

REVIEW

M. JIMMIE KILLINGSWORTH. *Whitman's Poetry of the Body: Sexuality, Politics, and the Text*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1989.

In this handsomely bound new book, M. Jimmie Killingsworth has written a thoughtful and impressive study of Whitman's poetry of the body. Informed by the work of contemporary critical theorists, particularly Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, Killingsworth's study also carries on the work of Harold Aspiz (*Walt Whitman and the Body Beautiful*, 1980) in seeking to locate Whitman's poetry of the body in relation to the medical, scientific, and sexual discourses of his time. But while Killingsworth is innovative in his use of contemporary theory and his detailed consideration of the homosexual text of Whitman's poems, his study is also contained within the terms of a fairly traditional reading of Whitman's life and work. Whitman, he argues, moved from the sexual, textual, and political radicalism of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, toward the greater conventionality of *Drum-Taps*, and finally toward a retreat from the radicalism of his early work in the post-Civil War period. In other words, under the influence of William O'Connor's religious defense of Whitman in *The Good Gray Poet* (1866), the good "gay" revolutionary poet transformed himself into a "good gray" bourgeois poet.

In his opening chapter, "Original Energy 1855," Killingsworth offers detailed readings of "I Sing the Body Electric," "The Sleepers," and "Song of Myself," arguing that in these early poems sexuality and the physical body are represented as a moral force, a source of human bonding and sympathy, and a force finally for political transformation that overcomes the traditional bounds of race, class, gender, and creed. "Among major nineteenth-century literary figures in America, no one confronted the political nature of sexuality as directly as did Whitman," says Killingsworth. "The merge of sexuality and politics in *Leaves of Grass* resulted from the poet's recognition of erotic energy as a powerful force in shaping individuals and societies" (46).

This first chapter establishes the image of Whitman as sexual and textual radical against which Killingsworth will read, measure, and evaluate Whitman's poetic development in the subsequent chapters of his book. Although Whitman extended his sexual politics and poetics in the 1856 *Leaves*, already in this edition Killingsworth detects a retreat from the more radical posture of 1855. Linking the confessional impulse that emerges in 1856 in "Sun-Down Poem" ("Crossing Brooklyn Ferry") with the "the trend of publicizing private life that, as Michel Foucault has noted, came to be typical of nineteenth-century discourse," Killingsworth argues that Foucault's analysis is important in revealing "how Whitman's poetry followed the main discourse paths of his day" (49).

Drawing on the work of both Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, Killingsworth finds that in the 1856 *Leaves* Whitman's "discourse of liberation begins more and more often to show its inevitable duplicity. The liberator of sexuality

must submit to the definitions posited by those who would control and limit sexual behavior.” And thus, Whitman begins to submit “to the ever-tightening taxonomy of sexualities that the midcentury bourgeoisie imposed on the ‘nature’ it created in its own ideological self-definitions” (52-53). But while the analyses of bourgeois ideology in Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* and Barthes’s *Mythologies* provide relevant and potentially illuminating contexts for reading Whitman’s work, it is unclear why these contemporary theoretic works would be more relevant to a study of Whitman’s poetry of the body in 1856 than in 1855. Given a Foucaultian frame of analysis, how is it that the sexual radical of 1855 could exist outside the “main discourse paths of his day”? And why is it that in 1856 he suddenly emerges as an avatar of bourgeois mythmaking and “phallic mastery”? In this chapter, Killingsworth’s desire to present Whitman as an author of sexually radical texts seems to come into conflict with his desire to discuss him in relation to the work of contemporary theorists like Foucault, who challenge traditional notions of authorial creation and control and emphasize the essentially controlling power of structures of knowledge and discourse.

Killingsworth’s most persuasive and innovative work on Whitman comes in Chapter 3, “The Tenderest Lover 1860,” as he turns to a discussion of the multiple and often conflicting voices and postures of the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. In a subtly argued subsection entitled “‘Calamus’: Sentimentality and Homosexuality,” Killingsworth seeks to locate the love poems to men in “Calamus” as part of a developing yet still undefined homosexual consciousness in mid-nineteenth-century America. “In the ‘Calamus’ poems,” he says, “Whitman developed a language and the rudiments of a psychology by which homosexuals could be brought to self-awareness and by which same-sex friendship could form the basis for political action” (97). Noting that same-sex relationships were tolerated and even encouraged by leading middle-class moralists, Killingsworth argues that “‘Calamus’ may be understood as Whitman’s attempt to incorporate the middle-class ideal of camaraderie into a more radical vision of a democratic society based on homoerotic love. Along with the ideal he adopted the hyperbolic rhetoric common in expressions of conventional love and friendship, with its avowals of exclusiveness and all-consuming passion” (99).

