

REVIEWS

BETSY ERKKILA. *Whitman the Political Poet*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989. 360 pp.

Betsy Erkkila's study is what an old acquaintance of mine, whose first language was Welsh, used innocently to call "a substantiable book." It is indeed substantial in ways succinctly suggested by that unintentional neologism: it is very readable, it is immensely valuable, and as the author increasingly displays an exhilarating command of her considerable subject it turns out to be quite remarkable. What is established, beyond any such reasonable doubt as used to be expressed by Whitman enthusiasts, is that from first to last, from temperance tracts to *Two Rivulets*, from hack journalism to unparalleled poetry, Whitman's thinking and writing was consistently saturated with politics, while his politics was in turn informed by his artistic imagination. What is therefore finally (one hopes) disposed of is the view that Whitman's life should be divided into two stages; stage one belonging to Whitman the political journalist and activist, stage two featuring Whitman the poet and creative artist.

What this book is not, however, is "original" in quite the clean-cut, thoroughgoing way the polemic in the opening chapter would seem at times to suggest. At this particular point the reader is best advised to attend not to the rhetoric of the text, but to the subtext concealed in the scrupulously ample footnotes. They indicate that one of the principal strengths of the book lies in the way Professor Erkkila collects, integrates and herself thoroughly assimilates the best of recent work on Whitman. A related strength stems from her ability to take this accumulated capital of understanding and to invest it in highly profitable speculations of her own. And then there are also those extensive sections of the book where she undoubtedly succeeds in revolutionizing our thinking about important areas of Whitman's life and work.

Of course the book is authoritative precisely because these separate features are not so much combined as thoroughly fused. Nevertheless, for the purposes of rapid analysis it seems to me useful to divide the study into four roughly equal parts; the first and third being characterized mainly by the work of resourceful synthesis, while the second and fourth are characterized by much greater originality of critical thought.

In the first quarter of the book, the work of two and more generations of scholars is linked when the comprehensive information supplied by Arvin, Allen, Rubin and others about the first thirty-five years of Whitman's life is reviewed in the light of more recent accounts of the Whitman family's place in the changing social, economic and political world of that period. Professor Erkkila concurs with the current opinion that in presenting himself as the champion of the laboring classes against the dominance of new capital and the growth of conglomerates, Whitman was also struggling to come to terms with the gap between the rhetoric of the Jeffersonian republicanism on which he had

been reared and the reality of Jacksonian democracy. His poetry, when it came, was the continuation of this struggle by other means—means that, in any case, provided him with a much more effective way of dealing with an ideological crisis. Moreover, Whitman had already been trained, by the radical political tradition to which he belonged, to regard both language and literary form as what Professor Erkkilä usefully calls “the site of social struggle.” He had even made use of temperance literature to “preserve the republican vigour of individual and nation,” and had seen the role of newspapers as being to “disseminate seeds of republican virtue.” Urgency was lent to his general anxiety over the un-Jeffersonian character of the new America by his fear that the qualities of the old republic would die out with the last of the heroes of the original revolution.

Over the past few years critics have increasingly stressed that to understand Whitman’s obsession with unity of all kind, and with the Union in particular, one needs always to bear in mind that he was living in the most fissiparous period in American history. Professor Erkkilä lists the main areas of social division and political conflict: “industrialization, wage labor, women’s rights, finance, immigration, slavery, territorial expansion, technological progress, and the question of the relation of individual and state, state and nation.” Whitman’s passionate involvement in many of these issues is expertly considered, with particular attention being properly given to the crisis over the Union that culminated in the Civil War. The third quarter of this book, which deals with the war itself and the poetry of *Drum-Taps* and “When Lilacs,” is perhaps the least original part of the study, although it remains an important and integral part of the complete work. By contrast, the chapters examining the complicated interface between politics and poetry during the pre-War decade contain glittering insights which seem to proliferate like sparkles from a wheel, while the section dealing with the post-War years is the crowning achievement of the whole book.

