilchrist*. Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1991. 281 pp.

Marion Alcaro begins her book imagining what it was like on September 10, 1876, the day Anne Gilchrist walked off a steamship onto American soil, the day which, Alcaro says, also marked Gilchrist's entrance into "the annals of American literature—as one of its most misunderstood, misrepresented, and consistently underrated figures" (14). Alcaro's statement about Gilchrist aptly applies not only to Gilchrist, but to other women who figured in Whitman's life as well—such as Abby Hills Price, Whitman's friend from 1856 until her death in 1878, or Mary Chilton, who lived a life radically counter to the dominant culture and critiqued her culture in newspaper articles. Price and Chilton were very much "new" women, or, to use Whitman's phraseology when speaking of activist women, each was a "woman under the new dispensation," "a true woman of the new aggressive type." Alcaro makes a convincing case for including Gilchrist in this category as well.

There were also women who figured in Whitman's life whose public roles *have* become part of women's history, though still marginally—such as Ernestine L. Rose and Paulina Wright Davis—but until recently Whitman scholars have not made the connection between these women and the roles they played in Whitman's life and work. I do not believe it is an exaggeration to say that Rose and Davis lived, wrote, and played a part in the cultural life of their times every bit as vital as Whitman's male friends—for example, William D. O'Connor and John Burroughs—but Davis and Rose, like Gilchrist, have been "consistently underrated figures" in the "annals of American literature," if they get mentioned at all.

The lack of critical and historical inclusiveness is and has been our problem as scholars; it certainly was not Whitman's problem in *Leaves of Grass*. Close to 150 years have passed since the first *Leaves* appeared, with its frequent use of both gendered pronouns, but only recently have we begun to address the politics of gendered language and its effect on interpolating the reader into the text; scholars have lagged far behind Whitman in sensitivity to gendered language and to the role it plays as the text and reader interact. Whitman's awareness of the politics of gendered language is readily visible in every edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Not quite so visible, however, are his views of women and history. In the recently published seventh volume of his and Horace Traubel's conversations, for example, Whitman said this about women and history:

[I]t would seem about time something was done in the direction of the recognition of the women: for some of us to dwell upon the lives of noble big women. History teems with accounts of big men—genius, talent—of the he-critters, but the women go unmentioned. Yet how much they deserve! (WWC, 7:440)

He had said much the same thing thirty-five or so years earlier when he wrote a passage in a notebook on the arbitrariness of history:

Because women do not appear in history or philosophy with anything like the same prominence as men—that is no reason for treating them less than men:—The great names that we know are but the accidental scraps.—Mention to me the twenty most majestic characters that have existed upon the earth, and have their names recorded.—It is very well.—But for that twenty, there are millions upon millions just as great, whose names are unrecorded.—It was in them to do actions as grand—to say as beautiful thoughts—to set examples for their race.—But in each one the book was not opened.—It lay in its place ready. (*DBN*, 3:773-774)

Alcaro's study opens the book of Gilchrist's life. The thoroughness of her research will make it difficult to dismiss Gilchrist as she has been dismissed in the past. Because of Alcaro's research, we learn about aspects of Gilchrist's life that were previously unknown—the nature of her friendship with Jane and Thomas Carlyle, for example, as well as with Tennyson, and her relationship with Alexander Gilchrist. Alcaro also brings to life the Gilchrist children in a way which helpfully contextualizes their own contribution to Whitman biography. However, the most compelling contribution her book makes in bringing to life Anne Gilchrist the person is its documentation of Gilchrist's writings and her attitude toward writing itself. Gilchrist did more than just complete her husband's biography of William Blake and write articles in praise and defense of Whitman.

Gilchrist's writings fall into five categories—scientific articles, critical reviews of Whitman, women-centered writings, biographical works, and her letters. Of these interests, the category most significant in contextualizing Gilchrist's and Whitman's relationship to their culture is their shared interest in science; Alcaro's book reveals that in the 1850s Gilchrist wrote and published numerous articles on natural science. Thus we now have a context for Whitman's frequent comments on Gilchrist's scientific expertise, and also for the poem Whitman wrote in her honor, two years after her death, in which he addressed her as "My science friend, my noblest woman-friend" (*LG*, 525). Documenting the range of her writing furthers Alcaro's goal—that of representing Gilchrist as an individual with an identity distinct from Whitman and Alexander Gilchrist.

Also of primary importance in understanding Gilchrist's and Whitman's receptiveness to each other is the passion which Anne Gilchrist felt about her writing. Though Whitman believed that Gilchrist's forte lay in her artful conversation, Alcaro's thorough research brings to light the extreme importance that writing held for Gilchrist. Gilchrist's own commitment to the writing process provided her the framework into which she could place Whitman and thus understand Whitman's singleminded commitment. Alcaro gives her readers an invaluable insight into Gilchrist when she quotes a letter to a family friend in which Gilchrist speaks of her lassitude following her husband's death and her completion of his *Life of Blake*. Gilchrist speaks of her needs and insights:

It seems odd and unreasonable perhaps to you that in the teeth of all my difficulties and limitations within and without, of time and opportunity and ability, I should still

persevere in trying to write, but I feel that I must do it, for this reason: that else I should slowly gravitate downwards into entire absorption in busy, bustling, contriving working-day material life. . . . For after all, when youth and growing time are left behind and *ripening* time comes—if there be anything to ripen—reading is not enough. Prose reading becomes either oppressive or useless unless the mind rouses itself to take a more active part than that of being a bucket pumped into. (102)

Insights like this—Gilchrist's awareness of the multi-faceted roles of the reader and writer and of the role writing played in her life—validate the purpose of Alcaro's book: to give "a view of Anne Gilchrist as neither the widow of one distinguished man nor the friend and would-be lover of another." Rather, Alcaro's purpose is to give a "view of Anne herself—the woman" (22).

