

## REVIEWS

MARK EDMUNDSON. *Song of Ourselves: Walt Whitman and the Fight for Democracy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021. xiii + 217 pp.

According to Mark Edmundson, Whitman's "Song of Myself" is an onanistic dream in which the poet, or speaker of this vision, is, among other things, angry at the sun. Although masturbation is his "characteristic sexual mode," Whitman is distressed "by the fact that some, or even all, of the figures he's fantasizing about . . . are male" (64-65). Later (110) Edmundson says he is "agnostic" on the question of Whitman's alleged homosexuality. Whitman's imagined "fight for democracy" in this volume—intended for "general readers"—centers upon his autoerotic encounter of Self and Soul and a "duel with the sun" ("There are millions of suns left"), which represents the patriarchal or aristocratic forces that continue to threaten the fragile democracy on the verge of civil war. The vernacular "you" in the poem is no longer primarily the reader, or "divine average," but "another part of Walt himself" (17). The sun and the grass serve in this rather private, if not "New Critical," reading of *Leaves of Grass* as the age-old opponents in the people's war against kings and aristocracy.

In this fight, Whitman was responding to what Emerson called for in his essays: "a vision of what being a democratic man or woman *felt* like at its best, day to day, moment to moment" (3). It seems that Thoreau might be the preferred Transcendentalist to get down in the dirt with Whitman and his omnibus drivers, not Emerson, who allegedly complained of the "fire-engine" society he encountered when Whitman took him to a restaurant in New York City at the end of 1855. Indeed, for all the Emerson that Edmundson calls upon in this monograph on Whitman, he seems oblivious to the Transcendentalist or logocentric context for "Song of Myself" and in fact all of *Leaves of Grass*. As we know and as Edmundson acknowledges, Whitman claimed that he was "simmering, simmering, simmering," and that Emerson—along with opera and the King James version of the Bible—"brought [him] to a boil" (5).

And just what was it that turned this mediocre poet/journalist/fiction writer (whose humble beginnings Edmundson exaggerates, ignoring the importance of Whitman's having edited the *Brooklyn Eagle* from 1846 to 1848) into America's greatest poet? It was the Emersonian idea that everybody and everything was

an emblem and a microcosm of God; hence, his Divine Average. Emerson made it possible for Whitman to make something as common as the grass into Transcendental evidence. It probably doesn't represent "individuals" with its leaves or blades, as Edmundson suggests, but the ubiquity of God's emblem in Nature (with a capital "N"). Like the coy lady who drops her handkerchief to attract a suitor, God drops the monogrammed gift of Nature to attract ours:

A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropped,  
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see  
and remark, and say Whose?

And when the poet says at the outset of "Song of Myself" (the full text of its first 1855 version is included in *Song of Ourselves*), "there are millions of suns left," Whitman is reflecting the Emersonian idea of the endless multiplicity of Nature as emblems of God: "They come to me days and nights and go from me again, / But they are not the Me myself."

At one point (39), Edmundson states that the "jour" in "jour printer" means "journal," instead of "journeyman," a rank at which Whitman as a former printer most likely was, not only in fact but in poetic fantasy, somewhere between life's "apprentice" and its "master." There is also the erroneous assumption that Lincoln and Whitman nodded to each other as the president rode to the Soldiers' Home north of Washington to escape the summer heat. As I tried to demonstrate in *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself*, Whitman made such claims of Lincoln actively acknowledging him only after the president's assassination. There is nothing of this sort, for example, in his article about Lincoln in the *New York Times* of August 16, 1863; such claims stem mainly from the poet's oft-repeated Lincoln lectures, given long after Lincoln's murder. It was probably for that reason that the most authoritative biography of the sixteenth president, *Lincoln* (1995), by David Herbert Donald, contains no mention of the poet. Fortunately, David S. Reynolds in his recent *Abe: Abraham Lincoln in His Times* (2021) does include Whitman as part of the politician's American culture. Surely, Lincoln was at least aware of the poet because of his wartime essays in the *Times*—if not because of *Leaves of Grass*, which Lincoln allegedly read aloud to his law partner in Illinois (as suggested by merely one unreliable source). Moreover, there is no evidence that auditors of the Lincoln lectures "would clamor for" the reading of "O Captain! My Captain!" (137) as the poet approached the end of each presentation. Granted, this poem, atypical for Whitman, was—and may still be—Whitman's best-known work.

Edmundson's study improves as the narrative moves from the analysis of

“Song of Myself” to a discussion of Whitman as a hospital “visitor” during the war. Edmundson credits *The Better Angel: Walt Whitman’s Civil War* by Roy Morris, Jr., for some of his inspiration. In reviewing that book in these pages more than twenty years ago, I admired the way Morris interwove the poet’s letters to soldiers, his *Drum-Taps* poems, and his diary observations into the whirlwind of the war and its terrible consequences. Part 2 of Edmundson’s study, “In the Hospitals,” recounts how Whitman rushed to Falmouth, Virginia, following the Battle of Fredericksburg in December of 1862 in search of his soldier-brother George, who was slightly wounded. There the poet found “the kinds of Americans [he] had dreamed of in ‘Song of Myself,’ proud and self-reliant—a people, he believed, like none other in the world.” These soldiers, Edmundson writes, “were not the product of Homer and Virgil but of the Declaration and the Constitution” (118-19).

Edmundson has an easy way with words, and his finest sentence is his opening one: it best describes, or sums up, the uniqueness of the 1855 poem that would later be entitled “Song of Myself”: “*Song of Myself* genuinely begins not with words but with an image” (15). That, of course, is Whitman’s frontispiece—the 1854 steel engraving of the “rough” standing with his hand on hip, hat cocked to one side, unjacketed and shirt open at the neck, celebrating “ourselves” as he celebrates himself.

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BETSY ERKKILA. *The Whitman Revolution: Sex, Poetry, and Politics*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2020. xvi + 276 pp. Iowa Whitman Series.

For many years now Betsy Erkkila has been deservedly recognized as one of the most distinguished, and one of the most venturesomely ground-breaking, of our contemporary Whitman scholars. Her consistent interest has been in exploring the radical aspects of his poetics and his politics, and in crusadingly demonstrating their relevance to the social, cultural, and political circumstances of the present, particularly in the U.S.A. Her early work on *Whitman Among the French* (1980) alerted her to the impact of the revolutionary political movements in France on Whitman’s writing career, from the Year of Revolutions of