

only in the serenity of old age that he concluded: "If I had not stood before [Shakespeare's] poems with uncovered head, fully aware of their colossal grandeur and beauty of form and spirit, I could not have written *Leaves of Grass*."

Price's most revisionist work appears in his chapter on "Whitman and Emerson Reconsidered." If we are to believe him, Emerson's influence has been much exaggerated. He reads the 1856 open letter to Emerson in a unique way and discovers in it undertones unfavorable to Whitman's theoretical "master," especially when Whitman generalizes and attacks *all* American poets as pedants and eunuchs, as if he had forgotten that Emerson was one of them. True, Emerson denied sex and deserved this criticism, but his transcendentalism nonetheless was a paramount and determining influence on *Leaves of Grass*, even if it was reinforced by the influence of the English Romantic poets—whom Whitman criticized upon other grounds. Besides, their influence was indirect rather than direct like that of Emerson, and I think I have proved elsewhere that his knowledge of Wordsworth's poetry in particular was extremely limited.

Price's book also contains interesting pages on Whitman's attitude toward Carlyle (though none on Walter Scott) and toward his American contemporaries—Poe, Longfellow and Bryant. It is too often forgotten that Whitman was an excellent literary critic (even though he did not have the advantage of reading Barthes and Derrida). He had an acute mind and a gift for happy phrases, and his conversations with Horace Traubel are full of critical gems.

After four chapters on the influences undergone by Whitman, Price's book suddenly turns unexpectedly in the last two chapters to an examination of the influence which Whitman—having created a new tradition—exerted on others: on the one hand, on three novelists (Hamlin Garland, Kate Chopin, and E.M. Forster), and, on the other hand, on some Harvard poets (George Santayana, George Cabot Lodge, and William Vaughn Moody, plus Van Wyck Brooks at the beginning of his career). This is an excellent idea. It is true that Whitman's bold treatment of sex encouraged writers to broaden the scope of the novel and treat sexual and marital relations more candidly, though other factors may have come into play. As to the Harvard poets, they did provide a transition to modernist poetry after the two decades of the "big blank" from 1892 to 1912, and they did so by adopting Whitman as "a rallying point and a justification for rejecting what was stale" in nineteenth-century poetry.

This small book, then, has rich and varied contents, and it reads well—a trait not so common these days.

University of Paris-Sorbonne

ROGER ASSELINEAU

DAVID KUEBRICH. *Minor Prophecy: Walt Whitman's New American Religion*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989. xi + 240 pp.

In "Starting from Paumanok," the "program poem" of the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman wrote, "I too, following many and follow'd by many, inaugurate a religion," and went on to devote no less than thirteen stanzas to this topic which was of such crucial importance to him. "The real and permanent grandeur of these States," he claimed, "must be their religion." Indeed,

his religiosity pervades virtually every subject on which he wrote. In recent years, however, most scholars have been uncomfortable with Whitman's religiosity, and so it is refreshing to see a book which returns us to a serious consideration of *Leaves of Grass* from the standpoint of religious studies. *Minor Prophecy* is not by any means, as the foreword claims, the first such book; but it is the first I know of that attempts to codify Whitman's religious views in relation to the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

Moving against the grain of most criticism since at least the 1950s, Kuebrich argues that the early "Whitmaniacs" perceived most clearly the chief purpose of *Leaves of Grass*: to found a new religion. Whitman achieved a "unified religious vision" in the process of writing the first edition, and afterward "continued to elaborate that vision throughout the rest of his life" (4). The individual poems, accordingly, "must be seen as the parts of a coherent religious myth" (4). As the would-be founder of a "post-Christian" religion in the western tradition, Whitman should properly be regarded as "a minor prophet of a needed American civil religion" (10, my emphasis). Indeed, Kuebrich suggests that Whitman was on the right track but underestimated the strength of Christianity, lacked an adequate vision of evil, and failed to recognize the difficulty most Americans would have in responding to his poetry.

