

REVIEWS

Charley Shively, ed. *Calamus Lovers: Walt Whitman's Working-Class Camerados*. San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1987. 223 pp. Paper, \$10.00.

Too few volumes of great writers' correspondence actually present correspondents; letters responding to or eliciting a response from the great writer who is the reader's main concern all too rarely see publication. Yet such letters must have a significant share in the great writer's emotional and intellectual development and after all can explain many references in the writer's own letters. The first such published exchange of correspondence involving Whitman was Thomas B. Harned's edition of *The Letters of Anne Gilchrist and Walt Whitman* (1918), although Whitman's share in the correspondence was minimal. A relationship of more profound emotional significance for Whitman was presented in Richard M. Bucke's 1897 publication, *Calamus: A Series of Letters Written During the Years 1868-1880 by Walt Whitman to a Young Friend (Peter Doyle)*, though in this case it was Doyle's letters that were lacking. The thinking was, since Doyle was neither an intellectual nor a creative artist, of what interest or value could his letters possibly be? The same could be said of many of Whitman's other correspondents—soldiers he helped in the hospitals during the Civil War, other young working-class men he met in the streets of New York or Washington. Yet with some of these young men Whitman had some of his most intense relationships.

Until recently, these relationships have been virtually ignored by Whitman biographers and commentators. Many great writers, heterosexually conventional with spouses or opposite-sex lovers, have had their love and sex lives microscopically examined and related to their work, but there persists a squeamishness about treating homosexual writers in the same way. Thus Charley Shively has performed an important service with *Calamus Lovers*: not only does he fill in some holes in Whitman's correspondence by printing actual surviving exchanges between Whitman and these young men (many of these letters are published here for the first time), he also opens the discussions of Whitman's homosexual relationships, providing relevant documents in context (including photographs) as well as valuable background information. These relationships now appear in a light quite different from that shed rather dimly by past commentators like Justin Kaplan and Paul Zweig (though a bit more fully by Lewis Hyde in *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* [1983]): no longer do they seem one-sided, with Whitman as the older homosexual man seeking in vain for reciprocation from non-homosexual younger men. The feeling appears just as strong on the other side—in some cases even stronger than Whitman wanted, perhaps out of an aversion to being tied down, an attitude any reader of *Leaves of Grass* will recognize.

As Shively acknowledges in his introductory discussions which precede each chapter's presentation of the correspondence of a particular relationship or epoch in Whitman's life, many of these young men went on to a conventional heterosexual marriage (though others of them, like Doyle, did not). But in an age when homosexuality could hardly be discussed openly, let alone receive the kind of acceptance possible today, it is hardly surprising that young working-class men should succumb to the force of convention and social expectation and take a wife. This need not negate

the possibility of a fully mutual homosexual relationship or suggest that they moved beyond homosexual feelings to a "more mature" heterosexuality and "full manhood," as Kaplan for one suggests (p. 359). For some of these erstwhile Whitman lovers, in fact, marriage to a woman did not seem to fulfill their deepest emotional needs; rather poignantly, Fred Vaughan, with whom Whitman lived during the late 1850s, writes to Whitman in 1874: "There is never a day passes but what I think of you . . . My love my Walt—is with you always.—" (p. 50).

Vaughan, surprisingly, is a brand new name in Whitman biography; Shively makes a major contribution in presenting his hitherto ignored letters, discussing their relationship, and suggesting that he was the inspiration for the "Calamus" poems. As a gay man himself, Shively can understand some of the dynamics of a homosexual relationship, both physical and emotional, in a way that nongay critics and scholars do not seem able to. Indeed, he sometimes makes large leaps, assuming he knows just how Whitman acted; some readers might take some of his statements with a grain of salt. But that grain of salt is certainly no more than what has been needed to accompany the work of other Whitman biographers over the years, from Henry Bryan Binns's invented heterosexual New Orleans romance in 1905 to Kaplan's claim in 1980: "Whitman figured that nineteen out of twenty young men living in the cities visited prostitutes 'as an ordinary thing.' There is no reason to believe he was the lone holdout." (p. 96) Kaplan here ignores the possibility that that one in twenty was homosexual—or that some of those prostitutes were men, as Shively astutely points out. In fact, one of the significant contributions of Shively's book is its incidental insight into gay life in the nineteenth century, a subject that still needs extensive examination from a perspective that can see behind the necessary subterfuge and veiled allusions, not to mention sexual secretiveness, prevalent in that period.

