

REVIEWS

SUSAN BELASCO, ED FOLSOM, AND KENNETH M. PRICE, eds., *Leaves of Grass: The Sesquicentennial Essays*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007. xx + 481 pp.

THIS 500-PAGE VOLUME OF CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH celebrates the 150th anniversary of the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* and documents the critical work of the distinguished presenters who gathered for “*Leaves of Grass: The 150th Anniversary Conference*” at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 2005. Such a collection might have ended up as a “proceedings” volume, something that invites a scholar to dip into it here and there for a selected essay, particular piece of information, or treatment of a certain issue. Such a book might have turned into a memorial, a laudatory commemoration of Whitman’s revolutionary first book of poetry or a backward glance at the distinguished critical work on *Leaves of Grass* from the past century and a half. *Leaves of Grass: The Sesquicentennial Essays* is not, however, an ordinary “proceedings” or tribute. It is a set of outstanding essays full of fresh questions, new challenges, recent discoveries, and surprising findings.

The volume includes noteworthy reminiscences by distinguished Whitman scholars—Joel Myerson, Jerome Loving, and David S. Reynolds—who contribute first-person accounts of their experiences researching and writing about the poet over the course of their careers. The distinguished contemporary poet, Galway Kinnell, also offers a story of his “Encounters with Whitman,” providing an engaging take on the great American poet but lacking the scholarly accuracy of the other contributions (Kinnell suggests, for example, that “Whitman may be the only nineteenth-century poet who wrote powerfully about slavery—or perhaps the only one who wrote about slavery at all”). These fascinating and readable essays do amount to a look back, but they also bring to light some interesting details about Whitman studies (who studied or worked with whom, for example), methodologies, and the personal interests and compulsions that urge the scholar to study Whitman. The Myerson, Reynolds, and Loving essays, collected in a section called “The Life Behind the Book,” are less concerned with new developments in the scholarship on Whitman’s life and work and more with what has motivated some of the most important work in the field over the past two decades.

In general, however, reading the twenty pieces collected here reminds us of how much we still don’t know about Whitman and how much uncertainty still exists around details once considered factual or established. This might sound strange, given the exponential growth in critical work on Whitman from 1855 to 2005, which is vividly documented in Donald D. Kummings’s “The First *Leaves of Grass: A Bibliography*,” the final chapter of the collection. Yet, as the essays in this volume reveal, the ever-growing body of research within the field

of Whitman studies has provided as many answers as questions. Ed Folsom's essay, "What We're Still Learning about the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* 150 Years Later," the theme-setting opening to the book, illustrates most overtly how increasingly aware we are of all that we don't know about Whitman and the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Established facts have become questions again. Who did the famous engraving that serves as the frontispiece for the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*? Who, if not the "Rome Brothers" (a firm that in fact did not exist in the 1850s), published Whitman's book? Is there or isn't there a period at the end of the last line of the 1855 version of "Song of Myself"?

The uncertainty surrounding what we know and don't know about Whitman can be enormously productive, as this volume clearly demonstrates. In "One goodshaped and wellhung man?: Accentuated Sexuality and the Uncertain Authorship of the Frontispiece to the 1855 Edition of *Leaves of Grass*," Ted Genoways tells us, "we know surprisingly little about how [the frontispiece] was created." Yet it is his awareness of this ignorance that spurs him to track down the information needed to reconstruct the complex story of the image's creation and its eyebrow-raising revision.

Even for Whitman scholars—or should I say, especially for Whitman scholars—the collection contains surprises. One might have thought that after 150 years of critical discussion, the political thought that shaped *Leaves of Grass* would be well known. It turns out that there are significant gaps in the study of how the political discourses of the era shaped Whitman's poetry. In "United States and States United: Whitman's National Vision in 1855," M. Wynn Thomas makes a rather stunning contribution to our understanding of Whitman by examining the powerful, shaping influence John C. Calhoun had on the poet's political ideas. Yes, *that* Calhoun, the famous Southern separatist, pro-slavery, states' rights Senator—someone who was for Whitman both a "disunionist" and "a bold honest *morally* heroic man."

Not all of the essays move toward such unanticipated conclusions and instead develop and explore further what we might already have suspected about Whitman and his work. For instance, Betsy Erkkila's comparison of Whitman and Marx is not completely unexpected. Several connections between these two bearded egalitarians have no doubt occurred to many readers. Yet her "Whitman, Marx, and the American 1848" essay may be the first systematic, article-length examination of "the uncanny overlappings" of these very different revolutionary writers. Christopher Beach, among others, has previously pointed to Whitman's ambivalent feelings toward the city, but William Pannacker's essay in this collection, "*Leaves of Grass* (1855) and the Cities of Whitman's Memory," reveals just how disenchanting Whitman had actually become with New York City by the time he had begun to publish his successive editions of *Leaves of Grass*. Pannacker also shows how the city in *Leaves of Grass* is an "imagined community"—an aesthetic, static, and nostalgic creation of what the city might have been and not a realistic picture of the large, chaotic, and ever-changing metropolis it had become.

