

share one. The mouse politely, firmly—and wisely—refuses. One unconscious turn of the vast bulk of his amiable friend's body in its sleep, he points out, and he would be a goner. Quite. As one of this world's little mice, I am always suspicious when Walt comes on strong!

But Erkkila's book is a first-class study by a first-rate scholar, an accomplished and beautifully written demonstration of Whitman's continuing relevance, and a heartening one in the light of the present rather parlous condition of the post-Trump United States. In it the better angels of America's nature are once more encouraged to spread their wings. And in closing, let me draw attention to the remarkable series to which this book is a valuable addition. Surely, a critical essay surveying this body of work in its entirety is long overdue. Would it not be a good idea for the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* to commission a promising young scholar to write it?

*Swansea University*

M. WYNN THOMAS

★

ED FOLSOM AND CHRISTOPHER MERRILL. "*The Million Dead, Too, Summ'd Up*": *Walt Whitman's Civil War Writings*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2021. vi + 227 pp. Iowa Whitman Series.

We live in an age of eclectic anthologies. Take Whitman Studies, which, in the last two decades, has welcomed several volumes of writers talking back to Walt. These include *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song* (2019), now in its third edition; *Visiting Walt: Poems Inspired by the Life & Work of Walt Whitman* (2003); *Lovejets: Queer Male Poets on 200 Years of Whitman* (2019), and *Walt Whitman hom(m)age 2005/1855*, an avant-garde, Anglo-French affair that includes works by John Ashbery, Eleni Sikelianos, and Jorie Graham, among many others. Whitman himself gets in on the game too, with new editions of his journalism (*Walt Whitman's Selected Journalism*, 2015), his late life talks with Horace Traubel (*Walt Whitman Speaks*, 2019), his early notebooks and manuscript fragments (*Every Hour, Every Atom*, 2020), and his writings on the sea (*The Sea Is a Continual Miracle: Sea Poems and Other Writings by Walt Whitman*, 2017). The vast Whitman oeuvre—and its chatty afterlife—has never felt more accessible, navigable, or fun.

Ed Folsom and Christopher Merrill's *"The Million Dead, Too, Summ'd Up": Walt Whitman's Civil War Writings* shares much with these earlier titles, and others besides. The most recent book to anthologize and contextualize Whitman's Civil War writings, it seeks, like this spate of selected editions, to elevate a Whitmanic subtopic. Like the anthologies of homage, it treats reader response as a relevant form of critique. The book's co-editors embody this approach. Folsom is one of America's foremost Whitman scholars; Merrill is a poet, non-fiction writer, and the director of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. The two are colleagues, and their joint commentary represents a continued warming of relations between English Departments' Cold War rivals, literary studies and creative writing. Warming might be putting it mildly. This is post-glasnost. This is a START-Treaty partnership applied to a grim, if timely, subject: American disunion.

We see this in the book's form. There are forty entries—poems, excerpts from *Memoranda During the War*, and three letters—representing Whitman's Civil War writing. Each entry receives a pair of commentaries (first Folsom, then Merrill) that create, over the course of the book, a twinned and (mostly) chronological analysis of the primary texts. This reminds me of Whitman's *Two Rivulets* (1875-76), an oft-forgotten book that Folsom describes as "a typographical and stylistic experiment that positions both poetry and prose on each page—'two rivulets' of words running next to each other, the poetry at the top and the prose at the bottom" (4). *"The Million Dead, Too, Summ'd Up"* is, in its own way, *three* rivulets: one from the 19th century and two from the 21st. It's criticism in stereo. It's parallel play, as when two kids—in this case a professor and a poet—each learn something new from the looks they throw toward the other's toy.

There are obvious benefits to this approach. *"The Million Dead, Too, Summ'd Up"* is wonderfully browsable, even without an index, and I often found myself reading the entries out of order. If the average critical study risks encumbrance, by notation and the long arc of a thesis unwinding across a handful of chapters, this book feels agile. I thought of Helen Vendler's *Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries* (2010) or *The Art Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1997)—two studies that make their own art from a discrete series of attentive essays. I thought of the Unsung Masters Series, a recuperative enterprise from Pleiades Press and Gulf Coast that reissues overlooked poets with a selection of work and accompanying commentaries by poets and scholars alike.

