

In Whitman's indirection, in the fuzziness of his language, Corona reads the poet's ability to hide what could not be said openly because the public was not yet ready. Whitman's lines alternate between the expression of feelings and emotions belonging privately to the poet and a more generalized expression, where the absence of a linguistic and experimental subject makes it possible for every reader to contribute his/her own experiences. In this way, Whitman interweaves the concrete person and the universal human. Playing sense against meaning, he keeps the latter at its most abstract and general level while making space for sense to build up as much out of what he implies and leaves unsaid as from the cumulative effect of words and images. Accordingly, what his readers can infer is due as much to their own emotions and desires as to the poet's. In what is undefined and general, they can project themselves, thus contributing new and different senses to meanings, overimposing their own images on those projected by the author. As a reader, the translator plays his own part. In Corona's case, one feels as if the translator has entered the skin of the author and his persona and has made his present our own; reading is almost like listening to two voices speaking at the same time (and not only because of the coupling of the original and the translation on the printed pages). Differing from other translators, Corona emphasizes the poet's presence in the text as well as an oral, contemporary mode of expression, and he uses these as a vehicle for his present personal, critical, and cultural awareness. His translation renders Whitman's lines in a colloquial, personal, even caressing, Italian where sudden literary turns echo the sounds and words of modernist poetry rather than nineteenth-century poetry.

Corona's translation, together with the interpretation he offers in his preface and textual notes, is a very important contribution to a fresh encounter with Whitman's text as well as a guide for Italian readers to a poet far more daring and experimental than the one who appeared in all the following editions of *Leaves*. It is a new Whitman, quite different from the political, democratic, proletarian bard introduced in Italy at the beginning of the century. Corona offers us a man, taking his chances with the contemporary Italian public. The poet of "our" 1855 edition speaks our language and is, like us, on the edge of the third millenium.

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GREGORY EISELEIN. *Literature and Humanitarian Reform in the Civil War Era*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996. 215 pp.

According to D. H. Lawrence, Whitman's essential message was that of "the long life-travel into the unknown, the soul in her subtle sympathies accomplishing herself by the way . . . the leaving of his fate to her and to the loom of the open road." But "he didn't quite carry it out. He couldn't quite break the old maddening bond of the love-compulsion; he couldn't get out of the rut of the charity habit—for Love and Charity have degenerated now into habit; a bad habit."

Gregory Eiselein's book is a very full, and very interesting, examination of "the charity habit" in the United States at a critical point in the nineteenth

century, when the antebellum philanthropic culture of a New England zealous for reform was gradually replaced by the postbellum (and proper bellum) charity "business" that emerged through the incorporation of America. Not that these are Eiselein's terms. He prefers to speak of "humanitarian discourses and practices in this era [which] were internally fragmented, fluid, changeable, and sometimes open to progressive, radical, and eccentric innovations." In short, he speaks the distinctive idiolect of modern sociological analysis, drawing upon discourse-theory reinforced by Foucault-esque understanding of strategies of empowerment and disempowerment, and using eccentric terms part of whose purpose is to estrange us from our cozily socialized selves. (I follow Eiselein here in using *eccentric* in its root sense of "out of the [socially] ordinary [the 'center'].") When applied to historic societies, such terms need to be used with caution, otherwise the knowing analyst ends up patronizing those in the past whose patronizing attitude towards their period's "unfortunates" [s]he deplores! But Eiselein proves to be more than historian enough to avoid that sociological fallacy, just as he proves to be a good enough reader of literature to avoid feeding texts through a methodological shredder.

As he admits, Eiselein does not use his analytical terms in a strictly neutral fashion. By the key term "eccentric," for instance, he "means philanthropy that deviates from established forms of benevolence by offering assistance in a way that dismantles the disparity in power separating humanitarian agents from humanitarian patients." His heart as well as his head has produced this estimable definition, which throughout the book he puts to work in a way that is historically scrupulous as well as morally aware, and self-aware. He knows he is dealing with modes and dynamics of interpersonal relationship that are inherently tricky to deal with. When D. H. Lawrence mocked Whitman's way of "assum[ing] Allness, including Eskimeness, unto himself," he anticipated Eiselein's objections to a philanthropy that presumes to speak for those for whom it "cares." "Eskimos are not minor little Walts," said Lawrence with comic bluntness. But he went on to put it rather differently: "Outside the egg of my Allness chuckles the greasy little Eskimo." The dismayingly racist turn here in Lawrence's comment is a reminder of the unpleasant forms that a critique of do-goodery can almost imperceptibly assume.

And of course in a culture as virulently anti-statist and as hysterically committed to self-help as that of the United States can periodically be, the issue of how one self can best help another readily takes on the culturally distinctive form of wondering how one self can best help another help itself! So in addition to the issues of universal moral import which Eiselein both explicitly and implicitly ponders, his book also consists of valuable culture-specific reflections on what might be called the moral infrastructure of the United States, reflections that inevitably entail a close consideration of the distinctive structure of power relations constitutive of that particular society. So whereas discussions of European philanthropy are likely to be class-based, those of American humanitarianism—and Eiselein's is no exception—must center sooner rather than later on issues of color and ethnicity.