Some of the essays do not provide new information about Whitman but rather new ways of narrating his career and influence. For example, in "The Visionary and the Visual in Whitman's Poetics," M. Jimmie Killingsworth

works to move beyond the traditional stories of Whitman's ground-breaking debut followed by a long, gradual decline into increasingly disappointing poetic efforts (the "failure story"). He substitutes for this view a "new critical narrative" that emphasizes Whitman's shift from the great visionary poems (like the 1855 "Song of Myself") to short, proto-modernist visual poems—poems that should be admired in part because of their sensitive attention to changes in American culture and developments in literary style. Similarly, Jay Grossman alters our understanding of Whitman's influence on modernist poetry by rejecting the view made popular by Harold Bloom that highlights the oedipal struggle of later great poets against earlier ones. In its place, Grossman offers not a story about anxiety of influence but a nuanced account of Eliot's complex and shifting engagement with Whitman. His essay for this volume, titled "'Profession of the calamus': Whitman, Eliot, Matthiessen," takes careful note of Eliot's disgust and his attraction, his suppression of Whitman's influence and his overt allusion to him, the distance and the intensity in their literary historical relationship.

Instead of creating new overviews of Whitman's influence, other pieces in this volume provide surprising new insights about his poems and his historical context. In a focused close reading, Alan Trachtenberg, for instance, offers a substantial and fascinating account of the role of night in the poem that would eventually become known as "The Sleepers," revealing the ways Whitman treats night as a radical and identity-shattering equalizer. Vivian R. Pollak in "'Bringing help for the sick': Whitman and Prophetic Biography" points out that Whitman's interest in the injured and ill was not exactly gender neutral, as the Civil War gave the poet the opportunity to show "sympathetic attention to *male* victims." Susan Belasco's examination of *Leaves of Grass* within the context of the "flourishing market for books of poetry" in the pre-Civil War United States shows us not only how Whitman was an iconoclast but also, and less predictably, how he was a poet who was quite sensitive to the poetry marketplace of his era and the importance of books and anthologies within that market.

Many of the revelations in this volume come in part from newer theoretical methods or approaches that resonate with our own century's concerns and crises. In "Complaints from the Spotted Hawk: Flights and Feathers in Whitman's 1855 *Leaves of Grass*," Thomas C. Gannon examines Whitman's poetry from an ecocritical or zoöcritical perspective to offer a rather unflattering but credible look at the poet's treatment of nature, ecosystems, and the non-human. For other essays, it is not the current ecological crisis but globalization that prompts the re-examinations. In "Walt Whitman as an Eminent Victorian," Lawrence Buell shifts our attention away from Whitman as the quintessential "American" poet and toward "the image of Whitman as a transatlantic poet." With a different transnational perspective, Walter Grünzweig provides a brilliant cultural study of how Whitman was read, received, and used in communist Eastern Europe. His essay "Whitman and the Cold War: The Centenary Celebration of *Leaves of Grass* in Eastern Europe" draws on an investigation of how the World Peace Council celebrated Whitman in 1955 to show how Eastern European praise of Whitman emerged "not so much from

a desire to criticize 1950s American society by contrasting it to Whitman's idealized vision as from a desire to use Whitman indirectly to address Eastern European society, which lacked free expression."

Other essays generate their new insights and unexpected conclusions from approaches rooted in fundamental methods of literary research, the careful examination of literary books and manuscripts. In "'To reach the workmen direct': Horace Traubel and the Work of the 1855 Edition of *Leaves of Grass*," Matt Cohen compares Whitman's and Traubel's books and "book morphologies" to show how "the argument over bibliographical form between Whitman and Traubel [was] a political one." With wonderful insight and intellectual clarity, Cohen uses his attention to books and book-making to map out the very different views that the poet and his disciple had toward labor, class, art, individuality, and democracy. Kenneth M. Price's essay, "The Lost Negress of 'Song of Myself' and the Jolly Young Wenches of Civil War Washington," examines an obscure Whitman manuscript to elucidate the poet's narrow thinking about African American young women. Although further confirmation of Whitman's less-than-progressive portrayal of African Americans is perhaps a predictable discovery, the analysis of Whitman's representation of young black women is new. Perhaps more importantly, the essay reveals how the resources of the ever-growing online *Walt Whitman Archive* might "enable a new flowering of Whitman manuscript studies, which should advance understanding of the poet's participation in discourses of sexuality and race."

Like so many of the chapters in *Leaves of Grass: The Sesquicentennial Essays*, Price's essay demonstrates how it is perhaps the combination of new innovations (theoretical and technological) with standard methods of literary study that will produce the jaw-dropping discoveries, the unexpected conclusions, and the new insights in Whitman studies of the future. This volume does reveal, disconcertingly, how much we still have to learn about what has to be one of the most important books of American poetry ever published. Yet this outstanding collection of critical essays also conveys just how exciting those discoveries can be and how thrilling it is for Whitman scholars to realize that there is so much more to do.

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