

Whitman formulates in *Democratic Vistas*: "Books are to be call'd for, and supplied, on the assumption that the process of reading is not a half-sleep, but, in highest sense, an exercise, a gymnast's struggle; that the reader is to do something for himself, must be on the alert, must himself or herself construct indeed the poem, argument, history, metaphysical essay—the text furnishing the hints, the clue, the start or frame-work. Not the book needs so much to be the complete thing, but the reader of the book does." The mosaic of "Song of Myself" furnishes the framework, but the reader must construct the poem. And even in doing so, the reader should be intent on completing himself or herself, rather than completing the poem, through the "gymnast's struggle" of interpretation. Professor Miller's *Mosaic of Interpretations* can, in this sense, be no more complete than Whitman's poem. But in furnishing a host of insightful hints, by other critics and by himself, Miller constructs a version of the poem that is more than merely complete.

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DAVID LEVERENZ. *Manhood and the American Renaissance*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989. xii + 372 pp.

In Peter Weir's recent film, *Dead Poets' Society*, the inspiring but unconventional teacher played by Robin Williams takes as his model the figure of Walt Whitman, whose portrait hangs over his classroom. For those in the know, this can hardly be an innocent set of signifiers: the teacher is obviously gay, and he is bringing to his adolescent male charges the message of sexuality in the poems of Whitman. But at the same time that the film signifies this sexual plot, another set of signifiers denies it: the poem of Whitman's most often referred to is "O Captain! My Captain!" and the teacher has a picture of an attractive woman on his desk (even though she is absent from the film and the plot). The second set of signifiers, coming after the first, says this film doesn't mean what you think it means. It certifies the film's safeness for its large American audience.

Of course it could be that the heterosexual plot is the *only* plot in the film, and the homosexual plot is only in my imagination. It *could be*, except that in that case the film makes no sense. If the Whitman who is invoked is the Whitman of "O Captain!" he is the very heart of conventional pedagogy and patriotism and hardly likely to inspire anyone to anything. And if Robin Williams is invoking that Whitman, why does the family of his favorite student react with such violence to his influence over their son? Is it really because they hate the theatre so much? Of course, the hatred of the family, the torments they inflict on their son, his eventual suicide, and his roommate's emotional collapse all make sense as a study of the effect of homophobia on the perceived incursion of homosexuality into a homosocial world. By silencing the homophobia theme, or leaving it available only for the sophisticated, the filmmakers have provided a film that seems curiously empty.

A similar hollow center seems to exist in the pages of David Leverenz's study. Leverenz's project is, despite his denials, very much a cultural part of the current project of the historical re-examination of masculinity, prompted both by social construction theory and by feminism. Leverenz wants to keep his distance because he does not agree with the feminist view of "manhood as patriarchy," and because his method is fundamentally psychoanalytical, with all the problems that poses for an historicized account of gender. Many feminists have expressed their hesitations about embracing this sudden enthusiasm on the part of men for feminism, and have even seen it as a kind of appropriation. (See, for instance, Elaine Showalter's notorious essay, "Critical Cross-Dressing; Male Feminism and the Woman of the Year," which first appeared in *Raritan* in 1983, and was reprinted in Alice Jardine and Paul Smith, eds., *Men in Feminism* [New York and London: Methuen, 1987], 116-132, as well as many of the other essays in this volume.) At its best, however, the new project of "male feminism" can be the beginning of an analogous exploration of the historical and theoretical bases of masculinity, one that is both indebted to feminism for many of its methods and assumptions and also capable of contributing to an eventual joint re-examination of gender and culture. Leverenz's work is, he claims, indebted to feminism and to his own re-examination of himself and his gender roles within the family. The missing center in Leverenz's book, as in Weir's film, is Whitman and the serious consideration of homosexuality his inclusion would entail. It is not, of course, that the study of masculinity must be gay in origin or in outlook; but no one can possibly talk about "manhood" in the American Renaissance without Whitman or his young men.

Leverenz is at least frank, unlike Weir, about this exclusion, and its sources in his own psyche. Whitman's homoeroticism, he writes, "make[s] me, as a heterosexual male, recoil" (30); his response is physical—"I tighten and fend him off." Leverenz can accept Whitman's address to the self only "so long as his 'I' evokes a vaguely arrogant spirit rather than a specifically desiring body" (31). But Whitman's body is present and desiring, just as much as the Robin Williams character is creating a fraternity of male desire in his *Dead Poets' Society*. Leverenz's Whitman, and Whitman's homosexuality, can only be welcomed as long as they are "wondrously mystical" and not "perilously close to fellatio." The problem is not merely what we might call Leverenz's "panic" reaction; Leverenz makes explicit the dynamics by which anxious heterosexual male readers have operated to desexualize Whitman despite Whitman's assertion in "Song of Myself" that the body ("the other I am") "must not abase itself" to the soul. A Whitman without physical love is a Whitman for the schools, one trimmed to meet the needs of anxious parents, and one all the more dangerous for the resulting repression of desire.

Concepts of manhood were indeed central to the writers of the American Renaissance, and the dramatizations of their dilemmas "of beset manhood" have done enormous harm to women as readers and as writers, as many feminist critics have argued. (See Nina Baym, "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Woman Authors", *American Quarterly* 33 [1981], 123-139, and Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978].)