After introducing his argument, Kuebrich outlines the structure of Whitman's religious world-view in chapters two and three, and then turns to the poet's "style" in chapter four, which is devoted exclusively to the use of symbolism. He does a fine job of relating Whitman's religious views to the new evolutionist theories and to the American millennialist and perfectionist religious tradition. However, Whitman's deep interest in pre-Christian and non-western religions, which were the source of many of his ideas and techniques for representing ecstatic states, never comes up. Following earlier scholars, Kuebrich also relates Whitman's ambitions to those of other prophets and spiritualists of the mid-nineteenth century. According to Kuebrich, Whitman "fulfilled the traditional role of the liberal religious mystic who lives in a period of profound cultural transition"; he presented a "sound response to his historical situation" (62).

In my own judgment, Kuebrich's Whitman is excessively metaphysical and theological. Kuebrich's Whitman does not love the actual world for its own sake; he loves it because of its relation to another, much greater world beyond that we will know only after death. His proposed religion has a number of stable, identifiable elements in it, including "a religious cosmology, a religious psychology or theory of the soul, a program or set of existential demands for the soul's development, a millennial interpretation of history, and a coherent set of religious symbols" (8). In general, these elements seem unobjectionable, but they become problematic as we get into specifics—for example, the "coherent set of religious symbols." According to Kuebrich readers have often misconstrued Whitman's symbols because they have failed to use a phenomenological method that shows how these symbols signified particular religious concepts throughout Whitman's career. Whitman's symbols have distinct, intended meanings that cannot be directly expressed but that the reader is expected to realize by submitting to spiritual discipline: "the problem is to recognize when Whitman is using a natural fact as a symbol and what meaning he intends for it

to convey" (73). Kuebrich then uses a phenomenological method to determine what the "unstated but intended meanings" are (73). To discern the meaning of a symbol, one must read *Leaves of Grass* as a whole (the final edition), "looking for recurring motifs and related patterns of meaning" relative to the symbol being scrutinized. Moreover, one must attempt "to intuit the state of consciousness and accompanying existential realization to which Whitman tries to bring his reader" (74), and which never changed. While it is undeniable that certain symbols *usually* had religious connotations in Whitman's poetry (for example, water), Kuebrich's excessive phenomenological emphasis upon reconstructing authorial intention attempts to close off the multivalent, disseminative qualities of Whitman's poetry, the richly pluralistic responses it encourages. Indeed, Kuebrich consistently plays his reading of Whitman off against "interpretations that seriously distort Whitman's intention" (9), while he attempts to present the "final" exegesis of an almost literally canonical *Leaves of Grass*.

Another problem, of course, is that Whitman could not expect a reader in 1855 to be able to read the poems he had not yet written, but which Kuebrich thinks we need to read in order to understand his symbols correctly. (In fairness to Kuebrich, I should note that he feels this is one reason "Song of Myself" is flawed.) Against the common view that Whitman's career went through stages of development marked by important personal and/or political crises, *Minor Prophecy* argues that we can only properly understand Whitman's poetry by studying the final edition. That is to say, the final edition not only reveals beliefs and poetic intentions Whitman had at the time he composed it, it reveals the meaning each poem was always intended to convey. Significantly, in the early portions of his book, as evidence of Whitman's privileging the "supersensible" or spiritual over nature and the "sensible," Kuebrich pretty consistently brings in quotations from *Democratic Vistas* and after. He largely ignores the repeated assertions of the equality of body and soul that appeared in the 1855 edition. Kuebrich is dead right in arguing that Whitman was a religious prophet from the beginning to the end of his career, but there is plenty of evidence that the Civil War, especially, made for changes in emphasis and hierarchies of value.