This form also expands the book's possible uses. It is, first and foremost, a reassessment of Whitman's Civil War writing—a reassessment I didn't

think necessary until I started reading. As Folsom writes, Whitman's war texts "seldom have received sustained and detailed reading" (7); that's because the war marked, for many critics, Whitman's decline. This book's existence is an argument for the opposite. It's also a generous aid for future research, ending with an eighteen-page annotated bibliography, arranged chronologically from newest to oldest. I was shocked to see the paucity of pre-1960s articles or the preponderance of those post-2000. This is a volume designed to launch new dissertations and seminars but *also* new stories (see Chris Adrian's fictionalized take on Whitman's hospice work, "Every Night for a Thousand Years," 1997); plays (see Christopher Dwyer's one-man show, *Leaves of America*, 2002); or poems. I can imagine it scanned or assigned to graduates and undergraduates alike, to young scholars and advanced creative writers looking, as Whitman writes, "to answer what I am for" ("Poets to Come").

Folsom's introduction begins that process, foregrounding the existential dilemma that the Civil War posed for Whitman's democratic poetics. How, Folsom asks, can a poetry based "on a union of its diverse parts" (2) survive that union's split? His framework is textual, his metaphors surgical. Folsom notes, as he has elsewhere, that the Civil War divides the first three editions of *Leaves of Grass* (1855, 1856, and 1860-61) from the last (1867, 1871-72, and 1881). He shows how Whitman's postwar revisions "involved his decision to open [*Leaves*] up," like a patient (3). Whitman starts by sewing unbound copies of *Drum-Taps*—his stand-alone, fifty-three-poem book of war poems—into the 1867 *Leaves*; Folsom describes this as a "bibliographic suturing." Later, in the 1870s, the poet "bleed[s] his Civil War poems into the very fabric of *Leaves*" (3). Poems like blood stains, revision like incision—the metaphors are apt when "this is no book, / Who touches this touches a man" ("So Long!"). Like Whitman, Folsom reads the body as congruous with the body politic.

Folsom's subsequent commentaries are a delight. Drawing on a lifetime immersed in Whitman, his era, and the scholarship that followed, Folsom paints a detailed picture of Whitman's Civil War. His critical lenses are historical, biographical, and textual, but it's his formalist chops that drew my check marks of approval. Consider the book's titular phrase, a section title from *Memoranda* that precedes "the longest sentence [Whitman] would ever compose" (11). Folsom analyzes that sentence, with its "seven parenthetical insertions," "phrasal trenches," and "thirty-some dashes," as a purposefully "undiagrammable utterance" that lurches and pauses, absorbing the bodies of the dead as it moves (11). It's a Whitmanic catalogue, familiar enough, but it ends as a sentence fragment. Whitman had no way, Folsom writes, "to predicate *this* war" (11). It is a death

sentence, necessarily truncated, like so many soldiers' lives and limbs.

Other, surprisingly granular readings caught my attention too. Take the word "compost" in "This Compost"; consider the word "composition," which pops up when critics and poets alike talk shop. The words don't just share an etymological root, Folsom argues, but an idea: all writing, like all nature, originates in a breaking down. In the latter, that includes bodies—of flora, fauna, and homo sapiens. In the former, it's sentences and words. Whitman's linguistic experimentation, then, is part and parcel with his belief in pastoral regeneration. Both bring renewal. Bodies recur once more in the repetition of "arms," "arming," and "arm'd" in "Drum-Taps" (the poem), a subtle reference, Folsom argues, to amputation. Whitman's contractions—which I'd always read as a regrettable archaism—remind us of amputation too. Their elision leads to double meanings. "Summ'd," for instance, can be read as "summoned" or "summed." Whitman intends both—and does both—but it's the former, the giving voice to, that evokes, in absentia, the unity in what's left out: "one."

