

REVIEWS

WALTER GRÜNZWEIG. *Walt Whitmann: Die deutschsprachige Rezeption als interkulturelles Phänomen*. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1991. xiv + 301 pp.

The (mis)spelling of Whitman's name in Grünzweig's title is the clearest indication of his project. This challenging, sophisticated work is no simple study of influence, but instead an understanding of how an author is made over, re-constructed, in a different cultural context. If we want to understand Whitman in Germany, we must consider Whitmann, the German poet, and the multiple purposes to which he could be put.

One of the most striking differences between a history of Whitman reception in Germany and one of Whitman reception in America is the frankly political understanding of the import of Whitman's career. German socialism provided a fertile soil for a Germanic Whitman. As Whitman's reputation declined in America, or was made over into that of the bland poet of the war years and after, in Germany he could still provide a kind of rallying cry, in debates over feminism, homosexuality, pacifism, and anti-imperialism.

Reception theory does not posit the existence of a "real" figure whose work is then more or less accurately perceived. Instead it recognizes that the "poet" is a cultural force to be contested. Grünzweig is not concerned with the false question of whether Whitman's German readers were right, but rather with the ways in which they, in their critical texts, translations, and poetic texts, constructed the figure they needed. The received poet is thus the result of a dynamic tension between on the one hand the life and work and on the other hand the engaged reader. That reader is not situated, however, as in Harold Bloom's heroic version, in an isolated study reading alone; his or her act of reading is a political and social act that can in turn only be read with attention to those circumstances.

The creation of "Whitmann" began early. His first German readers were of the generation of 1848, the first translations by the revolutionary poet Ferdinand Freiligrath appearing in 1868. This element would remain constant, although by no means universal, in Whitman reception. As one can easily see from Grünzweig's extremely useful appendix, listing both translations and critical pieces in chronological order, this first translation (taken from the British edition of Whitman in the same year) included ten poems, all from *Drum-Taps* (another appendix reproduces, in English, W.D. O'Connor's letter to Freiligrath in November 1868, enclosing *Leaves of Grass*). The first extensive translation, by Karl Knortz and T. W. Rolleston, appeared twenty years later, but still during the poet's lifetime, in 1889. It included twenty-seven poems, among them "Starting from Paumanok" and "Song of Myself."

Knortz's and Rolleston's translation was published at the same time as the beginning of the famous debate over Whitman's homosexuality, a debate that became open after the poet's death. Knortz's later *Walt Whitman and His*

Followers explains that Knortz had not wanted to go into a detailed discussion of this question in his earlier work, but that a reading of "Calamus" had convinced him that Whitman was an "Edel-Urning," or in the sexology of the day, an ideal (or non-physical) homosexual. As Grünzweig shows, the readers and translators of Whitman had their own agendas; but the Knortz/Rolleston translation accomplished its goal of creating a "naturalized" Whitman.

The American Whitmanians continued to attempt to control the reception of the poet, even after his death. Johannes Schlaf was raised to the position of "official" Whitman interpreter, his own poems being published in Horace Traubel's *Conservator*. In terms of the debate over Whitman's homosexuality, Grünzweig gives the best account so far of the complex politics, as the various "sides" sought to claim "their" Whitman. Schlaf was, according to Grünzweig, not so much anti-gay as determined to rescue Whitman from what he saw as a narrow and naturalistic understanding of sexuality on the part of Eduard Bertz. The context, of course, as Grünzweig reminds us, was the Eulenburg scandal which had come close to bringing down the Kaiser. It was no time to take lightly the accusation (or claim) that Whitman was homosexual. Still, what is striking to the North American reader is the extent and importance of the debate, the mere suggestion of which was dangerous in America.