Even Whitman participated in this secretiveness, however much he called for unscrewing locks from doors and doors from their jams, and he certainly lent fuel to those who would so ardently "defend" him from accusations of homosexuality by his responses to queries about his sexuality. (But these were never so blatant as Shively implies: "Whenever confronted with the question: 'Are you queer?' Whitman avoided the inquiry even to the point of lying and misrepresenting himself" [p. 24]. "Queeries," indeed!) Shively sensitively interprets Whitman's misrepresentations, suggesting that his notorious response to John Addington Symonds about fathering six children stems from his offense at Symonds's lack of frankness about his own homosexuality. Another contributory motive—Whitman's desire to dissociate himself from a libertine, aristocratic homosexuality that was European and upper-class in contrast to his democratic adhesiveness—has recently been explicated by M. J. Killingsworth in an essay for *Walt Whitman: Here and Now* (1985), edited by Joann P. Krieg, but Shively seems unaware of this important essay. He does, however, briefly note the connection between Whitman and another important homosexual British writer, Edward Carpenter, whose sexual experience with Whitman, cited in an interview with Allen Ginsberg later published in *Gay Sunshine Interviews* (1978) from an account by Gavin Arthur, has been ignored by Whitman commentators.

Carpenter's socialism, to a large degree inspired by Whitman, and Killingsworth's thesis certainly belong in a book dedicated to advancing awareness not only of Whitman's homosexual relationships but also to the embodiment in his own life of his democratic, egalitarian, working-class sympathies. In fact, Shively's book is oriented

more toward the popular reader (primarily a gay one) than the scholar—quite unforgivably, really, for the accessibility of Shively's lively introductory material and the reprinted letters would hardly have been compromised by including thorough notes at the back to indicate provenances of the letters and sources for biographical and historical facts and generalizations, many of which are rather questionable without clear documentation (as are some generalizations made about gay life and relationships, which may mislead some readers less familiar than Shively with these issues).

Shively is not merely a gay poet and journalist, associated with the Boston collective which publishes *Fag Rag*; he is a professor at the University of Massachusetts, with a Ph.D. from Harvard. Hence it is strange that "the importance of accurately reproducing letters as they were written" was impressed upon him, according to his acknowledgements, not by fellow academics but by more populist editors like Winston Leyland of *Gay Sunshine*. One questions his accuracy, however, when it has apparently not spread to the entries from Whitman's notebooks: the two separate appearances of one four-line transcription (pp. 57, 65) reveal no fewer than three discrepancies. Moreover, a familiar line from Whitman is misquoted (alas, a flaw all too common in writings about Whitman), while obvious misprints abound, as do such dreadful terms as "massification" and "prophesized" (p. 63).

A major flaw is the book's final section, a selection of Whitman's poems of gay love for which Shively has conflated manuscripts, early editions, and the familiar final forms of poems from "Calamus" and passages from other poems to achieve "the most erotic reading" (p. 186). But such brilliant—and clearly homoerotic—poems as "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand" and "When I Heard at the Close of the Day" gain nothing, erotically or poetically, from the changes Shively has imposed. Further, the italicized reference following each poem is often incomplete. Shively and his editor, Leyland, might have produced a more attractive as well as a more accurate anthology by following the example of Walter Lowenfels in his edition of Whitman's erotic poetry, *The Tenderest Lover* (1970), which provides textual information only at the end of the volume, clearly indicating there the source of changes in specific lines. Moreover, Lowenfels includes poems from "Drum-Taps," which Shively ignores—an odd omission considering that this book's subjects and Whitman's lovers include several Civil War soldiers.

In sum, this book is an important contribution to Whitman studies and is disappointing primarily for its failure to recognize its own value.

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Horace Traubel, ed. *An American Primer by Walt Whitman, With Facsimiles of the Original Manuscript*, ix, 35 pp. Boston: Small, Maynard & Co., 1904. Reprinted, Stevens Point, Wisconsin: Holy Cow! Press, 1987, with Afterword by Gay Wilson Allen, pp. 37–44. Paper, \$5.95. Cloth, \$13.00.

Around the mid-1850s Whitman wrote out brief notes on the structure and usage of American English that apparently he had intended to use as material for lectures. Nothing came of the lectures, but the separate notes, some a few sentences in length, others full paragraphs, grew to a 110-leaf manuscript, often heavily revised, and