

REVIEWS

SHERRY CENIZA. *Walt Whitman and 19th-Century Women Reformers*. Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1998.

"Is he one of us?" was reputed to be Margaret Thatcher's favorite question about the male politicians who thronged her court. It is the question we, too, tend to ask of writers of the past, as we try to cajole or bully them into joining the twentieth century; into catering to the needs and expectations of our own time. But it won't work. If the past is indeed a foreign country, as L. P. Hartley famously suggested, then it can be entered only on a passport issued exclusively to genuine historical scholars, filled though that passport must telltalingly be (as postmodernists never tire of pointing out) with the name, countenance, date of birth, country of origin and personal signature of the holder. For, to change to one of Whitman's favorite images, even the best of historical studies can be no more than the *carte de visite* left by the present for a past that is always out whenever scholars stop by.

What makes Sherry Ceniza's study of Whitman's relationship with nineteenth-century women reformers such a signal achievement is that it deals with one of the subjects—Whitman's imaging of women—most likely to test the patience of even the most tolerantly historical of modern imaginations. "If I'd been one of his women, I'd have given him Female, with a flea in his ear," was D. H. Lawrence's irascible response to Whitman's unctuous "the Female I see." But while ready to brave such potential horrors as the late Whitman's cult of Motherhood (on which she has an excellent section, which includes an interesting attempt to assimilate Whitman's postwar privileging of the maternal to his daringly progressive concept of a "parenting" that transcended gender markings), Ceniza persuasively argues for a Whitman very much more intelligently and committedly progressive in his ways of representing female experience than has previously been recognized by even the shrewdest of scholars. And her arguments are strengthened by the evident honesty of her historical scholarship—demonstrated, for instance, in her insistence on distinguishing at several points between what she would *like* Whitman to mean in certain ambiguous passages and what her historical judgement tells her is the more *likely* meaning—a difference related to her important insight into Whitman's "contradictory discourses," the textual sign of a tension "between what he knew and what he was comfortable with [i.e., the broad spectrum of established practices] and what he knew was consistent with his [radically innovative] theory of democracy." There is, I suspect, an important book to be written on this subject, a book that may put all our own time's clamorous claims for Whitman's progressivism into qualifying perspective.

The signs of Ceniza's integrity are all the more important because, as she readily acknowledges, the evidence she amasses is as much circumstantial and contextual as directly textual. Indeed, some of the more adventurous readings

she offers of passages from the poetry (e.g., the twenty-ninth bather in "Song of Myself") ring true only to the extent that the politico-cultural materials she has previously unearthed are felt to be relevant and convincing. But on such occasions another of her virtues is very much in evidence—her willingness to represent her textual readings not as superseding all others but as simply adding another potential dimension of meaning to a poetry whose very strength (and whose very usefulness to Whitman, perhaps) lies in its multivalence.

Ceniza's work is a kind of salvage operation. Just as, a few years ago, Christine Stansell opened a door in these very pages on Pfaff's beer cellar for the first time in over a hundred years and showed us plain the animated faces of Whitman's Bohemian companions, so Ceniza—with a gesture as vividly illuminating as recent unveilings of "Joyce's" Nora, "Lawrence's" Frieda, or "Dickens's" Nelly—introduces us to those many female friends and associates of Whitman who were active in the women's rights movement of the antebellum period. She also reintroduces us to a Mrs. Whitman who was in danger of becoming as routinely abused a figure as Whistler's poor mother. To read a book like this is to find oneself entering the past rather as Whitman stumbles upon a revelation in his Civil War poem "A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest." Such an experience may afford the merest glimpse into a previously closed world, but it is enough not only to alter one's priorities of explanation but to change one's categories of understanding. And Ceniza achieves this primarily by examining neglected original sources, doing so to particularly dramatic effect at the conclusion of her study by printing a series of eloquent extracts from letters addressed to Whitman in his declining years by appreciative female readers of *Leaves of Grass*.

Long puzzled by scholars' hostility to Mrs. Whitman, I was pleased that this study began by rehabilitating her, boldly proceeding so far as to suggest that hers was a formative influence not only on Whitman's compound image of womanhood (in which an acknowledgment of female strength, and potential for independence, is interwoven with a romancing of the maternal) but even on his "aesthetics." Ceniza is the first to pay proper attention to the distinctive timbre of Louisa's writing, and to demonstrate how an uneducated style, so easy to dismiss as the garrulous ramblings of one of the "semi-literate," may be better read as an expressive index of a psychologically acute intelligence, a restlessly curious mind and a ready tongue. Louisa's relish for the colloquial (she even speaks of her son George as wanting to "loaf and live at his ease") anticipates Walt's taste for the tang of the new American English, and his deep respect for his mother's abilities is evidenced, as Ceniza points out, in his touching concern to keep her well supplied with substantial reading matter, whether in the form of books or of journals.