In the twentieth century, Whitman was again used by opposing political forces. "To a Foil'd European Revolutionaire" became, after World War I, a hymn to the Spartacist hero Karl Liebknecht. The 1915 Gustav Landauer translations placed an emphasis on Whitman as a war poet, with translations of poems such as "As I Lay with My Head in Your Lap, Camerado." It was, however, the 1919 and 1922 translations by Hans Reisiger, read by, among others, Thomas Mann, that established Whitman's reputation in the German-speaking world. 1919, the postwar year, was in fact a boom time for Whitman in Germany, with close to 40 critical articles and reviews, and dozens of translations of individual poems, aside from the Reisiger texts. For Reisiger, Whitman offered new hope for a depressed nation; in Whitman, Reisiger (and Mann) saw the basis for the construction of a new liberal state. Reisiger's treatment of Whitman's sexuality also marks a crucial change. The sexology theories of Magnus Hirschfeld, which linked social reform to a fundamentally physical model, are replaced by political concerns which, without denying the sexuality, see in it a means to resistance and a way out of the tradition of male-superior, warrior-like homosexuality.

The debate is not yet over, although its terms have shifted once again. Grünzweig concludes his study, inscribed in the need to find a new democratic model for Germany, with the observation that the "most vital school of American Whitman interpretations of our time is certainly that of gay criticism," and predicts a renewed interest in Whitman in Germany through the impact of gay studies.

North American readers will find this study fascinating and enlightening. Reading it, they will find themselves in another world, one in which the poet and Whitman admirer Johannes Becher can become minister of culture in the GDR. As in North America, however, Whitman's model can be both formal and intellectual. Becher's "An Europa" (1916) begins with a call for a new poetics:

The poet shuns radiant chords.
He jostles with brass, lashes the drum shrilly.
He arouses the people with chopped sentences.

Recalling Whitman, Becher's text also recalls Emerson's call to which Whitman responded. But it is a far cry from the American Whitmanians of the same time, either the Sandburg sentimentalists or the finely honed imagists. Grünzweig's complex, thorough, and fascinating study constantly recalls the need for comparative studies to immerse themselves in national, historic, and social contexts, and reminds us of what is entailed in reading interculturally. This is must reading, not only for Germanists, but indeed for anyone interested in Whitman's "reputation" and in the nature of poetic influence and cultural reception.

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SAM ABRAMS, ed. *The Neglected Walt Whitman: Vital Texts*. New York, Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993. viii + 200 pp.

"Who learns my lesson complete?" Not the general reader, Sam Abrams asserts, for he argues that the most widely available texts of Whitman's works distort through omission, leaving out material of the highest significance and thereby misrepresenting Whitman "as a much less radical thinker and much less conscious artist than he in fact was." In particular, Professor Abrams argues that these texts—he cites in particular the editions published by the Modern Library and the Library of America—deny the reader full access to "two aspects of Whitman's life and work that the poet sought to conceal, or, at least, obscure: his commitment to male-male sexual love, and, most surprisingly, an intense negativity, a furious indignation, profoundly doubtful of the entire democratic experiment."

In support of his contentions, the editor offers in this volume "Old Age Echoes," poems and passages that Whitman omitted from *Leaves of Grass*, two manuscript poems ("Pictures" and "Poem of Existence"), and a handful of prose works: two of Whitman's reviews of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, *An American Primer*, and the pseudonymous "Walt Whitman in Camden," written under the name "George Selwyn" in 1885. Some of these selections, it will be noted, bear upon the two aspects of Whitman's life and work cited above, while others do not. The fact is that these two aspects, while no doubt of the highest significance and of great interest to a contemporary reader, fill only a relatively few pages in the body of Whitman's work.

Anyway, there is significant material in *The Neglected Walt Whitman*, and it would be ungrateful to complain about having it available in this volume. It should be pointed out, however, that all the poems included in this collection and also the two 1855 reviews have been widely available since 1965 in the "Comprehensive Reader's Edition" of *Leaves of Grass* edited by Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett, published first by the New York University Press, then born again in 1973 as the Norton Critical Edition paperback. "Old Age Echoes" and the poems excluded from *Leaves of Grass* were also published in