

REVIEWS

GAY WILSON ALLEN AND ED FOLSOM, eds. *Walt Whitman and the World*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995.

This is a book that every university library will need to buy and that everyone interested in Whitman will want to consult. Allen and Folsom have asked nineteen contributors to select comments on Whitman's poetry from eighteen different countries and language areas: the British Isles, Spain and Latin America, Brazil, Portugal, "the German-speaking countries," the Netherlands, France and Belgium, Italy, the former Yugoslavia, Poland, Russia, Sweden, Denmark and Norway, Finland, Israel, India, China, and Japan. The resulting anthology is a continuation and rethinking of Harold Blodgett's *Walt Whitman in England* (1934) and Gay Wilson Allen's *Walt Whitman Abroad* (1955). There is a very good bibliography of translations and criticism from each area. (The work is dedicated to Allen who, sadly, died while it was in press.)

"The book sets out," in the editors' words, "to trace some of the ways Whitman has been absorbed into cultures from around the world" (2). *Absorbed* is exactly the right word for the poet who said that "every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." "No American writer," the editors state, "has been more influential in more nations than Whitman," and the book demonstrates "some important ways that American culture, as articulated in Whitman's work, has helped redefine older and more established national traditions and how it has helped emerging nations define themselves." Thus, his writing "undertakes a different kind of cultural work than it performs in the United States" (2). Knowledge of the international response to Whitman, the editors hope, will help us to reconceptualize American literature.

The issues, however, are not exclusively American. The claims the editors make are much larger: "No other poet in English since Shakespeare has appealed to so many people in so many places in so many ways" (6), and "No poet has generated more responses from other writers than Whitman has" (8). It would be very interesting to see these claims discussed in more detail. What is the difference between the response to Whitman and that to Shakespeare? *Can* the difference be structural? The strangeness of this *foreign* response to Whitman is that, as the editors point out, "until well into the twentieth century . . . he was more highly regarded and more widely read in several European countries than he was in the United States" (3). It is a shame that there was not space enough to include an overview of the American response to Whitman, as the dynamics of the whole process cannot be understood without it.

Perhaps the major contribution of *Walt Whitman and the World* is what it suggests for theory. The book destroys any notion that there is such a thing as a *canon* of American and European literature established as a conscious (or unconscious) conspiracy to enforce certain political views or hold power. The evidence is here. The ways in which people encounter Whitman are too various

and haphazard, and, most important, readers *choose* him. Chance and readers decide the future of a writer's work—and the readers who make the most difference are very often other writers. It is not the number of readers that counts, but their quality and the quality of their responses. Stendhal is right about “the happy few.” Great writers belong to everyone, to anyone lucky enough to come across a copy of their work.

Take, for example, Kornei Chukovsky's first encounter with Whitman's work. He was eighteen years old, had broken completely with his family, and was barely managing to support himself by working on the docks in Odessa. The year was 1901: “One day when I was working on the docks, a foreign sailor beckoned to me and thrust a thick book into my hands, demanding 25 kopecks for it. He glanced furtively about him as he did so, as if the book was a banned one” (333). Chukovsky bought the book: “It was a book of poetry written by a certain Walt Whitman, whose name I had never heard of before.” The book changed his life: “I was shaken by these poems as much as by some epoch-making event” (334). Whitman helped him to find himself: “the chaos of my emotions at that time was in perfect harmony with the chaotic composition of the poetry” (334). He went on to become the foremost Soviet Whitman scholar and the author of what is widely regarded as the best Russian translation of *Leaves of Grass*. Chukovsky's translation, as he describes it, was an act of reparation, of generosity, an attempt to share what he had received.

And it is the great merit of Allen and Folsom's book that it makes us vividly aware of these infinite complexities and chances in reader responses to Whitman. Chukovsky indicates that he would never have bought the English *Leaves of Grass* for 25 kopecks from the sailor, if the year before he had not tried to buy Flammarion's *Astronomy* from a secondhand bookstall. The dealer rummaged through his entire stock without finding a copy, so out of gratitude, Chukovsky bought a worn and battered “self-tutor of English.” This book was his constant companion as he went about doing odd jobs, “sticking up theatre bills, working on the Odessa docks and reading psalms at funerals,” so that when he met the sailor on the docks, his English was good enough that he “was able to read without too much effort Longfellow's *Evangeline* and Poe's ‘The Raven.’” Ripeness is all. Such are the accidentals, risks, and successes of a writer's “reception.”

