

## REVIEWS

TENNEY NATHANSON. *Whitman's Presence: Body, Voice, and Writing in "Leaves of Grass."* New York: New York University Press, 1992. xvii + 532 pp.

The dust-jacket of this new book features advance praise from some well-qualified and substantial critics; when the likes of Quentin Anderson, John Irwin, and Donald Pease call a book "the finest articulation of Whitman's project in existence" (Pease) or "a central book about our literature" (Anderson), it makes a reader sit up and take notice. Of course, many a reader is also aware of dust-jacket hyperbole and the art of excluding less than lavish praise. Still, in this particular case it is worth noting that the cover blurbs come from Americanists with a great deal of theoretical sophistication, for it is within the light (and shadows) of theory that one can best appreciate the accomplishment of *Whitman's Presence*.

My own sense of Tenney Nathanson's work runs in the same direction as that of the American theorists, though it does not run quite so far. Without any doubt, this book is the most thorough application of poststructuralist argumentation to Whitman's poetry I have read. It is also the smartest. Nathanson's discussions, notes, and bibliography clearly show that he has a deep understanding of the poststructuralist critique of the sign, especially the work of Derrida, Lacan, and de Man. In addition, he knows the major critics of Romanticism, making canny use of such writers as Bloom, Hartman, Weiskel, and Ferguson. He also has a strong sense of the theoretical Americanists, including those quoted on the dust-jacket (Nathanson makes extended use of Anderson's 1971 book, *The Imperial Self*). Finally, Nathanson is well-acquainted with Whitman scholarship, especially those who write on Whitman's language and on the shape of the poet's career through the six editions of *Leaves of Grass*. The several layers of Nathanson's critical intelligence are thus both broad and deep.

Nathanson's account of "presence" is at its best when it is most closely allied to the work of Derrida and Lacan. In arguing that Whitman's performative rhetoric creates the illusion of an ideal poet-hero, for instance, he refers to Derrida's argument that repetition gives rise to the notion of essence:

Thus as Derrida suggests, "this determination of being as ideality is paradoxically one with the determination of being as presence" (*Speech and Phenomena* 53). *Leaves of Grass* subscribes to this double determination. Whitman's catalogues, we saw, seem to liberate objects from their entrapment in the shifting guises of appearance, allowing them to present themselves fully and immediately to the poet, to reveal "what [they] are." And his apostrophes convey to us what we are repeatedly invited to call a presence: they present the poet himself, freed from the contingencies in which he was hitherto mired. Presence in Whitman's work is finally the presence of this ideal being shaped by the word and supposedly given concrete physical embodiment through a magical disposition of it.

In *Leaves of Grass* voice is both the medium of this incarnation and the crucial synecdoche for the transfigured body thereby created. (114)

If Derrida's deconstruction of the word/thing relationship affords a sharp insight into Whitman's rhetoric of presence, Lacan's poststructuralist psychoanalysis places that rhetoric in a dialectical relationship with cultural order. Thus Nathanson treats the "dark patches" passage of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and the panic-ridden Section 28 of "Song of Myself" as instances in which the poet "is subject to a kind of disembodied gaze of which he is conspicuously aware: the gaze, we might say in Lacan's terms, of the Other, a fantasmatic embodiment of the internalized cultural code that structures him, and by means of which he names and defines himself, now re-projected outward" (95).

The double value of Nathanson's theoretically driven interpretations is, first, that they defamiliarize supposedly familiar texts and, second, that they give new contexts for experiencing the dramatic entanglements of Whitman's poems. The most forceful example of this double strength is Chapter 3, "Indications and Crossings: Light and Flood" (57-84), which gives a superb reading of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" as an anxious dialectic between two modes of representation we can perhaps best think of as writing and voice. This poem and the reading of it Nathanson sketches in the chapter together form the true ground of the entire book.

