

REVIEWS

BETTINA L. KNAPP. *Walt Whitman*. New York: Continuum, 1993. 240 pp.

This is a serviceable primer to the life and works of Whitman, attempting to fill the same niche so securely occupied by James E. Miller, Jr.'s reliable *Walt Whitman* (1962, rev. 1990). Miller's book is part of the venerable Twayne United States Authors series; Knapp's book appears in the less familiar "Literature and Life: American Writers" series from Continuum, a series in which Knapp herself has authored volumes on Edgar Allan Poe, Emily Dickinson, Stephen Crane, Gertrude Stein, and Anaïs Nin. Scholars don't approach such books expecting to learn anything new about the subject, and that's certainly the case with this Whitman volume. Its audience would seem to be those who are unfamiliar with *Leaves of Grass* and who want a quick overview.

"Part I: The Life" (17-75) is a kind of *Masterplots* summary of Gay Wilson Allen's *The Solitary Singer* (1955). Knapp tracks Allen closely, often quoting materials straight out of Allen's biography instead of from the original sources, and often paraphrasing him quite closely. Take, for example, the incident when Whitman goes to the battlefield at Fredericksburg to find his wounded brother George and confronts a pile of amputated human arms and legs. In Allen's telling of the event, he allowed himself the liberty of imagining that Whitman must have been thinking that one of the severed limbs in that pile could have been George's: "This would have been a shocking encounter at any time, but at the moment the thought that some of George's own limbs might be in that horrible heap almost overcame him. He went on, however, and soon found George whole and in good spirits. A shell fragment had pierced one cheek, but the wound was healing nicely and George was on active duty" (283). Knapp's account is remarkably similar and hardens Allen's speculation into fact: "The thought that one of George's limbs might be among the ghastly heaps was sheer agony. No matter. He was there to find his brother, and find him he would. When finally he located him, he learned joyfully, that this injury had been minor: his cheek had been pierced by a shell fragment and was healing well" (49). Or, after Allen, discussing "Song of the Universal," tells us that Whitman "had been reading Hegel—or more accurately discussions of Hegel—for several years" and that "traces of Hegelian influence may be seen in *Democratic Vistas*, in Whitman's belief that the 'dialectic' of conflict and struggle will produce a more perfect society" (460), we are not surprised to find Knapp echoing the perception: "That for years he had been drawn to the philosophy of Georg F. Hegel is evident in *Democratic Vistas* and 'Song of the Universal.' Reality for Hegel, let it be noted was looked upon as a dynamic process governed by a dialectical law. . . . Hegel's philosophy imbued Whitman with hope: the thought that a better society would emerge from the Civil War" (67-68).

Beyond such pale imitations of Allen, Knapp's analysis of Whitman's life and character has little to offer, and in fact a good many statements are misleading or false or hopelessly vague: we learn, for example, that "Whitman was not a *thinking* type," but that rather, for him, "Body and feeling emerged virtually simultaneously with the spiritual orientation, the orientation of the soul" (35). Or we learn that "Whitman's untitled essay prefacing *Leaves of Grass* . . . explained his very personal approach to punctuation, including his frequent use of ellipses" (36). (Anyone searching the 1855 Preface for Whitman's explanations about why he punctuated as he did will be sorely disappointed.) Or we learn that "many women endorsed Whitman's poetry, because of . . . his help in mounting a campaign for women's rights" (46). (He knew women's rights activists and espoused equality in his poetry, but if Knapp has found evidence for his actual involvement in a women's rights campaign, she does not offer it.) Some of the comments on poems are simply bizarre, as when we are told, with no further explanation, that "Beat! Beat! Drums!" is "a poem that was to go down in history" (48). As for Whitman's sexuality, we are told he "never had a girlfriend" (27) and that, "judging from the poet's life-style and his writings, including his correspondence, one may conclude—although not with certainty—that he was homosexual." Knapp seems to take Whitman to task for not outing himself: "The gist of his statements focused on speaking openly and brazenly about how one feels concerning one's *secret* inclinations. So far as is known, however, Whitman never did" (35).

The second part of the book focuses on Whitman's works, and Knapp offers readings that are often highly allusive, suggesting Hindu, Buddhist, and Neoplatonic echoes, and making casual comparisons to figures as diverse as Poe, Hawthorne, Nietzsche, and Saint Teresa of Avila. There are promising moments, as when Knapp cites Whitman's notes on *Phaedrus* in discussing *Calamus*, or when she uses Thomas Laqueur's work on body and gender to read "I Sing the Body Electric," but these moments pass too quickly and remain undeveloped. Too often, the commentary is simply summary, again a kind of *Masterplots* approach to the work. Knapp proceeds poem by poem (and short story by short story), but there are odd omissions (no commentary on *Drum-Taps*, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," or "Starting from Pausanok," for example) and an absence of guiding principles. The result is a fragmented presentation of Whitman's work. Miller's *Walt Whitman* remains a far more satisfying and trustworthy introduction.

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ED FOLSOM

STEPHEN MITCHELL, ed. *Song of Myself*. Boston: Shambhala, 1993. xv + 155 pp.

In this miniature book, Stephen Mitchell presents what he calls a "conflated version" of "Song of Myself." He uses the 1855 version of the poem as his "main source" but has adopted "any revision that seemed to be even a minor