Folsom's commentaries go beyond diction, though; they teach and inform. I now know that "Cavalry Crossing a Ford" is, at least by today's standards, partially plagiarized. I know too that Whitman got into a bar fight with a Southerner after reciting "Beat! Beat! Drums!" These revelations draw on recent biographical and archival scholarship, but the anecdotal and surprising never eclipse the historical. This is a book that keeps the events of 1861-1865 front and center without, thank goodness, devolving into a battlefield tour. The inflection point that was 1863—Stones River, Gettysburg, Chickamauga—gives new meaning to "Year That Trembled and Reel'd Beneath Me." The ominous meteor showers in "the fall of 1859 and the summer of 1860" inform Whitman's "Year of Meteors (1859-60)" as well as Melville's poem "The Portent" and Thoreau's image of John Brown, whose attack on Harpers Ferry Armory he described as "meteor-like" (28).

Folsom, in other words, knows *a lot*, and his commentaries, at their best, feel like vibrant lectures. After all, he and Merrill developed this book after co-teaching a MOOC (massive open online course) at the University of Iowa. He tempers his smarts, however, with generosity. These essays shout out to fellow critics—Peter Coviello, Kerry Larson, Ted Genoways—introducing the reader to a field's scholastic milieu. As a poet and critic writing about Whitman from the belletristic periphery—my last project was a series of essays on Bell's Brewery's *Leaves of Grass* beers—I found this gesture welcoming. I learned new names; I felt like I was "one of a living crowd" ("Crossing Brooklyn"). Folsom doesn't inhabit "the Me myself" professor persona—despite his subject matter—



but says “Round and round we go, all of us, and ever come back thither” (“Song of Myself”).

If Folsom’s commentaries look inward, then Merrill’s look outward. If Folsom is a close-reading Americanist, then Merrill is a global comparativist. He reads Whitman in D.C. alongside Miłosz in Warsaw. He quotes Guillaume Apollinaire (“I love art so much [...] that I joined the artillery”) and Charles Simic (“The sole function of the epic poet [...] is to find excuses for the butcheries of the innocent”). His commentaries take more liberties than Folsom’s—the spice, if you will, to Folsom’s soup—but draw on a wider panoply of influences and interests. His experience writing about the Balkan Wars, front-page news in the 1990s, helps him meditate on the relationship between poetry and armed conflict. He dabbles in what’s come to be called—despite the term’s slippery imprecision—the poetry of witness.

This is all to say that Merrill’s internationalism is key. It backgrounds the first-hand experiences, which often open or end a commentary, and that I grew to cherish. Merrill’s essays are shorter than Folsom’s, but they blend—and I count this a blessing—the personal and the poetic. In his reading of “When I Heard a Learn’d Astronomer,” he stares with “utter incomprehension” at the “stars above the Adriatic Sea” after surviving a ride in an ill-fated APC (60). A blood-stained Gettysburg bullet in his grandparents’ living room, and a family falling out over that grandfather’s estate, opens a short essay on war-torn siblings (“Two Brothers, One South, One North”). A telling quote from the Greek poet, Yannis Ritsos, closes it. Walt Whitman is often credited with, if not inventing, at least promoting reader response criticism; Christopher Merrill extends it admirably.

It is Merrill’s commentary on “Mother and Babe,” a two-line poem about nursing, that struck me most. Folsom characterizes this poem as one of Whitman’s “proto-imagist” lyrics—this book includes a healthy sampling—and both commentators think hard about juxtaposition. Why add *this* subject matter to *Drum-Taps*? How do short poems (“Cavalry Crossing a Ford,” “Hush’d Be the Camps Tonight,” and “Reconciliation”) talk to the long ones (“When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”)? How, in other words, do poets put books together? It’s a question relevant to critics and creative writers alike, and it leads Merrill to a paragraph-long disquisition on sequence and assembly. It’s a paragraph that I’ll soon be photocopying for my undergraduate poets, but it’s Merrill’s *own* juxtaposition that I’ll remember. Some years ago, his father-in-law died on the morning of his daughter’s fifth birthday. Merrill quotes his father-in-law’s chaplain on the coincidence: “This is everything, isn’t it?” Whitman

would approve.