Although Whitman's readers, as their testimony shows, are reading him for different reasons and using him in different ways, their reasons—like Chukovsky's—are personal and individual, and most, if not all, are reading him in order to know more about themselves and the world. Whitman sets them free. This is why the great authors have always been read and why they are great. Moreover, most of them discovered Whitman informally, by chance. It should be enough to make every American public library stop churning their holdings and go back to having a permanent collection of the best writers.

The old word for the effect of an author was *influence*. The new words are *intertextuality*—where the interest is in the similarities of texts and where it is not necessary to do the hard work of finding out who read what when—and *reception*, an awkward term derived from the German, *Rezeptionsgeschichte*, that shifts the emphasis from the author and the text to the reader. And, while much of the current discussion of the “reception theory” is very abstract, not

so Allen's, Folsom's, and their collaborators'. They give us an entirely new and different view of Whitman's reception focusing on the most basic unit of a work's reception—the individual. They offer reception in action. Their book is a demonstration of exactly how *Leaves of Grass* has affected people around the world for over a hundred and fifty years—in detail. That is the beauty of it. They have documented the individuality of a wide variety of personal responses, and a theory that would take account of all the details in this book might just revolutionize literary history.

One of the first things that we learn is, and this perhaps cannot be emphasized too much, that there is resistance to new and original work. Our first impulse is to think that reception depends on liking. But that faith is undermined by several selections, including one of the book's most valuable contributions, the reprinting of Matthew Arnold's astonishing letter to W. D. O'Connor (September 16, 1866). It should be common knowledge (I had not seen it before). Arnold is forty-four. He has written all his best poetry, been Professor of poetry at Oxford, and has recently published the first edition of his *Essays in Criticism* (1865):

As to the general question of Mr. Walt Whitman's poetical achievement, you will think that it savours of our decrepit old Europe when I add that while you think it is his highest merit that he is so unlike anyone else, to me this seems to be his demerit; no one can afford in literature to trade merely on his own bottom and to take no account of what the other ages and nations have acquired: a great original literature America will never get in this way, and her intellect must inevitably consent to come, in a considerable measure, into the European movement. That she may do this and yet be an independent intellectual power, not merely as you say an intellectual colony of Europe, I cannot doubt; and it is on her doing this, and not on her displaying an eccentric and violent originality that wise Americans should in my opinion set their desires. (25)

This is the resistance of a great poet—the cold, implacable, conservative force of tradition. Arnold is intelligent, thoughtful, a man of wide reading and wide sympathies, but inexorable in his rejection of Whitman's originality (which he acknowledges) and in setting the conditions for "a great original literature" in the United States. The standard is European and immutable: the American "intellect must inevitably consent to come . . . into the European movement." How does *Leaves of Grass* threaten him? The letter causes us to think again about Arnold, about the differences between British and American literature, and the meaning of tradition.

Walt Whitman and the World would be strengthened if each text was introduced (or followed) by a short biographical note explaining the author's place in his or her literature and locating the text in the author's career. The introductory essays for each section discuss the individual selections, but it would be useful, for example, to have right next to Valéry Larbaud's "Etude" the information that it served as the introduction to the *Oeuvres choisies* (1918) of Whitman published by the NRF, of which Gide was a prime mover, and which contained translations by Gide, Laforgue and Vielé Griffin (Larbaud translated some extracts from *Specimen Days*); further, the criticism in France of Bazalgette's translations that led to these versions needs to be mentioned. Susan M. Brown's "The Case of Fernando Pessoa" (148-152), which appears

just before Pessoa's "Salutation to Walt Whitman," is an excellent example of how this can be done (and much longer than would be needed for most of the texts).

A work of this kind must of necessity be a selection, which means that things one would have liked to have included are left out; moreover, we all have our own personal preferences. Sometimes the choices here seem somewhat random, and some of the texts are too cut up. More important, for many of the texts it is impossible to tell where the cuts have been made and whether the ellipses indicate a cut in a single passage or over two or more pages. The two pages included by Anne Gilchrist are spread over eleven pages in the original. It would have been simpler and more accurate to put the page numbers in parentheses in the text. John Addington Symonds's text has been rearranged (apparently for coherence), but certainly his original order is preferable if we are concerned with his understanding of Whitman. The bibliographical references are often inadequate. The date of each text is given in the table of contents (and it would help if they were also in a note to the text itself), but we need to know the occasion and first publication (as well as the date of composition) of each text in order to be able to use them to think with.

