

“chief editor” of the *Crescent*; therefore, we have no justification for attributing to him, for example, the main editorials with regard to the European revolutions of 1848—as Joseph Rubin does without argument in *The Historic Whitman* (1974) and as Larry J. Reynolds does in his *European Revolutions and the American Literary Renaissance* (1987). For each entry, Myerson gives not only the original citation but the place of all reprintings (one oversight I note, however, concerns items E8 through E10 [the first three installments of the “Sun-Down Papers” in the Hempstead *Inquirer* in the winter of 1840]: they are reprinted by William White and Herbert Bergman in the *American Book Collector*, 20 [January, 1970], 17-20).

Despite its limitations, this section of the bibliography is good to have. It is the most comprehensive checklist we have and will inspire further investigation of the place of journalism in the Whitman canon. In fact, the entire volume may someday lead some brave editorial soul to consider doing a new “Reader’s Edition” of *Leaves of Grass*—something already suggested by the publication of the *Textual Variorum of the Printed Poems* in 1980. The most important section of Myerson’s descriptive bibliography, of course, is the first, where we learn enough technical details about each edition of *Leaves of Grass* to become a collector of first editions. (If you can afford the price of this bibliography, you may be able to afford to purchase at least one of the later original editions of *Leaves of Grass*.) The bibliography gives future biographers a convenient guide to information buried in collections or in obscure appendices to hard-to-find secondary books on Whitman—including exactly how many copies of a particular edition were printed and how much money Whitman made. Myerson announces at the outset of his book that *Walt Whitman: A Descriptive Bibliography* is “my last bibliography.” That’s too bad for the rest of us, but we now have Whitman to add to his other superb bibliographies—of Emerson, Dickinson, and Fuller. With all the recent emphasis on “material culture” in literary criticism, this kind of bibliography ought to be more popular than it is. Yet I suppose one has to believe in literature, or the miracle of the imagination, to appreciate the “text.” Joel Myerson has rendered those who do hold such a belief a great service with this, allegedly his last bibliography.

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JAY PARINI, ED., AND BRETT C. MILLIER, ASSOC. ED., *The Columbia History of American Poetry*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. xxxi + 894 pp. \$59.95.

Containing thirty-two essays—the work of thirty authors—*The Columbia History of American Poetry* is an impressive, wide-ranging, and ambitious survey of this nation’s poetry, from Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor (as would be expected) and Early African American poetry (as perhaps might *not* be expected) to such current presences as Merrill, Ashbery, Levine, Charles Wright, and Native American poets. The volume intends to be inclusive: major figures are given their due, and others are presented in ways that demonstrate the attraction and the excellence of their achievements. This *Columbia History* gives

ample evidence, if any were needed, of the breadth, variety, and richness of poetry in America. It should send readers back to the poems with interests stimulated and perceptions enhanced.

The concern here, however, is with Whitman, and in general this collection of essays reaffirms his dominant position in the development of American poetry. "Even a cursory reading," Jay Parini remarks in his introduction, "of the chapters gathered in this *Columbia History* will reveal the centrality of Whitman, who has been and remains our most influential poet." The extent of Whitman's influence is cited in various chapters. While many of the poets mentioned in this connection are to be expected (for example, Crane, Stevens, Williams, the Beats, and contemporary "confessional" poets), others are welcome surprises (for example, Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts poets, James Weldon Johnson, and Langston Hughes).

Full attention is also given to Whitman as a major force, along with Dickinson and Frost, behind America's poetry of nature; and Whitman is, with good reason, given credit for establishing the confessional mode of our national poetry. Gregory Orr even singles out "Trickle Drops" as *the* original "confessional" poem. Furthermore, Lynn Keller properly cites "Song of Myself" as establishing "a tradition of innovation" in the twentieth-century long poem. Seeing Whitman's poem as loosely retaining "the quasi-circular quest-journey structure of traditional epic," she comments that "Like 'Song of Myself,' many Modern long poems enact a sense of poem-as-process that can incorporate private and public statement, individual self-construction and communal identity, social criticism and nationalistic celebration, epic breadth and lyric intensity."

In addition to cameo appearances in various essays, Whitman also has, as would be expected, a chapter to himself, "Walt Whitman's Revisionary Democracy" by Donald Pease. In general, this essay moves between the presentation of basic biographical information and discussion of what might be called Whitman's special effects; for example, "In *Leaves of Grass* Whitman not only liquefies himself but manages to melt and evaporate the most resistant objects into a merging flow" or "In these lines [from Section 5 of the final text of "Song of Myself"] Whitman's self becomes intercorporeal with that of the 'you'—each self experiencing itself as the interiority of the other." Readers will have to decide for themselves about the extent to which their experience of reading Whitman approximates Professor Pease's; this reader is left with the uneasy feeling that the imagination of the critic is overshadowing and obscuring the distinctive qualities of the poet.

