

REVIEWS

GARY SCHMIDGALL, ED. *Intimate With Walt: Selections from Whitman's Conversations with Horace Traubel, 1888-1892*. The Iowa Whitman Series. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001. xxxii + 319 pp., 7 photos, 3 drawings.

What a joy it is to have available, finally, in one volume these pithy selections from Horace Traubel's conversations with Whitman. Gary Schmidgall's judicious and representative sampling from the nine-volume original can serve the general reader and the scholar alike, comprising an affecting portrait of the poet in his last years and organizing his comments on a vast range of topics both personal and public.

Professor Schmidgall divides his anthology into five broad sections: autobiographical commentary; Whitman's reflections on his own work and literary career; comments about his friends, partisans, and social life; his thoughts on human nature and culture; and finally both Whitman's and Traubel's reactions to the poet's health, illness, death, and burial. Each section of the book includes numerous titled sub-sections. For example, section four includes "Views of America"; "Affection, Love, and Sex"; "The Woman Sex"; "Memoirs of Washington and the Secession War"; "Turned to a Generous Key: Abraham Lincoln"; "Race"; "Famous Authors"; "Walt and the Bard"; "Sweet Magnetic Man: Ralph Waldo Emerson"; "Oxygenated Men and Women: Walt's Pantheon"; "Scoundrel Time"; "Ecclesiastic"; "Music, Opera, and Marietta"; and so on. Within the sub-sections each excerpt is given a headline, journalistic in style: "Minority Voice," "Mother Dearest," "Barbarous Bastard . . . Whatever," "Thanks, I Needed That."

We are often reminded in this volume of Whitman the human "critter" and his quotidian life, from his early years to, of course, the latest ones. However, in this respect (through no fault of Schmidgall's), the almost complete silence about those actually living with Whitman at Mickle Street—particularly Mary Davis and Warren Fritzingler—can be deafening. Only at the very end do we find Mary and "Warrie" gaining presence, together with Horace and Thomas Harned in the room, Warrie listening intently to report every skip in breathing, Mary choking back sobs, Warrie "still eagerly observant, but with a mixed sigh and cry in his throat." The story of the complex relations between Whitman's literary friends in his last years and those physically nearest him remains to be told.

In terms of autobiographical reflections, what stands out most, perhaps, is Whitman's adamant insistence on doing things his own way from the moment he set to work on *Leaves of Grass*, along with what I interpret as an underlying hurt that so many found him unrespectable, a "rough," a peddler of obscenity. Over against Whitman's frequent recurrences to such charges come his eloquent descriptions of William Douglas O'Connor: "William would talk alive with a dagger in his heart: it's impossible to minimize him"; "when aroused, when there was occasion for it, he could do the job—he was a human

avalanche: nothing could defy him.”

The poet's affectionate references to Walter Whitman, Sr. (above all, with regard to his kindness and gentleness with animals and children), will correct popular notions about the poet's disdain for his father. In fact, it seems clear that some of Walt's most ingrained attributes—his love of animals, his insistence on doing things his own way—derived from his father: “My old daddy used to say it's some comfort to a man if he must be an ass anyhow to be his own kind of an ass!” Of course, Whitman's closest relationship in the family was with his mother; here we are struck by the extent to which he claims she never understood what he was up to as a poet.

Textual scholars will get a kick out of Whitman's many comments on book-making: “I often think that pica is, after all, my type: it is so ample, so satisfies the eye.” Whitman liked chapters or poems to end “short of a page”; finding a page of poems from *November Boughs* crowded, he decided, “Well, we can throw a line away.” Traubel, the great straight man of American literary history, asks, “Don't you love your lines too much for that?” “No—not enough to let them spoil the page.” As a one-time printer, Whitman was as interested in what a poem looked like on the page, and how a book was physically made, as in how it was written. “*Leaves of Grass* looks better, reads better, *is* better when black-inked—when the ink has not been spared.” His passion for the physical perfection of a book carried over into his regard for the proofreader: “He is an important critter—the most important, I often think, in the making of a book. It is easy enough to have good material—a plenty of everything—but to put all in its rightful place and order!—oh! that is another thing.” It is useful to have such comments collected in one place.

