

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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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

improvement" (xiii). He offers textual notes that specify what edition of *Leaves of Grass* he has used for all non-1855 lines. This is not the first time that such a pastiche-version of Whitman's poems has been published. Perhaps the best-known example is Galway Kinnell's *The Essential Whitman* (New York: Ecco, 1987), which presents a collection of Whitman's poems in versions Whitman never authorized. Kinnell, a poet who has often referred to Whitman as his "principal master" (3), worried that "many of Whitman's revisions seem intended to domesticate the 'barbaric yawp' and make his verse sound more recognizably like poetry" (8), but he also worried that if he presented only the original published versions of Whitman's poetry, readers would miss "those occasional brilliant rewritings that Whitman came up with" (10). For Kinnell, in other words, Whitman usually dulled his poems with his revisions but once in a while improved them dramatically. So, for his anthology, Kinnell came up with a controversial solution:

I took as my starting point what I regard as the most satisfactory version of each poem (usually, but not always, the earliest version). I then compared it with all other versions. When I found a distinctly superior reading—some happy rewriting or blessed deletion, or in the case of superseded versions, an abandoned felicity—I incorporated it into the version at hand. Some of the poems in this book, therefore, are in versions that have never existed before. (10)

Stephen Mitchell similarly offers a version of "Song of Myself" that never existed on the page before, though it has potentially existed in the unexplored combinations of the various versions of the poem that Whitman published. Mitchell claims not to have known about Kinnell's project until after he had completed his own conflated version (146), but these two "new" versions of "Song" make an interesting comparison. Both Kinnell and Mitchell, by example, challenge readers to compile their own "best" version of Whitman's poems by picking and choosing from among the possibilities Whitman implicitly offers in his various editions. It's one more way that Whitman's readers can enter the "gymnast's struggle" with his poetry that he always encouraged—an active engagement in which the reader would be involved in the creation of the poem. Presumably, if each of us sat down with all the versions of "Song of Myself" and devoted ourselves to the kind of careful reconstruction that Kinnell and Mitchell have performed, we would all arrive at different poems, each composed totally of Whitman's lines, but each responding to our individual needs and judgments—endlessly personalized renditions of "Song of Myself."

Mitchell's book is in a "miniature" format, four-and-a-half by three inches. In his preface, Mitchell recognizes the irony of contracting Whitman's lines into such a tiny format: "To shrink this expansive, world-swallowing language even to the size of a normal book is a bit absurd. . . . Still, I think Whitman would have been touched at the prospect of being carried around in the breast or hip pockets of young men and women, intimately, close to the flesh" (vii). Whitman, of course, always sought precisely this intimacy of book and body, and he loved the idea of a pocket-sized edition of *Leaves*, working to produce a book that would, as he once said, "go into any reasonable pocket." The second edition of *Leaves*, which he called the "chunky fat book" was one unsuccessful

attempt to give readers a book they could thrust beneath their clothing. Mitchell's "Shambhala Pocket Classics" version of "Song," however, fits in just about any pocket.

Over the past century, there have been many attempts to carry out the poet's wishes and produce Whitman books that could easily be carried in the reader's pocket: one of the earliest was Anne Montgomerie Traubel's 1906 selection of Whitman's prose, called *A Little Book of Nature Thoughts*, beautifully printed by Thomas B. Mosher; then there was the lovely Little Leather Library edition of *Memories of President Lincoln* in 1916, and the Peoples Pocket Series edition of *Walt Whitman's Poems* in 1921 (also known as the Haldeman-Julius edition). Recently, Ox Head Press in Minnesota issued a couple of very tiny Whitman books as part of their Minnesota Miniatures series. Andrzej Szuba's new Polish translation of Whitman's poems, *Kobieta Czeka Na Mnie*, was issued in a miniature format, as was the four-volume *Homage to Walt Whitman*, strikingly illustrated by the Italian artist Guido Villa. There may be something paradoxical about constricting Whitman's vastness into a miniature book, but there is also something implausibly liberating about these companionable little volumes. Some great writers recall the importance of carrying Whitman around in small formats, where he was always readily available: Kenneth Patchen recalls how "I went down through the woods / To the smelly crick with Whitman / In the Haldeman-Julius edition, / And I just sat there worrying my thumbnail / Into the cover" And Meridel LeSueur writes movingly of the same miniature edition:

I remember when the Little Blue Books first published Whitman. They were published by Emanuel Haldeman-Julius and the newspaper *The Appeal to Reason*, which could circulate a million copies in a crisis because there were no consumers as such. Everyone was a distributor. It was the publication of the workers and farmers. Most books were expensive and hard to get. *Leaves of Grass* was one of them. These little books were blue and made to fit in the overall pocket so you could pull them out at work or at the plow and read. . . . A generation of American workers got their education from these. And they published some of *Leaves of Grass* to carry in your overall pocket. Walt should have been there, striding across Kansas, hearing the "Open Road" shouted from freight cars and cattle towns. . . . (Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom, and Dan Campion, eds., *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song* [Minneapolis: Holy Cow!, 1981], 101, 355)

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