

REVIEWS

KENNETH M. PRICE, ed. *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 356 pp.

Most college teachers are resigned to getting students out of high school whose knowledge of Whitman consists of two items: he was gay and his poetry was detested by his contemporaries. The first point will always be argued, but Kenneth Price has produced a book that will help place the second "fact" in context. This is only appropriate, for Price is following in the steps of Whitman, who recognized the importance of contemporary reviews when he published (and even reviewed himself in) *Leaves of Grass Imprints* in 1860.

Earlier modern collections of essays about Whitman either gave little attention to the contemporary reviews or chose to select mainly those of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*. For example, Edwin Haviland Miller's *A Century of Whitman Criticism* (Indiana University Press, 1969) reprints one review each of the 1855 and 1871 *Leaves* and *November Boughs*, plus two of *Drum-Taps*; Francis Murphy's *Walt Whitman* (Penguin, 1969) has four reviews of the 1855 *Leaves* and one of the 1856 edition, plus two of *Drum-Taps*; Milton Hindus's *Walt Whitman: The Critical Heritage* (Barnes and Noble, 1971) generously reprints fourteen reviews of the 1855, four of the 1860, one of the 1871, and two of the 1881 *Leaves*, plus one each of *Drum-Taps* and the 1868 *Poems* (edited by Rossetti); and James Woodress's *Critical Essays on Walt Whitman* (G. K. Hall, 1983) reprints seven of the 1855, one of the 1856, three of the 1860, and one of the 1881 *Leaves*, plus two of *Drum-Taps*. There is naturally much overlap among the selections, particularly for *Drum-Taps*, where one assumes the reviews are chosen because they were written by William Dean Howells and Henry James. In short, these collections effectively put forth reviews of the 1855 *Leaves* as representative of the general critical reception to Whitman's nearly forty-year career. And, unlike Price's volume, these other collections often reprint reviews in severely truncated forms.

Price's collection gives us, for the first time and in complete texts, a sense of how Whitman was reviewed, starting with him as one of the roughs and ending with reactions to the good, gray poet. The Whitman books represented in this volume and the number of reviews reprinted for each are: 1855 *Leaves* (17), 1856 *Leaves* (3), 1860 *Leaves* (14), *Drum-Taps* (9), 1867 *Leaves* (2), 1868 *Poems* (6), 1871 *Leaves* (1), *Two Rivulets* (3), 1881 *Leaves* (16), *Specimen Days & Collect* (9), 1888 *Complete Poems and Prose* (1), the 1888 London edition of *Democratic Vistas* (1), *November Boughs* (16), and *Good-Bye My Fancy* (6). (Price also includes notices of "A Child's Reminiscence" as it appeared in the September 24, 1859, New York *Saturday Press*.) At the very least, Price has now made it possible for us to study the responses to Whitman's prose works for the first time, as well as how the critical reactions to Whitman's work evolved over his publishing career.

Students of publishing history will also find Price's book useful as a means of graphically demonstrating how an author's choice of publishers can affect his or her reputation. Books self-published by Whitman garnered very few reviews; and *Democratic Vistas*, *Passage to India*, *As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free*, and *Memoranda During the War* seem not to have been reviewed at all. There was only one review (not in Price) of *Franklin Evans*, probably because even though it was sold as a pamphlet, its true first appearance was in a serial. *After All, Not to Create Only*, while published by the fine Boston firm of Roberts Brothers, was not reviewed, despite its being an occasional poem published only a month after the occasion. Because Whitman kept revising *Leaves* and republishing it under the same title, reviewers naturally ignored later editions as reprintings unless commercial firms such as Thayer and Eldridge or James R. Osgood or Rees, Welsh or David McKay took over the book, in which case new reviews came pouring in. Also, the high proportion of newspaper reviews to periodical reviews suggests that Whitman was not noticed as much by the highbrow press as were other, more "serious" (or "appropriate") writers. A very simple lesson to be learned from Whitman's publishing career is that authors who publish their own books in very limited numbers are usually ignored by the press. Conversely, if this is true, then those who did read Whitman must have indeed remembered him and his works (both positively and negatively) in order to warrant the renewed attention given him when he surfaced again through a commercial publisher.