Although Whitman continued to cultivate radical sexual politics, seeking in the “Calamus” poems an “erotic solution to metaphysical pain and social division,” Killingsworth finds that in the 1860 *Leaves* “more and more, he prayerfully turns away from the political body and the body politic” (130). Here again, however, Killingsworth’s attempt to trace a clear line of development away from the sexual radicalism of the 1855 *Leaves* appears to be contradicted not only by the radical and emphatic “presence” of a loving, desiring and eroticized homosexual body in the 1860 *Leaves*, but by an increasingly emphatic and vocal concern with the direction and design of the political union. How do we account for Whitman’s inclusion of his most overtly political sequence of poems, “Chants Democratic,” in the 1860 *Leaves* if he was really moving prayerfully away from the “body politic”?

The concluding chapters of *Whitman’s Poetry of the Body: Sexuality, Politics, and the Text* further underscore Killingsworth’s reading of Whitman’s life and work as a dramatic retreat away from the sexual, textual, and political radical-

ism of the early poems. In Chapter 4, "Silence 1865-1876," he argues that the Civil War in effect ended Whitman's career as the poet of the body. Although he acknowledges the themes of homoeroticism in *Drum-Taps*, he finds a new distance in Whitman's poems, manifested "in the 1860s as a retreat from the experimental language and politics of the early *Leaves*, which linger in *Drum-Taps* but have begun to fade" (140). Reading the war poems as a retreat from erotic physicality and homosexuality, Killingsworth finds in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" a similar farewell to eroticism and a corresponding substitution of the abstract for the physical: "His elegy to the departed president is also an elegy to personal love, to the satisfactions of physical life, and to a poetry based on the 'perturbations' of the body" (143).

This emphasis on the Civil War as a retreat from the (homo)sexual body appears to block a more provocative and less "straight" reading of "Lilacs" and indeed the *Drum-Taps* poems themselves as a further inscription of the homosexual desire that is in some sense enabled rather than disabled by the wartime context. In fact, given Killingsworth's foregrounding of the sexual and homosexual text of Whitman's poems, this reading of the Civil War poems appears to be prepared for by his own very shrewd analysis of sentimentality and homosexuality in "Calamus." If "Lilacs" is an elegy for the departed president, it is also more provocatively an elegy on the loss of an eroticized lover and comrade figured not only as president, but as soldier and everyman.

In his concluding chapter, "From Poetry to Prose 1871-1891," Killingsworth argues that in his prose works and conversations, as in later editions of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman sought to revise and tone down the image of himself as sexual radical. There is in Whitman's later work an increased emphasis on themes of religion, death, and spirituality, an emphasis that Killingsworth reads as part of Whitman's more general turn away from the radical sexual politics of his early work. But while Killingsworth is certainly correct in finding a difference between the "early" and "late" Whitman, some of the distinctions he makes are not completely clear. "The 'literatus' of *Democratic Vistas* is a definer and shaper of culture rather than a bearer and nourisher of culture" (160), he says. "Once the voice of the people, Whitman's poet now claims to be the voice of what the people are incapable of realizing" (162). "Once the poet of the people," he continues, "Whitman now addresses a severely narrowed audience drawn from the educated classes" (164). But, it might be asked, was Whitman ever strictly speaking the "voice of the people"? Wasn't he always in some sense the "voice of what the people are incapable of realizing"?

It is indeed one of the paradoxes of Whitman's career as the poet of democracy that the audience for his work has always been primarily among the "educated classes." But this was not necessarily the class to which Whitman sought to appeal in either his early or his later poems. In fact, in arguing that in his later years "Whitman the apologist tries his best to re-center his poems according to the values of the upper classes of his society" (165), Killingsworth appears to contradict his own very shrewd reading of Whitman's relationship with his English admirers, and John Addington Symonds in particular, as a sign of his "distrust of high cultivation." "Whitman did not want to be involved in the early homosexual rights movement as it was developing among the educated classes in Europe," Killingsworth convincingly observes of Whit-

man's famous response to Symonds's inquiry about "those semi-sexual emotions and actions which no doubt occur between men" (167-168). "Whitman developed this calculated response [about his six grandchildren and so forth] in order not to be portrayed as a perpetrator of homosexual libertinism among the English upper classes" (169).

If it is indeed true, as Killingsworth argues in his final chapter, that in his later years Whitman "adopted a depoliticized aestheticism in which art is seen not as a motivator of political and moral action but as an artifact embodying the soul of the genius," how does one reconcile Whitman's actual practice of a "depoliticized aestheticism" with his emphatically anti-aesthetic warning to future readers and critics in *A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads* (1888): "No one will get at my verses who insists upon viewing them as a literary performance, or attempt at such performance, or as aiming mainly toward art or aestheticism" (LG 574).

Although Killingsworth's argument in *Whitman's Poetry of the Body: Sexuality, Politics, and the Text* seems at times strained and potentially contradictory when he seeks most forcefully to present Whitman's life and work as a clearly defined arc of development away from what he calls the "erotic physicality and radical politics" of his early years, his study represents an important and revisionary contribution to our reading and understanding of Whitman's work. This contribution is particularly evident in Killingsworth's attempt to bring contemporary critical theory to bear on a reading of Whitman's poetry of the body; his attempt to locate Whitman fully and complexly in relation to the sexual discourses of his time; and finally, in his attempt to present Whitman's homosexuality not as a background but as foreground in his study of the sexual and textual politics of Whitman's work.

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