Given this purpose, however, Gilchrist's choice of title—*Walt Whitman's Mrs. G*—is problematical. It signifies one of the weaknesses in the book—its lack of theoretical sophistication. To make Gilchrist a "possession" of Whitman is not what Alcaro sets out to do, so it is unfortunate that Alcaro does not demonstrate an awareness of the role language plays in constructing a person's subject position in her or his culture. Equally problematical is Alcaro's seeming unawareness of her own essentializing, her characterization of intellect as a "natural" condition based on biological sex, and, even more vexed, her repeated valorization of the so-called male-mind over the female, as when she tells us repeatedly that Gilchrist found intellectual stimulation in the "boldly creative masculine mind":

In later years, Anne would meet, entertain, and correspond with a number of brilliant and talented women—Jane Carlyle, Christina Rossetti, Emma Lazarus, Jeanette Gilder, to name a few. But it was always a keen, cultivated, boldly creative masculine mind to which her own mind responded most eagerly and which most inspired her. (55)

There is no theoretical awareness in Alcaro's choice of language here and no historically based reflection on the four women she names. Rather, the passage reads as if the view she attributes to Gilchrist is her view as well. The naturalizing of male and female characteristics in this passage works against her carefully researched text, as she simplistically uses language which fuses biology with intellect and disposition. Speaking of Gilchrist's walks with Tennyson, Alcaro writes:

As always, Anne found communication with a keen, creative, masculine mind exhilarating; and it must have been refreshing to the husband of a porcelainlike, perennial invalid to have a vivacious young woman, whose conversation was both sparkling and knowledgeable, walking briskly beside him (112).

Speaking of Gilchrist's reaction to Whitman's poetry, Alcaro writes:

Most exhilarating of all was a new communion with a strong, creative, masculine mind, always the most powerful intellectual stimulus for Anne. (119)

Nowhere do I get the sense that Alcaro sees any problem with the implications created by these passages. Alcaro's lack of sensitivity to gender issues is also

apparent when she uses last names in referring to males and first names in referring to females. For example, in speaking of Paul Ferlazzo's article on Gilchrist, Alcaro writes: "Ferlazzo points out that before 1870—in addition to the reviews by Fanny, Juliette, and Adah—there had been a number of appreciative American criticisms of *Leaves of Grass*" (130).

Also, the book would have benefited from more historical awareness. For example, Alcaro conjectures that Gilchrist "may have been the first woman in the nineteenth-century Anglo-American world to declare . . . that sexuality is a beautiful and natural aspect of being a woman" (24). Not only were there women in the United States who earlier than Gilchrist publicly spoke of the pleasures of sex—the "Adah" [Menken] referred to in the previous paragraph certainly was one—but also there were women before Gilchrist who spoke in Whitman's defense and who used Whitman's representation of sex as a validating argument for his poetry. Likewise, Alcaro's discussion of Fanny Fern does not benefit from the recent critical work done on Fanny Fern and her writing. Alcaro comes close at times to doing to women in general what she says that critics have done to Gilchrist: leave them out of history or, in the case of Fanny Fern, make judgments seemingly without looking carefully at the work which feminist scholars have recently made available. Finally, more connections made between Gilchrist's life and the cultures in which she and Whitman lived would have benefited the reader.

Alcaro's book does, however, put to rest critics' over-simplification of Gilchrist's feelings for Whitman and of their friendship. She provides us with a view of Gilchrist which will correct reductive readings of her such as the one by Edwin Haviland Miller when he suggests that Whitman's frequent visits to the Staffords' farm were made "to escape the importunities of his passionate admirer" (*Corr*, 3:62n). Alcaro's book insists that we give Gilchrist what Whitman so astutely gave her—respect for her as her own person.

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MARK BAUERLEIN. *Whitman and the American Idiom*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991. xi + 171 pp.

Has ever a poet had more enemies, real or assigned, than those ascribed to Walt Whitman by himself or by others? Slave owners, politicians, literati, Europeans, conservatives, straights, capitalists—the list goes on and on. As though that list weren't already long enough, now along comes Mark Bauerlein with a new candidate for the list: language itself.

The real drama of *Leaves of Grass*, according to Bauerlein, is all internal. Where dozens of earlier critics have assumed, often after Whitman's own remarks, that the thrust of his poetry is directed toward and against the outside world and have framed their questions and sought their answers accordingly, Bauerlein comes at his answers from a basis in semiotics that leads him to take more literally than anyone before him Whitman's claim that *Leaves of Grass*