Similarly problematic are the author's biographical and psychological readings, to which one might respond with the Scottish verdict, "Not proven." When, for example, the assertion is made that the "Calamus" poems "presented Whitman with an opportunity to exempt his father posthumously from guilt over his children's failures, and to discriminate his imaginative allegiance with Emerson from his bond with his father," this reader, who admittedly favors the obvious, is unconvinced, not having been able to find Whitman père, Emerson, or the Whitman siblings in these poems. Other concerns would seem to be more central.

Emphasizing Whitman's presentation of self in relation to an ideal audience of American democracy, "Walt Whitman's Revisionary Democracy" has little to say about Whitman's poetics. The author comments that "In disregarding meter altogether Whitman originated a form of free verse without precedent in literary history," but does not elaborate upon the statement. In a comprehensive history of American poetry, one might wish for more detailed attention to Whitman's artistry. To abandon meter, after all, is to give up one of the most powerful resources poetry has to offer. What is gained thereby? Some discussion of the nature of Whitman's "form of free verse" would be helpful, as it is not made clear why Whitman is such an important *poet*. While asserting that "American poetry may be read as a series of reactions to Whitman," the author chooses not to deliberate upon specific causes of these reactions. Such commentary would be useful.

More to the point is the assessment of Whitman in John McWilliams's chapter, "The Epic in the Nineteenth Century." Professor McWilliams questions the generally accepted assumptions. "Whitman's primacy and centrality," he writes, "to the tradition of the twentieth-century 'personal epic' or 'visionary epic' . . . is a far more problematic matter than we usually assume." The author insists that to conceive of *Leaves of Grass*, and of "Song of Myself" in particular, in terms of 'epic' is to distort the term beyond recognition. "The 1855 *Leaves of Grass*," he writes, "proposes a defiant rejection of epic conventions rather than an adaptation of them." It was not until 1872, Professor McWilliams points out, that Whitman spoke of *Leaves of Grass* as "an epic of Democracy"; in 1855 he had written that "the expression of the American poet . . . is to be indirect and not direct or descriptive or epic," and he had used the phrase, "the great psalm of the republic," in referring to the ideal poem of the United States—lyric rather than epic. Perhaps Whitman's original perception is the more accurate.

Professor McWilliams concludes his discussion of Whitman with a challenging statement and a probing question; both compel reconsideration. "The writing of *Leaves of Grass*," he states, "began in great heroic poetry that was not epic, and ended in bad 'epic' verse that was not heroic. . . . Has twentieth-century thinking about the viability of epic poetry been shaped primarily by Whitman's early need to transform the genre beyond recognition, or by his later need to adopt the epic as the only way to lay claim to the authority of a popular bard who has truly made it new?"

Equally probing is Lawrence Buell's chapter, "The Transcendentalist Poets," which challenges the very centrality of Whitman proclaimed in the introduction and elsewhere. "Whitmanian openness," Professor Buell argues, "may prove to have been less pervasive in American poetry than the more restrained experimentation represented by the Transcendentalists' lover's quarrels with bound forms, and, in the next generation, by the poetry of Emily Dickinson, Robinson, Frost, much of Pound and Eliot and Stevens; Dunbar and McKay and Countee Cullen; John Crowe Ransom, Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Francis, Sylvia Plath, Gwendolyn Brooks, Richard Wilbur—their prosody can be referred back, in most cases by analogy rather than genealogy of course, to the aesthetic of liberty-within-restraint represented by Transcendentalism's subjection of bound forms to pressure and deformation."

Professor Buell questions the prevailing view of American poetry that stresses the dominance of Whitman. "A Whitman-centered account of American poetics," he argues, "makes the contrast between Anglo and American poets pleasantly dramatic at the expense of the truth, the truth finally even of Whitman himself. More accurate than an autochthonous myth of American poetic history that winds up dancing around a selective version of Whitman, fathered by an even more selective version of Emerson, would be a myth of American poesis as part of a transatlantic Anglophone community almost as interlinked in the nineteenth century as in the High Modernist era, a narrative in which the splitting out of the Transcendentalist group quickly seems artificial except insofar as it helps one to concentrate on how Transcendentalist poems reflect the play of certain ideas more or less peculiar to the movement."

*The Columbia History of American Poetry* leaves no doubt about Whitman's continuing vitality; whatever judgments one might make, Whitman remains the poet who cannot be avoided. And he remains too large for easy summary. Even in calling attention to Whitman's indelible and massive influence, the editor must speak in contraries. "One can hardly imagine," he writes, "our debt, as a culture, to Walt Whitman, who was able to summon a vision as defiantly idiosyncratic and yet as thoroughly central and representative as any in the history of our poetry." *And yet. . .* How often the phrase comes to mind when Whitman is the subject.

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