In line with his theological and "spiritual" emphasis, Kuebrich's interpretations tend to dilute the sensuousness and fleshliness of the poems, which he analyzes in chapters five, six, and seven. Significantly, aside from the discussion of Whitman's "indirect" symbolic method, we do not read much about his aesthetic. As the spiritual aspect of Whitman's poetry is emphasized, the aesthetic loses force and specificity. The poems all begin to sound alike, to signify the same large concepts, such as "immortality." One misses at once the aesthetic peculiarities of *Leaves of Grass* and Whitman's affectionate and sensuous caress of "surfaces," which trains us in the appreciation of difference—very specific forms of attention and sensitivity to the very texture of things in all their forms and processes. Does not this sensitivity account, in part, for the amazing transcultural range of Whitman's appeal?

That range of appeal is considerably narrowed if one follows Kuebrich's advice, for he implies that only the "hot little prophets" have previously understood the poetry, in some cases because Whitman did not guide the average reader adequately to a comprehension of his intention. Whitman was so

caught up in his mystical vision when he wrote "Song of Myself," for example, that he could not anticipate the problem readers before Kuebrich would have in understanding the poem: "Although 'Song of Myself' is informed by a coherent world view, the poem itself does not . . . provide the general reader with enough information about this world view to interpret the poem as a self-contained whole" (82). Hence, we need to study all of *Leaves of Grass* (the final edition) in order to understand it. Moreover, as a result "Song of Myself" is less successful than "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," in which Whitman's symbolic method more fully draws the reader into a mystical experience. Such dogmatism detracts from the real strengths of Kuebrich's study, which does help illuminate Whitman's religious orientation.

Whitman believed, according to Kuebrich, that we can only come to realize ourselves if we undergo the type of mystical experience Whitman did. Reading Whitman's poetry is the means to that experience. Indeed, Kuebrich is pretty specific about just what we are supposed to do: read "Song of Myself," for example, and then go outdoors and try to experience natural things (especially stars) in the way Whitman intended we should see that he experienced them. Of course, we can do this only if we read the poetry "correctly." As it turns out, "Whitman's poetic includes a program for the reader's spiritual development which corresponds to the purgative and illuminative stages of Christian mysticism" (71)—the three stages identified years ago by Evelyn Underhill, upon whom James E. Miller, Jr., also relied in his influential analysis of the "inverted mystical experience" in "Song of Myself." In suggesting that the reading of a poem is supposed to set off a transforming experience in the reader, this type of interpretation has much to recommend it; but it cannot account for many peculiar aspects of Whitman's "mystical" experiences—soul journey, the speaker's transformation into other people or animals, the plainly political aspects of the poem, and theatricality, the dramatic qualities of the text. Too many of Whitman's techniques and representations of "spiritual" experience bear little resemblance to Christian mysticism, as many previous scholars have noted.

In his sixth chapter, Kuebrich considers Whitman's "Anticipations of Immortality." Here "Out of the Cradle" and "Lilacs," in particular, are interpreted as testimonies of Whitman's belief in immortality—rightly countering the tendency of most recent critics to try to find in them Whitman's supposed "mature acceptance of the hard fact of human mortality" (113). On the other hand, a recognition that Whitman managed to keep faith in immortality need not lead to Kuebrich's more problematic assertion that the poet did not go through a profound spiritual crisis in 1859-1860, when the democratic experiment seemed to be on the verge of collapse. The strictly phenomenological method seems to inherently flatten out Whitman's career, eliding the challenges, transformations, and crises that paralleled public events.

This is not to say that *Minor Prophecy* ignores such events. Kuebrich rightly places "Lilacs," for example, in the context of other religious responses to Lincoln's assassination, providing a counterweight to recent tendencies to read the Civil War as a nineteenth-century analogue to World War I or even the Vietnam War. Many northerners besides Whitman interpreted Lincoln's assas-

sination as a sign from God, marking the beginning of a new era and the birth of the Nation, as Kuebrich shows. But does not this very fact testify to the intense spiritual as well as political catastrophe the war had been? Kuebrich's method minimizes the individuality of the poems, the multiplicity of their meanings, and their engagement with historical fact. They all end up being primarily about immortality and faith in God's providential design. The central point of "Lilacs," for example, is that "since the primary purpose of this world is to prepare the soul for a more real afterlife, man's death consummates the creation" (128).