“If art reflects life,” wrote Bertolt Brecht, “it does so with special mirrors.” The quality of Professor Erkkilä’s treatment of Whitman as “political poet” is guaranteed by her sophisticated understanding of the way in which ostensibly physical images, formal structures, and personal modes of writing become the secret bearers of political meanings in Whitman’s poetry. So, for instance, she returns repeatedly to the changing use Whitman made of body-language throughout his long writing life to deliver state of the union messages. In “Song of Myself,” unity in diversity is what the body comes, by various ingenious means, to represent. At the beginning of the Civil War Whitman privately vows to keep himself physically sweet and pure. During the frenetically unscrupulous post-War period, his partial paralysis becomes an eloquent image of the moral state of America. So his arm-wrestling with the young sapling, in *Specimen Days*, takes on a new and poignant significance, since his attempt at physical rehabilitation is an enactment of his hopes for the spiritual regeneration of his country.

Professor Erkkilä’s exceptional sensitivity to the way political circumstances could affect the climate of Whitman’s most intimate feelings, allows her to make several persuasive suggestions. After showing how the sequence of unhappy political events between 1856 and 1860 tended to undermine his confi-

dence in himself as a poet, she adds that he may have sought refuge in the exceptionally intense homosexual relationship from which the first *Calamus* poems presumably came. Such consolation was, she believed, denied him after the war, when the whole temper of American society changed. And if Whitman's personal life meshed so closely with politics, then so did some of the poetry that critics have tended to regard as exclusively personal. "A Word Out of the Sea" and "As I Ebb'd With The Ocean of Life" can usefully be thought of as political tone-poems that captured the mood of a period of crisis as it darkened toward war. Professor Erkkilä's sensitive interpretations of these poems provide a good example of how well new frames of critical reference can sometimes complement the old.

When the great, scheming, French politician Talleyrand died, a contemporary remarked that a study of his diaries "would reveal the secret history of an epoch." The same could be said of a full study of *Leaves of Grass*, and Professor Erkkilä is adept at deciphering the code in which the poetry writes the politics of the middle and late nineteenth-century. She is particularly good at analyzing and accounting for the way in which the order of poems was restlessly, repeatedly, changed in successive editions of the *Leaves*. Through close examination of the 1860 edition, for example, she is able to show how the major groupings and minor clusters were designed to correspond closely to the pattern of Whitman's anguished political preoccupations at that time. The extensive revisions in the 1867 *Leaves* were "the poet's attempt to bind the nation's wounds." Radical groupings were added to the 1870 edition, "to keep alive the spirit of revolutionary struggle" in difficult times. But the final arrangement of the poems in 1881 "signifies his abandonment of the plan to write a new volume of poems centered on the theme of democratic nationality and spiritual union."

Such was for years the prejudice among critics against bringing politics into Whitman's poetry that no one really took the trouble to plot the course of his writings in precise detail against the turbulently changing background of public life during the period. Now that this has been done the result turns out to be fascinating, particularly when one concentrates on the post-war years. Professor Erkkilä notes how Whitman "weakened his own assault on the grip of capital" in 1881 by dropping the *Songs of Insurrection* cluster. This happened "at the very time that the Knights of Labor and the Farmer's Alliance were beginning to gain adherents." By then Whitman was losing heart for the increasingly hard political struggle. He had become "a prophet without a land" in boom-time America, and "Passage to India" is all too typical of the poetry of the late period when it seeks "to save a national vision by leaping out of history towards spiritual grace."

Recognizing that after the war Whitman's best work was done not in poetry but in prose, Professor Erkkilä pays close attention to *Democratic Vistas* and *Specimen Days*. Her study of the latter is in fact one of the most striking parts of the whole book. She shows how Whitman tried to construct a fictional image of his own life, offering it as an exemplum of personal and national progress fit to take its place alongside the corresponding ideal he had so triumphantly invented in "Song of Myself." Instead of treating *Specimen Days* as a haphazard collection of notes, Professor Erkkilä views it as a careful and politic composi-

tion. The narrative, she shrewdly notes, is designed to move us "directly from the tragedy of war to the restoration of an eternalized nature that bears no sign of political struggle and the wounds of history." In the early section dealing with the family farm on Long Island, Whitman establishes a pattern of highly selective recall that serves as the template of the entire book: "with its language of absences and erasure, holes and breaks, Whitman's evocation of the past suggests the experience of social disruption and dispossession that underlay the progressive rhetoric of the age."