The reviews themselves tell a familiar story that splits along two lines: Whitman is a pornographic writer and he does not know how to write poetry. The reviews that point unfavorably to the sexuality of Whitman's verse are well known and their arguments have been dealt with at length over the years in critical works. What is less studied, though, is how the debate over Whitman's choices of verse forms reflected the interest in American poetic theory during the period, and this dialogue would be impossible to follow easily without the evidence presented in Price's volume. For example, by going beyond the reviews of *Drum-Taps* by James ("It has been a melancholy task to read this book; and it is a still more melancholy one to write about it" [115]) and Howells ("you had at times to hold your nose [as a great sage observed] in reading *Leaves of Grass*" [112]), Price allows us to see how Whitman's reputation would develop over the rest of his career. As the reviewer in the *North American Review* phrases the matter, "It is fortunate that Walt Whitman's *Drum-Taps*, unlike his *Leaves of Grass*, is in point of propriety unexceptionable, so that it can be judged on its intrinsic merits" (131). Clearly, then, Whitman's poetry could not be given serious literary consideration until he had removed what his contemporaries considered to be the impure sections from it. This point was also made by the reviewer of *Poems* (1868) in the *Athenæum*, who praises the editor (Rossetti) for excluding "every poem that could fairly be deemed offensive" (159). As late as 1881, Thomas Wentworth Higginson complains that "Whitman's love, if such it can be called, is the sheer animal longing of sex for sex—the impulse of the savage, who knocks down the first woman he sees, and drags her to his cave" (239). Howells, writing favorably in 1889, points out that Whitman's "offence, if rank, is quantitatively small, a few lines at most; and it is one which the judicious pencil of the editor will some day remove for him" (323). And the

reviewer in the 1882 *Literary World* comments, "His prose is better than his poetry. It is clean. It is sane. It is intelligible. It is often readable" (279).

Once readers failed to be distracted by the content of Whitman's verse they were able to concentrate on its form, which was often unusual by nineteenth-century standards. (Not many reviewers took the stance of the one in *Chambers's Journal of Popular Literature, Science, and Art*, who called Whitman "The first characteristic poetical writer that the United States have produced," claiming, for instance, that "Longfellow is but Tennyson and water" [168].) Only after Howells notes that "there is not an indecent thing in *Drum-Taps*," can he discuss the literary merit of the poetry, which he feels is "better subjected to the laws of prosody" (112, 114); and in 1889, he has modified his views somewhat, writing that Whitman "produced a new kind in literature, which we may or may not allow to be poetry, but which we cannot deny is something eloquent, suggestive, moving, with a lawless, formless beauty of its own" (322). Few would have agreed with Oscar Wilde that "in his very rejection of art Walt Whitman is an artist" (319). The reviews that discuss Whitman's poetry on its own merits help us to trace the development of poetic theory in nineteenth-century America.

Another virtue of Price's presentation of selections from all periods of Whitman's career is that we can see how little the general press moved towards accepting him, even at the end. Many writers that challenged the establishment, like Emerson or Thoreau, garnered fine reviews at the end of their careers or posthumously. Whitman did not and, even though the general personal distaste shown towards him did die down, the general fault lines in his reception—over his content and form—remained through the end; and all these points can be seen in this review of *Good-Bye My Fancy* in the *Independent*: "Of Walt Whitman we could say nothing unkind—we could speak with sincere and sympathetic respect. His latest book does not challenge criticism; it is evidently the work of a mind sorely diseased, worn out indeed. . . . There is nothing of any value whatever in this book" (353).

Price has done a fine job of building on and adding to Scott Giantvalley's work in this book. (Surprisingly, though, he has left out listings or reprintings of some reviews, such as those in the November 23, 1842, *New-York Daily Tribune* of Franklin Evans and the November 11, 1870, *New York Times* of the 1871 *Leaves*, and Walter Lewin's review of *Specimen Days* in the June 4, 1887, *Academy*.) Cambridge is to be congratulated for the readable font and double-column format chosen for this and other volumes in the "American Critical Archives" series, of which this is the ninth volume. Price has put together the one book to buy in order to discover what the contemporary press thought of Whitman and his work, and we are in his debt for this accomplishment.

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