Leverenz's approach, with his own concern for the transformations wrought in him by "involvement in child care" (6), runs the danger of rendering melodramatic the concerns of mid-nineteenth-century men. But some of those men, such as Whitman, did not see their manhood as "beset," but rather released by the possibilities of social change and a socialist/feminist challenge to patriarchal order. For nineteenth-century social reformers the sexual and social order were one, and equality for women could only occur, as Whitman wrote, "when sex is properly treated, talked, avowed, accepted" (*Notes and Fragments*, ed. Richard Maurice Bucke [London, Ontario, 1899], 33 n.96). It is hard to take Leverenz too seriously as a feminist when he can write that "Whitman makes me feel feminized or nonexistent" without any apparent discomfort at the implicit equation of those two terms. May it not be that a new status for women indeed requires a feminizing of men?

Leverenz's study includes some challenging and provocative readings, but it lacks an adequate social context. Despite a considerable body of work on changes in the conceptualization of masculinity in the Jacksonian period, Leverenz draws on very little of it, preferring readings of the text situated only in the most general terms in period, place, and class. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's work is employed only very superficially, despite its great importance for understanding the creation of a Jacksonian ideal of manliness and for situating male relationships in new urban environments. The absence of an adequate social context enables him to discuss Whitman's "terror" at masturbation in Section 28 of "Song of Myself" as if it were simply a matter of Whitman's "self" and not the result, in part at least, of a sustained anti-masturbation campaign. Here a much fuller and more complex sense of Whitman's masculinity and its relationship to his culture is given in M. Jimmie Killingsworth's excellent recent study, *Whitman's Poetry of the Body* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989, especially 51-54; see also Irene Karjala, "The Subversive Seed: The Aesthetics of Auto-Eroticism in Walt Whitman," M.A. thesis, Concordia University, 1987, 1-20).

Although Whitman's sexually engaging portrait from the 1855 edition is the only illustration on the dust jacket of this volume, he is finally peripheral to it—rating about a dozen pages out of a total of over 350. It appears, unfortunately, that Whitman is excluded from consideration largely because he gives expression to homosexual desire. In a way, perhaps that is the fault of those of us who argued for years that Whitman's homosexuality must be taken seriously. As the sexuality is recognized, Whitman's poetry may be moved to the margins, away from the central place it could occupy as long as it was sublimated, or spiritualized, or at least unspoken. Similarly, the increased attention paid to "men's studies" and to the construction of masculinity has meant, for many critics at least, a shift of the field away from those, frequently gay, who first undertook it, to a "safer" terrain where it will pose no threat to heterosexual certainty. Leverenz has no difficulty with self-hating homosexuality: for his reading of *Moby Dick* Ishmael's "homoerotic chumship . . . veils a masochistic passivity" (283) and desire to be raped, while Ahab too shows a "masochistic craving" that culminates in "the ultimate in manly humiliations, a desire to be homosexually raped" (291, 297). When these passages are placed next to his analysis of homosexual rape in Hawthorne's work, one begins to see a pattern

that can only understand homosexuality as a threat to manhood, not an expression of it. While Leverenz was helping out with the kids, he ought to have thought a little bit about subjectivity and desire, ought to have read some accounts of the ways in which women who are raped are accused of secretly "wanting it," and ought to have wondered if the extension of the erotics of the body to otherwise forbidden territories, such as the anus, could be imagined in terms other than rape. The language of the body is a social language, and one of Whitman's efforts was to invent a new and enlarged vocabulary.

Whitman is a central figure in the redefinition of masculinity in mid-nineteenth-century America, and not only because of his position as a self-conscious homosexual. His attempt to make use of feminist theory led him at times to assertions of equality, at other times, to a sense of inherent roles. He sensed that the exclusion of women from public life and the repression of female sexuality meant the impossibility of establishing egalitarian heterosexual relationships. Most importantly, since Whitman is after all a poet and not a political theorist, he believed that sexual energies must be dispersed, both physically and linguistically, in order to overcome the order of the Phallus. By creating a new poetics of process and diffusion, based upon a repeated orgasmics and an eroticisation of the entire body, he led the way towards a male poetry of *jouissance*.

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WordCruncher Bookshelf Series: Walt Whitman. Poetry and Prose. Provo, UT: Electronic Text Corporation, 1988. Computer software. \$94.00 (*WordCruncher* program needed to run the text, \$299.00).

All merges toward the presentation of the unspoken meanings of the earth,
Toward him who sings the songs of the body and of the truths of the earth,
Toward him who makes dictionaries of words that print cannot touch.
("A Song of the Rolling Earth")

Edwin Harold Eby's *Concordance of Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose Writings* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1955) is a weighty book that is now difficult to find. Despite its usefulness, it will probably never be republished. But now there is an alternative to searching used-book stores for rare copies of Eby's book. The Utah-based Electronic Text Corporation, publishers of the *WordCruncher* software program, have come out with an electronic edition of Whitman's works: it is a text, a concordance, and much more. With the publication of this software, Whitman research enters a new stage.

Some scholars might be tempted to see the *WordCruncher Whitman* as a more or less entertaining toy; others will despair and will see it as the ultimate perversion of literary research, the final triumph of technologized formalism over humanistic ideals. There is something to these worries. With the author's entire *oeuvre* literally at one's fingertips, the ultimate stage of accessibility has