Ceniza sees the postwar Whitman as increasingly cautious in his imaging of women, but central to her study is the argument that in contrast the antebellum editions of *Leaves of Grass* (1855, 1856, 1860) demonstrate Whitman's growing familiarity, through a widening circle of female friends, with the women's rights movement that was an important feature of the politics of the 1850s. Ceniza shows that Whitman was greatly interested in the new terms of thinking about democracy, community, anatomy, health, law, money, love, marriage, family, etc., propounded by the women's movement. He had already come—via directions of his own—to related conclusions about the way in which

profound changes in social practices would have to be attended, and perhaps even anticipated and occasioned, by changes in the very language of people's consciousness. And by concentrating on three women friends of Whitman—Abby Hills Price, Paulina Wright Davis, and Ernestine L. Rose—who worked for the same cause but had markedly different agendas, Ceniza is able to show how, during the 1850s, virtually the whole gamut of their reformist issues came to be inscribed in his poetic texts at levels ranging from content to lexicon to whole rhetorical strategies. As Ceniza points out, in this new climate of opinion Whitman seems even to have revised his concept of poetic creation, imaging it in terms of birthing as well as of impregnation. And as she also very strikingly demonstrates from the contemporary evidence, even women readers in no way associated with the women's rights movement recognized in the 1860 *Leaves of Grass* the very image of their denied, desiring selves.

"I say there can be no salvation for These States without innovators—without free tongues and ears willing to hear the tongues; / And I announce as a glory of These States, that they respectfully listen to propositions, reforms, fresh views and doctrines, from successions of men and women." From the outset, Ceniza emphasizes what a good listener in this respect Whitman himself was. But he could also rather differently insist that his final aim was "To concentrate around me the leaders of all reforms—transcendentalists, spiritualists, free soilers," because "we want no *reforms*, no *institutions*, no *parties*—We want a *living principle* as nature has, under which nothing can go wrong" (original emphases). In that statement may be detected something of the unease that was intermixed with Whitman's admiration for reformers: his sense that their single-mindedness might be bought at the price of a fractious obsession with single issues, and his fear that their loudly adversarial demagoguery might constitute a threat to the precarious civil peace of the antebellum period. His poetry was, therefore, ultimately intended to advance reform by means, and to ends, radically different from those envisaged by his allies, the reformers.

Of course, such differences are, in part, intrinsic to the difference between art and politics. As Paul Klee memorably observed, when considering the mystery of the relationship between a painting and the experiences that occasioned it, it is rather like trying to trace the living causal connection between a tree's spreading branches and its branching roots. The broad similarity of outline is only too evident, and highly suggestive of correspondences that genuinely exist; but that similarity is as deceptive as it is suggestive, since branches are not roots and it would be ludicrous even to attempt to draw a line straight back from any one of the former to any one of the latter. Whitman likewise fully appreciated the "otherness" of poetry, but preferred not to understand it in purely psychological or aesthetic terms. Instead, poetry was for him the magical, holistic medium that transmuted narrowly political ideas and beliefs into "living principles" that could bring about organic, systemic change.

Therefore even as Sherry Ceniza strives to identify the traces, in Whitman's poetry, of the ideas he absorbed from the women reformers who were his friends, she frequently finds it difficult to make plain, straightforward connections. It is very much to her credit that she does not then try to falsify the evidence. Instead, she attends, with genuine sensitivity, to the complex, unexpected ways in which his texts mediate and signify a commitment to the cause of women.

The result is a groundbreaking study, remarkable not least for its capacity to fuse highly original historical research with new textual interpretations of an interesting kind.

University of Wales, Swansea

M. WYNN THOMAS

JIM PERLMAN, ED FOLSOM, AND DAN CAMPION, eds. *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*. Second Revised Edition. Duluth, Minnesota: Holy Cow! Press, 1998.

Greeting the publication of the first edition of *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song* (1981) were more than thirty reviews, all favorable, some of them rhapsodic in their praise. Revised and expanded, the second edition is an even better book and should be just as warmly embraced. Featured in the new *Measure* is a collection of poems, letters, and impressionistic essays by both American poets and poets from abroad. In all, there are 108 responses—non-academic responses—to Whitman's life and writings. They are presented chronologically and range from transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous letter to Whitman (dated July 21, 1855) to a 1996 poem by Rudolfo Anaya, "poet of the barrio." Collectively, the responses reflect what is now a long tradition of arguing with Whitman, a phenomenon described by the editors as "talking back" to the poet. In the end, the responses suggest that Whitman's most perceptive and thoughtful readers, by and large, have not been scholars and professional critics but other poets, other literary artists.

Not much that appeared in the first edition has been excluded from the second. Essays by C. W. Truesdale and Michael Kincaid have been dropped, along with poems by Paul Potts, Jonathan Williams, Anselm Hollo, and Robert Flanagan. In eliminating these contributions, the editors have not diminished the quality of the anthology. The best materials have been retained, and these include poems by Hamlin Garland (who sends Whitman "A Tribute of Grasses"); by Fernando Pessoa ("I burst loose to salute you, bounding, handstanding, yawping!"); by Federico Garcia Lorca, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Denise Levertov, and Philip Dacey; by Allen Ginsberg ("In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went into the neon fruit supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!"); and by Louis Simpson ("Where are you, Walt? / the Open Road goes to the used-car lot."). Such poems embody the strong avowals and impassioned dialogue that made the first, and now make the current, edition so remarkable.

Other outstanding materials that have been retained include essays by D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Pablo Neruda, James Wright, Galway Kinnell, Joseph Bruchac, Alvaro Cardona-Hine, June Jordan, Meridel LeSueur, and Robert Bly. All of these writers record discerning perceptions or make provocative declarations, but only a meager sampling of their thoughts can be provided here. Well worth noting are the views of Bruchac, who states that "Whitman's celebration of the earth and natural things, his precise namings, are very much like Native American song," or of LeSueur, who avers that "I cannot make it clear how much Whitman meant before World War I, in the grip of the white puritan, the Wasp, the Bible belt—the severe and terrible trashing of the