Whitman's most creative way of criticizing the social ethos of the Gilded Age was to imagine the Union of States in feminine terms. As power became increasingly concentrated and centralized during this period, so the brutal exercise of it in the fields of economics and politics was sanctioned as an example of manly aggression. In reaction, Whitman depicted America as a mother holding her large family of children together not by force or compulsion but by love, sympathy and understanding. His own instinctive sympathy with women as an under-class had always been genuine, and Professor Erkkilä shows how throughout his career he deliberately used his poetry to shatter the contemporary stereotype of the shrinking, sickly, sensitive and never sexual woman. At the same time he did tend to fashion a different but almost equally unsatisfactory feminine stereotype of his own—an image of woman as the passive receiver of the male seed and as the healthily fecund mother of men.

Professor Erkkilä's readiness to admit this is typical of her refusal to ignore the weaknesses in Whitman's political make-up. Another obvious example is his decidedly mixed attitude towards blacks. He disliked slavery in the abstract much more than he cared for the actual plight of the slaves. And of course once read, it is impossible ever to forget the notorious passage in which he advocates the policy of transporting America's blacks wholesale to some suitably distant and supposedly congenial land. His attitude to non-American whites could also be pretty condescending. There are times when he seems to see the whole world of the future as America writ gloriously large. This is the Whitman who is the Kipling of American cultural imperialism. As Professor Erkkilä tartly yet sympathetically observes: "Whitman never fully acknowledged the extent of his own ideological complicity in the celebration of American democracy." To her credit, she never allows her own admiration for Whitman to blind her to the many implications of that potent insight.

It is not enough, insisted the early Whitman, to think of American democracy as a political system, "for that would describe a portion only. It would need the application of the word extended to all departments of civilization and humanity and involve especially the moral, esthetic, and philosophic departments." What he alerts us to are the two very different senses in which the word "politics" is nowadays commonly used. In its narrower sense it refers only to the mechanics of government: but in its wider application it covers all the practices and discourses of power that animate and control the diversified life of a society. Because Professor Erkkilä conceives of politics in this larger sense, her treatment of Whitman as a political poet is not in the least reductive or simplistic. On the contrary it results in holistic criticism—a discussion of the

man and of his work in a fashion that is profoundly satisfying because it is so generously comprehensive in scope as to be able to render the completeness of a life.

Professor Erkkila both begins and ends her study with a reminder that the work of literary critics, as well as of poets, is subject to the influence of politics. And in identifying herself as a child of the Vietnam era, she prompts the further thought that maybe reactionary Reaganomics has made necessary and thus made possible the recovery in and for present-day America of the radical element in Whitman's politics and poetics. For certain, Whitman isn't Bushed yet, as Professor Erkkila has shown in what is an exemplary account for our time of Whitman the political poet.

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DAVID S. REYNOLDS. *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*. New York: Knopf, 1988. 625 pp.

JEFFREY STEELE. *The Representation of the Self in the American Renaissance*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987. 218 pp.

These new books by David Reynolds and Jeffrey Steele have in common the aim of extending the critical project that began with F. O. Matthiessen, the quest to understand the flowering of American literary art at the midpoint of the nineteenth century. Reynolds' book is the one most likely to affect the scholarly community by providing a lasting set of research problems, even though his argument will already be familiar to students of Whitman's and Emerson's comments on the age: the soil of American high culture had been prepared and deeply tilled by a lively and diverse popular culture heretofore insufficiently acknowledged in the scholarly literature. Reynolds' massive research effort and the expansiveness with which he develops his thesis are likely to overshadow the products of other recent scholars whose claims are more modestly offered. In the spirit of democracy invoked by Reynolds himself, then, let us begin with the other book.

Jeffrey Steele's *The Representation of the Self in the American Renaissance* employs what will no doubt be a common strategy for academic writers over the next few years, reading canonical writers in light of recent theoretical developments. Beginning with Matthiessen's insight into "the link between Emerson's figure of the orator and his myth of the unconscious," Steele argues that "we must amplify Matthiessen's discussion with a body of theoretical knowledge developed since his time—contemporary theories of reader response and reception aesthetics"—in order to grasp "the relationship between Emerson's psychological mythmaking and his presentation of a transfigured 'voice' that his audience is motivated to internalize" (2-3). Steele's brand of psychological criticism transforms the discussion of the work of art as a product of the artist's struggles in ego-formation—the kind of biographical or genetic discussion that has dominated Whitman studies in the past—by decentering it, replacing the