Philanthropy is a function of the inequality of conditions and/or circumstances between the provider and the receiver of the care which may try not

only to bridge that difference but also variously and equivocally to erase it. In mainstream American society, inequalities between whites had not until recently been so visible, extensive and longterm in character, or so evidently group-specific in effect, as to raise fundamental moral and political questions about "the charity habit." As Eiselein movingly points out, AIDS changed all that, and his book is in part the product of the change in attitudes that resulted. (In passing, let me confess that as one who comes from Wales, and is therefore proud to call Aneurin Bevan, architect of the National Health Service, a fellow-countryman, I find it dismaying to think it may have taken the AIDS catastrophe to make mighty America seriously consider introducing a "nondiscriminatory, single-payer, national health system.")

As a historical enquiry into the charity habits of a very different period, Eiselein's book could, however, well have been skewed off course by its contemporary point of departure, since insofar as those AIDS sufferers who so devastatingly cross-examined the caring profession were not infrequently members of the white American "ruling" class, they were hardly the modern equivalent of the multiply disadvantaged blacks and Native Americans of the nineteenth century. But Eiselein very well understands these significant asymmetries, while properly acknowledging his indebtedness, as a cultural historian concerned with "the problems and possibilities in nineteenth-century benevolence," to insights born of the current "humanitarian crisis" precipitated by AIDS. A broadly parallel crisis was occasioned, he argues, by the Civil War, and his study concentrates primarily on unorthodox examples of humanitarian textual practice during this transitional period when the rhetoric of antebellum romantic reform no longer sounded convincing and the postbellum bureaucracies of institutionalized humanitarianism were at a rudimentary stage of development.

Eiselein shows how Harriet Wilson's autobiographical novel, *Our Nig* (1859), can be read as a dissident commentary on mainstream antislavery literature, and how, in her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Harriet Jacobs produced a "'subversive repetition' of conventional humanitarianism," partly by incorporating African-American modes of language and the deviant discursive style of black abolitionism into her autobiography. Such a study of Jacobs is prefaced by an examination of the ways in which white antislavery philanthropist and African-American abolitionists respectively responded to the challenge of conventional humanitarian philosophy that John Brown presented by his violent raid on Harpers Ferry. As for the war that Brown's actions helped precipitate, Eiselein points out that it produced suffering of a kind and of a magnitude that not only beggared description but also necessitated a radically new approach to humanitarian care. The result was the establishing of such organizational bodies as the Sanitary Commission and the Christian Commission, both of which adopted a top-down policy entailing what Eiselein calls "coercive" approaches which attracted constructive criticism in Louisa M. Alcott's *Hospital Sketches* and in Whitman's wartime writings.

Eiselein finds much to commend in Whitman's non-coercive approach to the alleviation of suffering, and proceeds to show how a similarly deviant attitude to loss and mourning is inscribed in *When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd and Other Pieces* (*Sequel to Drum-Taps*). The postwar reconstruction of

American society featured a tightly organized, progressivist humanitarianism, whose “enlightened” approach to Native American cultures Eiselein shows to have had disastrous consequences. There is something almost tragic in his demonstration of how Lydia Maria Child, driven by openly genocidal extremists to embrace a policy of penning Native Americans within protective reservations, was also forced by the logic of her own liberal and evolutionary model of human development (which entailed seeing the Native Americans as civilizable rather than civilized) to advocate assimilationist measures that effectively destroyed the very peoples she sought to protect. An altogether more promising, though sadly politically inert, approach to the Native American case was outlined by Thoreau in *The Maine Woods*, which Eiselein analyzes with sympathetic rigor.

Whitman emerges from this discussion with as much qualified credit as Eiselein justly feels can be given to most of the historical figures he considers. Although for the cultural historian the poet naturally only constitutes an important case study, this book does significantly advance our understanding of Whitman. With respect to the poetry, Eiselein usefully demonstrates that the *Sequel* added to *Drum-Taps* in the wake of Lincoln’s assassination deserves to be treated as a collection in whose hitherto unappreciated coherence is subtly inscribed Whitman’s “eccentric” reading of the transition from peace to war. In particular, Eiselein finds in the structure of “When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom’d” a powerful instance—subsequently amplified and reinforced by the cyclical structure of the collection as a whole—of a conception of mourning significantly at odds with the elaborate culture of consolation of that time. And I find Eiselein’s conclusions on this subject both persuasive and profoundly moving:

Whitman’s purpose in *Lilacs and Other Pieces* is not to cajole the bereaved out of their grief. It is not even to persuade them into an absolute acceptance of the law of regeneration, an idea that in *Lilacs and Other Pieces* serves only to facilitate the mourning process. Instead, his goal is to bring the bereaved to a place of new beginnings, to give to the bereaved the *process* and the *language* that will enable them to construct for themselves a meaning that makes sense of death and that lends value to their daily living. In the cyclical structure of *Lilacs and Other Pieces* we find the *process* and in this cluster’s suggestive poetry the *language*.

What is particularly significant about this insight is its unconscious and therefore unaffected demonstration of how a reading of Whitman’s poetry can both benefit, and benefit from, one’s deepest contemporary life-experiences—in this case, Eiselein’s experience of acting as an AIDS worker. And at a time when the study of poetry threatens to become academic, in the merely pejorative sense of that much-battered word, one has particular cause to be grateful for such “unconventional” kinds of understanding as are on offer in Eiselein’s book.

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