Throughout, one loves the vim of Whitman's phraseology: “Accent and all that is always a foggy latitude to me.” “It would be a hard tussle for anyone to take Browning up in the bulk. . . . I don't believe I could do it. I don't find Browning's technique easy—it beats me sore, bruises me—though I don't make much of that: the fault is mainly my own.” About a hostile attack in a Chicago newspaper: “That is a slap in the face that does a fellow more good than a kiss.” We need a dialectologist to go through the conversations and bring us back a report.

On the most currently controversial aspects of Whitman's career, Schmidgall avoids tendentiousness, and his selections seem not, to me, unrepresentative of what one finds on those topics—his sexuality, his views of women, his politics—in the complete *With Walt Whitman in Camden*. The twenty-five-page introduction to the book itself is balanced and well-done, explaining the background and composition of Traubel's project, the nature of the relationship between the two men, and the most relevant aspects of Traubel's own life and career.

If fault can be found with the book, it is that occasionally a reader might be confused as to whether he is reading Whitman's words, the words of Traubel, or an editorial interpellation by the editor. Occasionally an item does not apparently come from *With Walt Whitman in Camden* at all, or perhaps it comes from one of the letters transcribed in that work; one can't be sure. Thus, under the heading “Idiosyncrasy,” a couple of statements directly from Whitman are followed by, “Just after war's end, in a letter to a ‘loving soldier-boy,’ Whitman wrote of the throngs at the Attorney General's Office, where

he worked, reiterating his taste for the idiosyncratic." This is followed by an excerpt from a letter Whitman wrote a friend after the war, now published in the *Correspondence*. It apparently has nothing to do with the Whitman-Traubel interchange. However, Schmidgall includes an effective list of citations at the back of the book, crucial to the volume's usefulness to scholars.

The anthology includes several helpful illustrations: a portrait of Traubel dating from the time of the conversations, interior and exterior photographs of the house on Mickle Street (then and now), architectural drawings of the first and second floors of the house, a few portraits of Whitman in his later years. Altogether a fine performance and a lovely read, a book to mine for information or to browse at random, *Intimate With Walt* bodes well for the Iowa Whitman Series it inaugurates.

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GIBSON, BRENT. *An Annotated Walt Whitman Bibliography, 1976-1985*. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001. ii + 325 pp.

Whitman scholars benefit from strong annotated bibliographies of criticism. Scott Giantvalley's *Walt Whitman, 1838-1939: A Reference Guide* (1981) and Donald Kummings's *Walt Whitman, 1940-1975: A Reference Guide* (1982) expertly chart the early reception and later commentary on Whitman. In addition, since 1986, Ed Folsom has supplied in this journal comprehensive listings of current Whitman criticism, judiciously annotated. Until now, however, there has been a ten-year gap between where Kummings left off and Folsom began. Brent Gibson fills this gap admirably.

Gibson discusses over one thousand items: articles, books, book sections, and dissertations. Following a foreword by Folsom, Gibson analyzes in his introduction the trends in Whitman criticism during the mid-seventies to mid-eighties. He notes the decline in the number of studies relating Whitman and *Leaves* to music and to religion; he documents the growing fascination with psychological interpretations of Whitman; and he finds, not surprisingly, a shift in the attention paid to individual poems (interest in "Passage to India" plummeted and studies of "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" soared). Gibson usefully offers statistics to demonstrate the increased critical interest in homosexuality. In his bibliography, one finds "eight substantial discussions of Whitman's homosexual correspondent John Addington Symonds, as opposed to only one article on Symonds written during the period 1940-1975." In addition, Gibson continues, "there were proportionately more than five times as many articles on Whitman's 'Calamus' cluster (often recognized as his most important homosexual poetry) written during the ten years of [this] bibliography as were written during the thirty-six years of Kummings' bibliography" (4).

Gibson's annotations summarize items clearly and succinctly. His self-described goal is to provide "largely nonevaluative summaries adopting the point of view of the work being annotated. . . . [But] I have not hesitated to deviate from this formula in such cases as I felt that this type of summary was insufficient" (7). A few of his annotations deviate from the nonevaluative pattern too