The problem with *Whitman's Presence*, however, is that this true ground is never stable, never solidly underfoot. Like the "labile" presence of the poet in the first two editions of *Leaves*, Nathanson's argument moves fluidly—often maddeningly—from text to text, from persuasive and insightful reading to far-fetched and obscure gobbledygook. In Chapter 4, "The Embodied Voice," for instance, Nathanson first develops a stunning account of the "socialized body" as a more drastic version of the "fallen body" in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and then counters that figure with its necessary, compensating figure of transparent language and body (85-123). Though often difficult, these forty pages are simply excellent. But then Nathanson moves into a badly misguided attempt to use Kristeva's quasi-mystical brand of semiotics to figure an archaic, infantile, pre-symbolic, "properly semioticized" space anterior to the socialized, inscribed body (123-47). The serious problem here is that Kristeva—and Nathanson—gives a mythic narrative of the pre-linguistic origins of language, with a regressive, nostalgic Eden ("a pulsating *chora* . . . a rhythmic but nonexpressive totality" [126]) as the implied goal of a renewed language. The ironic skepticism of Derrida, Lacan, and de Man deserts Nathanson sadly, leaving him with Kristeva's reified mythologies.

The larger point to be made here is that *Whitman's Presence* requires much winnowing, on several levels. In argumentation, as the previous example suggests, Nathanson is less discriminating than he should be. This lack of discrimination takes another form in Chapter 6, "Inscriptions." Here, Nathanson tackles the immense job of placing Whitman's image of voice within the rhetoric of romanticism, comparing and contrasting Wordsworth's sense of cultural transmission through speech to Whitman's imagination of a magical speech that will make the poet ever-present to us. This chapter is admirable,

especially in the accuracy and clarity with which Nathanson rehearses critical readings of Wordsworth. But the real point of the comparison escapes me, for the counter-example of Wordsworth does not add any specificity or layering to Nathanson's account of Whitman's image of voice. So far as I can see, the chapter merely repeats points made previously, though it does so in a new context. Indeed, the comparative project begun in this chapter seems to belong in another book.

The winnowing could also be conducted on the level of style, and the result would be a more focused, coherent book. One of Nathanson's strengths as a critic is to resist the overly neat formulations of previous critics, but his weaknesses are a tendency to digress, a tendency to repeat the same point several times at wide intervals, and a tendency to understand better than he explains. Since Nathanson clearly believes that the first two editions of *Leaves* present the best evidence for the "word magic" he describes, and since he openly claims that the 1856 edition is less successful at creating this type of magic than the 1855 edition (406), I personally would have hoped for a more detailed and coherent account of how and why those two editions resemble one another and differ from one another. Then this particular version of the standard narrative concerning Whitman's post-War career (366-500) might be persuasive. And then Nathanson's account of the word magic of the first two editions would be as clear as it is suggestive.

Lurking within the 532 pages of this very fine book is a 300-page masterpiece. I recommend that every serious student of Whitman's work try to determine which 300 pages that would be.

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M. JIMMIE KILLINGSWORTH. *The Growth of Leaves of Grass: The Organic Tradition in Whitman Studies*. Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1993.

M. Jimmie Killingsworth has performed a valuable service for the Whitman scholarly community by writing the *Leaves of Grass* volume in the Camden House "Literary Criticism in Perspective" series. This series sets out to "trace literary scholarship and criticism" on various writers and major works, and it aspires "to gauge the influence of social and historic currents on aesthetic judgments once thought objective and normative." Killingsworth is quite effective in demonstrating the contingent and changing nature of Whitman criticism during its first hundred and thirty years, revealing how any particular version of Whitman "depend[s] largely upon the historical conditions under which he has been received."

Killingsworth organizes his study around "the theory of organicism," which he argues most Whitman critics have picked up from Whitman himself and have used as a paradigm when interpreting and assessing his work. Killingsworth's subtitle, "The Organic Tradition in Whitman Studies," is a bit misleading, however, since he also traces the tradition of *opposition* to the organic critics. One of the real contributions of this book, in fact, is the suggestion that the dichotomy between the organic and the mechanical readers—roughly, those who saw Whitman's poetry as a spontaneous flowering of genius and those who