

my *Leaves of Llano Grass*, the cuentos / of the llano, tierra sagrada! I thank the wise / teacher who said, 'Dark Child, read this book! / You are grass and to grass you shall return.'" Such statements are eloquent testimony to Whitman's ability to evoke reactions beyond the boundaries of ethnicity and race.

Contextualizing and explicating the more than one hundred poems and prose works in the new edition of *Measure* is a lengthy essay entitled "Talking Back to Walt Whitman: An Introduction." Written by Ed Folsom, this overview is two-thirds again as long as the one that opened the first edition. Indeed, the new introduction is so substantial that it nearly constitutes a short history of modern American poetry. Folsom seems aware that he is providing for his readers something comparable to a poetic history, for he says at one point that "one way to understand twentieth-century American poetry is as an ongoing and evolving discussion, debate, or argument with Walt Whitman." Some of the recent directions this "argument" has taken are indicated by certain titles of the subsections of Folsom's introduction: "Talking Back Across Race," "A Spanish-Speaking Whitman," "Chants Native American," and "Women's Responses."

Scattered throughout the book are a dozen and a half photographs of Whitman, some of which are seldom reproduced and therefore may be unfamiliar to readers. Concluding the anthology is a 35-page bibliography listing poems, essays, and books that in some essential way react to Whitman's life and work. Compiled by Ed Folsom and containing nearly 700 items, the bibliography is the most comprehensive of its kind.

The revised edition of *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song* is a truly outstanding compilation, made so by its well-chosen selections, illuminating introduction, extensive bibliography, and fascinating visuals. Of the many and various collections of brief critical assessments of the poet, *Measure* is arguably the best. It can be read and understood—and actually enjoyed!—by individuals both inside and outside of the field of Whitman studies.

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KEITH V. COMER. *Strange Meetings: Walt Whitman, Wilfred Owen, and Poetry of War*. Lund, Sweden: Lund University Press, and Bromley, Kent, U.K.: Chartwell-Bratt, 1996.

Keith Comer casts a wide critical net in this illuminating book, and thereby manages to catch some unlikely combinations of thought: he relies on close reading of primary documents and demonstrates a concern for formal aesthetics, but he also manages to cite a host of poststructuralist critics, such as Cixous, Foucault, and Derrida. Consequently, he skillfully positions his argument in the cleft between formalism and other theories, thus potentially appealing to theoretically diverse audiences. The book also offers several layers of accessibility and thus will appeal to undergraduate, graduate, and professional readers (particularly in linguistics). There is a continual invocation of prominent Whitman and Owen scholars, as well as acknowledgment of a respectable list of historical/cultural studies in representational politics as applied to the discourse of war and poetics. Indeed, Comer offers us a respite from the territorial

disputes among these often contentious approaches in current literary studies.

Comer divides his analysis into four rubrics—Body, Voice, Language, and Silence—which guide his wide-ranging comments on Whitman's and Owen's responses to mass slaughter in the Civil War and World War I respectively. Comer believes that these two poets can be studied together productively because their differing representational strategies in responding to armed conflict clearly show the stark contrast between the nineteenth- and twentieth-century responses to the realities of war. Comer continually emphasizes the weakness of Whitman's ideological/rhetorical strategy to cover up the horrifying cost of war. According to Comer, Whitman's overarching concern for the Union causes him to gloss over the agonies of the war's casualties. In contrast, the strength of Owen's poetic/rhetorical project lies in his forthright depiction of the horrors of mass conflict. Through their explicit images of the grotesquerie of war, writers like Owen seem to have found—at least in Comer's eyes—a way to see through the martial ideology to the savage ironies behind it.

Comer begins his synthetic work with the assertion, "The body is where the poetry of war must begin" (23). The body is the site where we can find a "shared" conversation, when conflict threatens to silence any attempt at verbal communication. He insists that Whitman's body images are used "as justification for his idea of a democratic society," founded on metaphysical ideology (23). On the other hand, Owen "refuses the poetic sublime" and labors "to subvert philosophic and religious views asserting the superiority of transcendence" (23).

In the "Body" section, Comer utilizes his argument in favor of casting Whitman's project as one of diminishment: his early work focuses on the sensual particularity of the body, whereas the Civil War work points to "the process whereby the wills and bodies of individuals are transformed into the military extension of the body politic" (34). Comer's verdict: "All of this makes the almost total absence of individuals' bodies in so many of the *Drum-Taps* poems nearly impossible to reconcile with Whitman's earlier work and awareness of war's human consequences" (35). Much of Comer's critique in this section depicts this aporia in Whitman's project, where the body has been proclaimed sacred and yet largely vanishes from sight in the 1860s, in an attempt to create a patriotic erasure of the awful wounds inflicted on those bodies (48).

Owen, on the other hand, turns away from "transcendent value" in favor of "embodiment and life over any supposed honor in death" (51). Offering a close reading of both poets' prose and poetry, Comer excavates a case for Owen's emphasis on "the physical" which "seeks to prevent or reverse any disappearance or relocation of the body as substantiation for ideologies that support war" (54). In Owen's work, the alarm of conflicted condemnation of war's effects receives the gentler verdict in Comer's representational politics, since the cultural work of Owen's verse does less to mobilize consent for the war than Whitman's had done. In short, Owen's project is arguing that "the body . . . is where our collective fictions began but those fictions have helped us produce these wounded, maimed, and dead bodies" (55).

