

“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

1848 through to the Paris Commune of 1871 (there's a whole chapter on the Commune and on 'the formative influence' of French politics on his poetry in this new book), and she has continued to view Whitman accordingly as, at bottom, a truly revolutionary writer. Her latest study, a collection of key essays and lectures from the last few years, continues to present him in this light and includes an interesting chapter—"Whitman, Marx, and the American 1848"—that juxtaposes Whitman and Marx and argues that their respective work "has a pressing relevance and urgency to the ongoing struggles over capitalist dominance, democratic freedom, world union—and peace—today" (125).

Given that Whitman studies have long acted as a reasonably accurate barometer of the state of American society at large, repeatedly calling into focus such aspects of his case as most interestingly correspond to changes in the U.S.A. itself, it is surprising that no attempt seems to have been made by scholars to demonstrate the obvious affinities between Walt and "The Donald." Both are world-class braggarts and narcissists with a genius for ruthless self-promotion; both created powerful avatars crafted to seem empowering while identifying with an underclass fallen victim to capitalism's latest incarnation; both are arch-individualists and share a visceral mistrust of state intervention; both are brilliant manipulators of the mass-media of their day, newspapers in Walt's case, Twitter in Trump's, and are classic products of the showbiz performance cultures of the States; both project alluring images of themselves as "representative Americans" who are America-obsessed and accordingly treat the rest of the world as wannabe America, and so on and so forth.

A grotesque misrepresentation of course, but perhaps one with sufficient disturbing truth buried somewhere within it to at least challenge prevailing scholarly orthodoxy. It shows Trumpism to be the foul dust floating in the wake of Whitman's version of the American dream, and reminds us how slippery is Whitman's rhetoric (often as nebulous as it is sweeping), how open to ambivalence are his positions, and how fascinatingly compact he is of contradictions that need to be taken seriously. In short, it may be time to recognize the possibility that Whitman may have been speaking an important truth (for once!) about himself, when he warned Edward Carpenter in his old age that there was something in his nature "furtive like an old hen." It may be timely to recognize and respect the strong, ineradicable strain of conservatism in him, a strain that, while increasingly obvious after the war, had nevertheless been there from the very beginning. Furthermore (though whisper it not in Gath), rather a lot of his poetry is standard-issue fustian, and vapidly vaticinatory, which makes the startling originality of his best writing all the more breathtakingly remarkable

and intriguingly puzzling.

That these are matters not pertinent to the approach adopted by my old friend Betsy Erkkila is unsurprising. She, like me, is an intellectual product of the 1960s and 1970s, and while my reading of Whitman was influenced by the thinking of Raymond Williams and the European New Left of that long ago era, hers was inalterably shaped by the major reform movements in the areas of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation in the States whose origins can be traced back to that period. Not for nothing is her arresting new study subtitled *Sex, Poetry, and Politics*, given that so much of her outstanding work in the field of Whitman studies has attended to the interface between these different aspects of his writing.

Her writing glints with original insights, as when, discussing Whitman's treatment of women in his poetry and informatively setting it in the context of the times, she suggests that in his "poetic iconography the male figure is associated with democratic individualism, the female figure is associated with the federal union." Whitman, she adds, "invokes the woman not only as the source of creative energy but as the generative force of justice and sympathy in the world"—an invocation clearly congruent with, yet different from, the sentimentalizing and confining Victorian treatment of the female figure. How, one is stimulated to speculate, does Whitman's use of the female to embody crucial aspects of the desired national character of America compare with the contemporaneous use in France of Marianne for the same purpose (as in Delacroix's famous painting *Liberty Leading the People*), or of Britannia in Britain?

In her striking chapter on Whitman and the politics of language, already a well-worn subject of course, she perceptively distinguishes between the stilted, limited, and generalising way he used words from the French to express his feelings for women and the spectrum of French terms he employed to suggest the nuanced variety of emotional and sexual bonds between males. The best poems in *Calamus* (and there are plenty of duds) could profitably be read as a language experiment, an attempt to demonstrate that male-male relationships could be every bit as richly various in character as male-female relationships, and an attempt to develop the new "language of love" needed to encompass that truth. In that respect, *Calamus* asks to be compared with the great heterosexual English love-poetry of the Elizabethan period.