By eschewing a chronological approach for a phenomenological one, and by arguing that Whitman's "real" intentions only become fully evident in the 1881 edition, *Minor Prophecy* minimizes the stigmata of historical suffering and change; and, coincidentally, the sticky complications of sex. Chapter seven, "The Ecstasy and Quiet of Religious Love," presents a patient, intelligent, and provocative discussion of "Children of Adam" and "Calamus." Here again, earthly existence is subordinated to spiritual essence. In "Children of Adam," Whitman sought to fill "a large lacuna in his bible by liberating and blessing human sexuality" (134). Human instincts, as expressions of "divine immanence," gain religious value in Whitman's theology. Similarly, in "Scented Herbage of My Breast," Kuebrich argues, Whitman interprets "the experience of love to be an anticipatory understanding of the greater love the soul will know after death in its new relationship with its 'Camerado true,' the loving God who is the only satisfactory object of his desires" (142). Whereas some critics emphasizing the erotic aspects of *Leaves of Grass* elide its spirituality, Kuebrich subordinates the frankly erotic to emphasize the spiritual. In so many of Whitman's ecstatic passages, after all, it is virtually impossible to decide whether "spiritual" metaphors are veiling a hidden sexual message, or whether sexual metaphors are being used to convey spiritual experience. Perhaps the point, in the final analysis, is precisely to deconstruct the duality of body and soul which is so fundamental to the western religious heritage.

Does Whitman value love because it is symbolic of something "higher"? Or does he value it for its own sake? Or is it more accurate to say that the beauty of human love leads him to believe in "spiritual" reality? To answer the latter question affirmatively is not necessarily to argue that the value of human love *derives from* or is *dependent upon* its relationship to faith in something higher. In one of his more moving short poems, when Whitman is assailed by "The Terrible Doubt of Appearances," he is satisfied by holding the hand of a friend. I don't believe we can quickly translate this comfort into "spiritual" terms. The sheer beauty of contact, the sensual gratification in and of itself, can often be enough for Whitman: "I cannot answer the question of appearances or that of identity beyond the grave, / But I walk or sit indifferent, I am satisfied, / He ahold of my hand has completely satisfied me." It is important to note that Kuebrich quotes these very lines, but he argues that, to understand them correctly, we must notice the meaning of the term "satisfied" in "Song of Myself" and in a notebook entry where it refers to *spiritual* fulfillment, the experience of a "transcendent level of reality" (144-145). The assumption, of course, is that "satisfaction" always had primarily spiritual connotations for Whitman.

The "Calamus" poems, in Kuebrich's view, speak always of a religious love. Whitman wants readers to feel a love for him like that which Christians feel for Jesus. Hence, "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand" refers to the difficulties of following Whitman's radical spiritual program. "Whitman cannot name his love because it partakes of this ineffable spiritual reality" (146). The calamus plant, Kuebrich finds through a phenomenological method, is "the symbol of the highest form of spiritual love" (147). The "upward-shooting blade of grass proclaimed man's victory over death" (148); its aroma "suggests this love's intangible and yet compelling power"; "naturally growing at the water's edge, the calamus grass would indicate this love's ability to link the natural (the land) with the transcendent (the waters)" (148). Some readers will undoubtedly leap on Kuebrich's interpretation as an evasion of the "true" sexual and political meanings of "Calamus." But his argument for the religious significance of both this section and "Children of Adam" is a valuable contribution to Whitman studies, and does not necessarily deny the poetry's sexual and/or political meanings.