What shortcomings I find in *“The Million Dead, Too, Summ’d Up,”* are mostly sins of omission. If, as Folsom writes, Whitman “experienced [the war] *in the body, on the body, and by the body*” (his italics)—and lived long enough to see his own body fail—how might disability studies sharpen commentaries committed to tropes of amputation (206)? (Robert J. Scholnick’s essay, “How Dare a Sick Man or an Obedient Man Write Poems?": Whitman and the Dis-ease of the Perfect Body,” warrants a mention.) Two or three of Merrill’s commentaries end in cliché (“Love conquers all” [175]; “that made all the difference” [183]); most rely, for their comparativist touchstones, on canonical (i.e. white male) European and American authors. This might lead some readers—I was initially among them—to question this book’s willingness to ask hard questions about Whitman and race.

To those readers I advise patience. There are five or six thoughtful commentaries that address race, but they appear late in the text. Folsom, for instance, rereads “Reconciliation”—that famous poem of graveside kissing—as spoken by a Black soldier. (“[T]he main duty of black soldiers at the end of the war,” he points out, was “burying the corpses” [185]). The analysis is a tour de force. Both commentators deserve praise for their takes on “Results South—Now and Hence,” a cringe-worthy passage from *Memoranda* that Whitman suppressed when he folded *Memoranda* into *Specimen Days*, in which he ascribes Reconstruction’s failures to “black domination.” For Merrill, it “occupies a singular place in the history of American literary racism” (196). For Folsom it highlights “what is powerfully *absent* in Whitman’s voluminous writings about the war—the issue of race” (194).

Many readers might recoil too at “Ethiopia Saluting the Colors,” a poem, as Folsom notes, that “[o]ften reads as betraying Whitman’s racism” (198). The truth is more complicated, and I appreciated the evenhanded work Folsom does here to unlock and analyze this poem’s persona. The main speaker, one of Sherman’s soldiers, cannot fathom a formerly enslaved woman saluting his colors. That woman seeks, in Folsom’s reading, someone “to guide her out of her objecthood and into her selfhood” (199). Neither gets what they hoped for; both walk off incomplete. This failure of perspective, of empathy really, is part and parcel to Whitman’s own. He saw the war as a battle for the union. With Lost Cause histories on the wane, and initiatives like the 1619 Project on the rise, more and more Americans (one hopes) see the war for what it was: a contest over slavery. This commentary, and this book, will contribute to that awareness as well as the larger conversation that the field of Whitman Studies is now

having—in the wake of Whitman’s Bicentennial, *Black Spring*, and the publication of *Whitman Noir: Black America and the Good Gray Poet* (2014)—about Walt Whitman’s racial attitudes. It’s a conversation that is long overdue.

Overall, “*The Million Dead, Too, Summ’d Up*” is a worthy sequel to Folsom and Merrill’s first foray into collaborative commentary, *Song of Myself: With a Complete Commentary* (2016). It also arrives, as its authors well know—and as articles in *Harper’s* and the *Times* have explored—at a time when we’re asking “if in fact the Civil War [...] ever ended” (Folsom 205). Whitman watched, in real time, the Capitol’s construction. On January 6, 2021, we watched it face an insurrection. Whitman basked, in an 1864 letter to his mother (not included here), in that building’s “great bronze figure, the Genius of Liberty.” We have reason now to fear for Liberty’s vouchsafe: free and fair elections.

Were you looking to be held together by the lawyers?  
Or by an agreement on paper? or by arms?  
—Nay—nor the world, nor any living things, will so cohere.

So ends “Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice,” a poem written for the “Calamus” section *before* the war but revised for “Drum-Taps” *after* it. The title, like these lines, poses a question that plagues America today: what *will* help us cohere? What voice—or idea or challenge—will rise over our current carnage? Whitman’s answer is manly affection, what he calls “adhesiveness” elsewhere; it feels outdated today. Still, this poem, this book, and U.S. history remind us that we have cohered, however imperfectly, in the past. They also remind us that the cost for doing so, in Whitman’s time and our own, is often paid in blood. It seems entirely apt then that Whitman’s birthday fell on Memorial Day this year: May 31, 2021. There was reason to celebrate and reason to mourn.

*Wabash College*

DEREK MONG