Erkkila also reflects on the language war of the period, between those who thought American English should be strictly aligned with the very best of British English and those of Whitman's opinion that the aim should be "always to keep language open, flexible, and responsive to the changing contours of

the American experience.” This was and is an exhilaratingly admirable goal. But it is not without its ambivalent aspects, as perhaps needs to be stressed in the light of present circumstances, when, as the prominent Japanese novelist Minae Mizumura argues in *The Fall of Language in the Age of English*, so many languages (including French) and linguistic cultures all over the world are in ever-increasing danger of being eventually killed by the global domination of English. Whitman’s interest in French, for example, was, as Erkkila demonstrates, not only creatively enabling for him but generously inclusive in intent. But from the point of view of today’s language wars, it was a “contributionist interest.” His concern was to enrich English, and thus to Americanize it, by assimilating terms from the French and other “foreign” languages. Whitman never demonstrated an interest in learning any of the many languages that immigrants brought to the New York of his day, nor did he ever show an interest in seriously familiarizing himself with any of the distinctive and rich cultures from which those immigrants originated. His was a melting pot model of the States understandable in his period, not the mosaic model which seems far better suited to the cultural situation in the America of our present. Multiculturalism and Whitman seem to me to make somewhat uncomfortable bedfellows.

One of the most intriguing features of Whitman’s poetry is the profligacy with which it varies its accounts of its wellspring. His foundation myths as a poet are many, and accordingly bewildering but inviting. Erkkila has long been attracted to the Whitman of the Body, and the book’s chapter on “Whitman and the Homosexual Republic” shows her at her most intensely engaged, subtle, and illuminating. Particularly valuable is her premise that in *Calamus* the language of same-sex love “intersects with other languages, including the languages of temperance, sexual reform, artisan republicanism, labor radicalism, phrenology, heterosexual love, familial and especially father-son relationships, and spirituality.” Whitman’s process of thinking, like that of his poetics, is “schizo” in character, to adopt Félix Guattari’s suggestive model. They might both be compared to a rhizome, the root-creeping plant that sends up shoots as it moves invisibly along underground. In structure, “Song of Myself” is a perfect example of just such a procedure. Erkkila is adept at noticing how similar subterranean links connect Whitman with his seeming polar opposite, Emily Dickinson, another poet in whose work she is expert. Chapter five’s focus on Whitman and Dickinson’s “Radical Imaginaries” neatly encapsulates the common devotion of New Yorker and New Englander alike to the challengingly unconventional in the realms of politics, poetics, and sexuality, and their envisaging of alternative states of both individual and collective forms of human existence.

Erkkila's useful strategy of twinning Whitman with other leading figures of his age continues via the comparison in chapter eight, "Whitman, Melville, and the Tribulations of Democracy": both writers were children of families "that suffered losses as the result of an increasingly volatile capitalist marketplace," and both resultantly found themselves cut adrift, left to find their own ways forward. Eventually, of course, they adjusted in dramatically different ways, Whitman's temperament, basically sanguine though periodically streaked with such misgivings as found crude exasperated expression in poems like "Respondez!," strongly contrasted with the weathered and seasoned ironies of Melville's mature outlook. Whitman saw the cupola recently installed above the American Capitol as gleaming with the whiteness of democratic promise; Melville sardonically observed that there was rust on the iron dome. But the turmoil of their times moved them both to culturally transformative experimentations in style and voice, and to the production of what Erkkila nicely calls "Epics of Democracy" (171). Melville's *Battle-Pieces* was an artfully constructed chamber of echoes, designed to represent the Civil War as just the latest tragic example of the tedious and futile human passion for conflict, while for all its chastened tragic tone, *Drum-Taps* was designed to represent the war as an entirely new kind of struggle for the future of a humanely tolerant and inclusive democratic order. Then, in war's aftermath Melville, like Whitman, "looked to non-state forms of democratic affection and community as a means of countering the increasing use of military force and law to achieve social order."

Her final chapter, "Public Love: Whitman and political Theory," sees Erkkila challenging the political theorists and philosophers of democracy who have of late taken an interest in Whitman's writings. According to her, "their work is . . . characteristic of a long tradition of liberal literary and political criticism that has bracketed or erased the collective, adhesive, and homoerotic dimensions of Whitman's theory of democracy." From her point of view, these academics are failing to recognize and respond to that which is truly revolutionary and accordingly valuable about Whitman's achievement, and of her course her entire book has been explicitly designed to draw attention to these crucial and challenging aspects of his case.

Reading this excellent book made one thing clear to me: Betsy Erkkila trusts much more in Whitman's self-proclaimed universalism than I do. Product as I am of one of the world's many marginalized and endangered cultures, I always remember the familiar story of the Elephant and the Mouse. The best of friends, they share everything together—or almost everything. Short as they are of a second bed on one of their travels, the kindly elephant suggests that they

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 Erkkilä'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?

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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.