There is not space here to do justice to Kuebrich's extremely painstaking and often persuasive argument against reading "Calamus" chiefly as a homosexual manifesto or "coming out." Suffice it to say that scholars who wish to propound such readings should answer, point for point, Kuebrich's counter-analysis of the evidence for their position. Yet it may be that this sort of exchange would prove futile in the end. Again and again, in addressing the relation between "spirit" and "body" in Whitman, we seem to be faced with a sort of janus mask. We turn it one way and see "body"; we turn it the other and find "spirit." Does the one depend upon the other, or is the question itself finally irrelevant, a trap of (forgive the cliché) "western metaphysics"? One imagines Whitman leaving the classroom at this point to go bathe and admire himself. Despite Kuebrich's arguments, it seems to me that Whitman himself was inconsistent in answer to such questions. Early on, he *tended* either to stress that the "unseen" and the "seen" depend upon each other or to ignore the question. Later, he *tended* to stress spiritual destinations. One can, in any case, take issue with Kuebrich's insistence upon translating all comradesly love in Whitman into *essentially* spiritual love while nonetheless affirming the idea that Whitman "lay[s] down human love as the existential cornerstone of his new religious edifice" (150).

Incidentally, Kuebrich also presents the intriguing argument that the reason Whitman did not write a sequence on woman-to-woman "adhesiveness" balancing "Calamus" was in part because of his sexism and in part because he thought men (more than women) need adhesiveness to correct a deficiency in their personalities. Adhesiveness could offset the "hardness," crudeness, and worldliness that the culture encouraged in males.

In his concluding chapter, Kuebrich recaps his central argument and then judges the adequacy of Whitman's religion for our own era: "Whitman did, in fact, succeed in fusing a traditional religious cosmology with evolutionary science and a millennial theory of history to create a coherent world view which presented progress, both evolutionary and historical, as a movement of divine immanence toward reunion with its transcendent source. All of Whitman's major symbols such as the waters, stars, earth, and grass are integrated into this



central vision" (175). With some justice, Kuebrich adds that the entrapment of Whitman in English departments has prevented the most important assumptions behind his poetic from getting out: "(1) Every society needs a shared religious faith; and (2) American artists and intellectuals must take up the challenge of forging a new national vision that will unify and guide the American People" (176). Kuebrich not only believes Whitman considered these assumptions true; Kuebrich also believes they are true. Today, lacking "a more or less coherent set of ideals which have a character of ultimacy" and are widespread and ingrained in the citizenry, our American society is showing "many of the classical symptoms of cultural degeneration" (177)—an epidemic of drug addiction, violence, sexual chaos, and public corruption. Behind Kuebrich's frank advocacy of egalitarianism and anti-imperialism lies a staunch, culturally conservative emphasis upon the need for a strong center. This, of course, follows inevitably from the metaphysical emphasis of Kuebrich's whole approach. A different, anti-foundationalist reading of Whitman would lead instead (as for his pragmatist descendants) to a very different vision of a loosely cohering though "decentered" culture, less prone to ideological closure, pluralistic, experimental—more oriented by aesthetic appreciation and love for existence as such.

After reading Kuebrich's often persuasive study, one is left wondering if Whitman's departures from the western religious tradition are more than mere "modifications" of a few specific Christian beliefs and practices, or if indeed he is just a "minor prophet," worthy of a paragraph or two in histories of American religion. Whitman himself believed that democracy entailed a new stance toward reality, one of the rare revolutions in human consciousness, and not simply an extension of the Christian tradition, which he deeply distrusted. He not only incorporated evolutionary thought and millennialism into his vision, he also put an extraordinary emphasis upon sexuality and the body, insisting on the equality of the body with the soul. At the same time, he refused to set up a hierarchical relationship between pluralism and unity, "the many" and "the one." There is a definite homology here. Indeed, what we find repeatedly in Whitman's poetry is that these dualities are wrought *simultaneously* to an exquisite tension and mated in the ecstasies that are so often described in equally "spiritual" and "bodily" (indeed, explicitly erotic) terms. But Kuebrich does not pay very close attention to the particulars of Whitman's transports, to the peculiar "deconstructive" process of them. His emphasis, instead, is upon the timeless phenomenology (and "unity") of Whitman's symbols, at the sacrifice of multiplicity and temporal tenderness for what is near. Nonetheless, *Minor Prophecy* succeeds in its most important aim of challenging readers to recognize Whitman as a minor American religious prophet and should play a significant role in our changing view of the poet's relation to his culture.