In the "Voice" section, Comer faults Whitman's tendency to write "in the manner of the mass world, with quick distortions of reality and hyperboles, [and] his accounts threaten to join with those of anonymity and the insignifi-

cance of the individual" (79). Comer argues that the interpretive pivot of "voice" can be examined to locate the rift between voices spoken for "self-awareness" or egotism and voices spoken for "sharing meaning" about a dislocating event such as mass warfare (85). Commenting on disparate Whitman documents, Comer offers an ambivalent reading of the silence of soldiers' voices in the texts: Whitman could be articulating the unforgivable loss of these voices as "the most destructive act of the war" (92); or we can view this silence of the "wounded" as an integral part of the "transcendental 'I'" of Whitman's work (95). Comer goes on to point out that Whitman never gives voice to wounded soldiers, black soldiers, or deserters, since these voices "would call into question what Whitman perceived as the overarching justness and necessity of the Civil War" (98).

In contrast, Owen does give voice to those marginalized in Whitman's war poetry. Owen's motives "include the desire to prove himself in combat and the urge to serve as spokesman for other soldiers" (98). Since in his poetry "voice is often all Owen's speakers have left" (99), Owen's texts give a voice to many of those silenced by Whitman so that the reader may bear witness to the atrocity of war (101-102). The contrapuntal argument of alternating between Whitman and Owen forges its common language in "the extremes of modern war," where "without either having read the other, they write in one another's margins and gaps, marking and defining the moments that have formed our current human condition" (105). Though both poets are reticent to give full vent to the "madness" of mass warfare, Comer invokes Foucault to argue that their mutual witness to dehumanizing effects of combat does push poetry to transgress the boundaries of sanity (126).

In the "Language" section, Comer offers his most detailed theoretical reading through a careful staking out of a specific plot in the fields of linguistic labor. In this densely argued section, which reveals Comer's training in linguistics, he argues that for Whitman "words are not parts of arbitrary signs, but are intrinsically related to their referents" (136) and are founded on an intentional "act of naming" (137). And since Whitman is unable to name the scores of the war dead—thus creating a "crisis of metaphor and language for the poet" (139)—it is Comer's contention that Whitman must devote his linguistic strategies "to prevent a collapse of [his] faith in language." In this way, "the unknown—those who lack names—and the concept of bravery are joined together and demonstrate what is endangered with loss" (143).

On the other hand, Owen's linguistic strategies deal directly with this threat of silence by "creating and exploiting a constant tension through sound" (160). Owen also "attempts to turn poetic practices back on themselves. As the meter . . . mocks the clichés offered, the empty phrases also point to a danger of abusing language" (and therefore representation) through distortion, misrepresentation, and/or euphemism. Owen exposes the inadequacy of traditional prosody, since he "wants the madness of the trenches heard as well as seen" (162).

In the final section, "Silence," Comer admits that the silences inherent in euphemism, when referring to war, are "difficult to avoid" (178). Citing Elaine Scarry (a central critic throughout this study), Comer notes that his own argument has come full circle from the introduction to this conclusion on the temptation to be silent in the face of war's atrocities: "Particularly if one bases a

theory of language on the body, locates the foundation of referentiality in the body, the destructive capacities of modern war can sever any links between the body and language, and make the latter appear quite non-referential. The use of euphemisms contributes significantly to this undermining of language" (178). Comer convincingly concludes that Owen exposes the hypocrisy of euphemism, while Whitman deploys euphemism on occasion, in "what becomes a prevailing linguistic practice, especially with regard to warfare and weapons" (181), namely falsity in the guise of nationalist patriotism.

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RICHARD RORTY. *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*. The William E. Massey Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization. Harvard University Press, 1997.

It is hard not to sympathize with the main contention of these lectures, namely, that Leftist thought in America has adopted a "spirit of detached spectatorship" (11) and devoted itself to theorizing society rather than reforming it. The Old Left of Eugene V. Debs, Upton Sinclair, and Herbert Croly operated on "the conviction that the vast inequalities within American society could be corrected by using the institutions of a constitutional democracy—that a cooperative commonwealth could be created by electing the right politicians and passing the right laws" (54-55). But New, Cultural Leftists like Fredric Jameson eschew that activism and instead ponder indefinite politico-cultural conditions like "late capitalism" and ruminate upon hazy abstractions like "objectivity." Old Leftists sought to effect a just redistribution of wealth and opportunity. New Leftists "specialize in what they call the 'politics of difference' or 'of identity' or 'of recognition'" (76-77). Old Leftists worry about minimum wages, adequate housing, and universal health care. New Leftists worry about how to "teach Americans to recognize otherness" (79).

For Rorty, what separates the activist Old Left from the spectatorial New Left is a historical event—Vietnam. Once the dirty facts of U.S. intervention emerged and complicity seemed ubiquitous, Leftist thought lost faith in the viability of changing American policy by constitutional means. The goal was no longer "achieving our country"—that is, bringing American politics in line with democratic ideals such as those Whitman and Dewey espouse—but exposing the System. Old-style reformist strategies (mobilizing voting blocs, appealing to unions, muckraking) were too easily coopted by the Establishment, absorbed into the hegemony and muffled. Once that skepticism set in, Rorty says, the Political Left was eclipsed by a Cultural Left, a largely academic crowd cynical about America, disengaged from practice, and producing ever-more-abstract, jargon-ridden interpretations of cultural phenomena.

Again, it is not difficult to appreciate Rorty's profile of today's Leftist cultural critic. The self-styled tenured radical delivering a lecture on, say, the Yale graduate student strike before catching a plane for the next stop on the conference tour is an all-too-familiar sight. The second-year grad student itching to get into the composition classroom and impart Foucauldian insights about power and institutions, but who has little interest in diction and syntax, exemplifies a