Out of 91 texts, 43 are from the British Isles, 20 are German, and eight are from Spain and Latin America, and no other area has more than four. For the Netherlands, the former Yugoslavia, Poland, Finland, Israel, India and Japan, there are no texts, only summary essays. Some of those voices it would have been good to hear. There are only three women. What about George Eliot? She concludes her review of Meredith's *The Shaving of Shagpot* in *The Westminster Review* (1856) with a brief mention of *Leaves of Grass* from which she quotes a few passages. She used the second and third lines from Section 2 of Whitman's "Vocalism" as the epigraph for Chapter 29 (Book IV) of *Daniel Deronda* which she calls "one of the finer things which had clung to me from among his writings," then tried to cancel it, after the attack on Whitman in *The Saturday Review* of March 18, 1876 (see her April 18, 1876, letter to John Blackwood in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. G. S. Haight, 6:241). If there are not many interesting comments by women, this in itself is worth mentioning and thinking about.

Perhaps the most intelligent and wisest comment in the book is by Borges:

Almost everything written about Whitman is ruined by two persistent errors. One is the summary identifying of Whitman, the conscientious man of letters, with Whitman the semi-divine hero of *Leaves of Grass*. . . . The other, the senseless adoption of the style and vocabulary of his poems, that is to say, the adoption of the very same amazing phenomenon which one wishes to explain. (71)

A copy of this should be affixed to the wall in front of the desk of every person writing about Whitman. The observation comes from Borges' *Discussion* (1932) and is quoted by Fernando Alegría in his Introduction to "Whitman in Spain and Latin America." Borges' comment is so apt one would have liked to have seen more of his essay.

For a book that will be a standard reference work for its subject, it would be useful to have an index. It is to be hoped that this will be added to the second

edition. Also, in a second edition, it would be good to see Lorca's "Oda a Walt Whitman" and perhaps Pablo Neruda's comments on Whitman in his *Memorias* (1974). They are interesting for his juxtaposing of Whitman with Lautréamont. We notice that the absorption of an author often depends upon an amalgam of authors, and that to study the effect of an author we need to examine with what and whom he combines. Like so many of the writers in this collection, Neruda credits Whitman with helping him to be himself—this is a strange process whereby the other puts you in touch with yourself. As the introductory essay to the French section makes clear, there are a multitude of other interesting French texts that might have been included.

All of these are small things, however. Any criticism of *Walt Whitman and the World* is like being at a banquet and asking for more. What we are offered is a wealth of erudition and a wide variety of texts showing us, for the first time, Whitman's reception in South America and Asia as well as in Europe. One of the best things about the book is the number of poems dedicated to Whitman that it includes. Among others, there is Pessoa's wonderful "Salutation to Walt Whitman," Neruda's "Oda a Walt Whitman," a nice series of German poems from Morgenstern (1910) to Schwendter (1990), and a recent poem (1981) from the Chinese poet, Li Yeguang. (Both the original and the translation are given for Neruda and the Germans.) The majority of the texts included in this volume will be new to most readers, and we would have never found them by ourselves. Where else would we learn that Whitman allowed his admirers in Bolton, Lancashire, to stuff the body of his dead pet canary and take it home with them and that "Whitman Day" was celebrated in Bolton into the 1950s, that Brazilian interest in Whitman came originally from the French translations and criticism, that Japanese interest in Whitman begins in 1892 with an essay by one of Japan's best writers, Sôseki Natsume, then a twenty-four-year-old university student, or that there is a Khirghiz translation of *Leaves of Grass*? Whitman would have been pleased.

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LUKE MANCUSO, *The Strange Sad War Revolving: Walt Whitman, Reconstruction, and the Emergence of Black Citizenship, 1865-76*. Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1997.

"Reconstructing Whitman's Reconstruction" might be the theme or title of this book, for in it Luke Mancuso seeks to reconstruct our understanding of the post-war Whitman. While critics have generally lamented the decline of Whitman's writing following the war (but for the poignant heteroglossia of *Drum-Taps* or the passionate *Democratic Vistas*), Mancuso makes the striking claim that Whitman had a specific rhetorical program that he carried out with remarkable consistency throughout the Reconstruction (1865-77). He argues that Whitman sought to be the "federalizing poet" who through his poetry and prose would bind together the polarized sections and races of the Union into one "democratic nationality." Far from ignoring blacks (as a cursory review of his Reconstruction writing might indicate), Whitman saw black emancipation