

REVIEWS

HAROLD ASPIZ. *So Long! Walt Whitman's Poetry of Death*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004. xi + 294 pp.

During the nineteenth century, Harold Aspiz reminds us in his new book, it must have seemed that death rarely took a holiday. A high mortality rate during the first half of the century, particularly among children and victims of epidemic diseases, made death especially prominent. Nor could death be kept under wraps as a private family matter. It announced itself through tolling church bells, elaborate funeral processions, prescriptive mourning dress, wreathed doors, heavily curtained windows, wall photos or paintings of closed-eyed deceased children, death-masks displayed inside homes, among other public rituals and domestic memorials. In many regions of the United States, as well, there were public executions by hanging, invariably detailed in newspapers, which also routinely printed sensational reports of loss of life due to fires, natural disasters, and other tragic occasions. Cemeteries, positioned beside churches or near the center of towns, were often traversed daily in the course of usual human activity. At such times the increasingly elaborate cemetery masonry, wrought with emblems of death, could hardly be overlooked.

This was Walt Whitman's milieu. Whitman's personal encounter with mortality commenced with the loss of an infant sister when he was six years old. Besides his own periodic episodes of life-threatening illness, he lost his father, mother, brother, sister-in-law, and other cherished relatives, including children. As a newspaper man, Whitman contemplated human mortality far beyond average for most people, and such news stories sometimes informed his poetry. So, for example, Section 33 of "Song of Myself" features violent ends, including graphic images of an ambulance "trailing its red drip" and a "mash'd fireman with breast-bone broken."

During the 1850s Whitman, who claimed to have nursed injured stage drivers, frequently visited hospitals in Brooklyn and New York. But nothing surpassed the agonies he witnessed while serving as a nurse tending wounded and dying Civil War soldiers. The immense carnage of the Civil War, with its unfathomable toll in human lives, was death's most dramatic performance in nineteenth-century America. Whitman's direct experience with this blood-bath, explicitly reflected in such poems as "A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest," eroded his initial support for the war. Then in 1865, an already traumatized poet and nation were further shocked by the assassination of President Lincoln.

Whitman's time evinced still other concerns about dying. Cultural anxieties were evident in the elaborate rituals associated with the human corpse. The three-day vigil, most important at night, implied unacknowledged superstitious apprehensions about the deceased's vulnerability to sinister forces. These vigils also indicated fears concerning premature burial, a genuine, if exaggerated, possibility before the post-Civil War practice of embalming. Besides bi-

zarre news accounts of people reviving in their coffins, such popular fictional works as Edgar Allan Poe's "The Premature Burial" (1844) and Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868) contributed to an already considerable societal preoccupation with dying. It was during this time that opportunistic undertakers marketed caskets designed with an escape hatch or with a bell-rope.

In a less obvious manner, particularly before the Civil War and its aftermath, related cultural anxieties were expressed in sentimental representations of dying. Typical of this tradition was Henry Peach Robinson's *Fading Away* (1858), a painting of enormous popularity on both sides of the Atlantic. Robinson's depiction of a dying tubercular young woman, almost angelic in her light-saturated white gown, corresponds to melodramatic, young-girl death-bed scenes in nineteenth-century writings, most notably in Charles Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841) and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Such popular romance fantasies promoted the fashionable nineteenth-century ideal of a "good" or "beautiful" death, a latter-day version of centuries-old Christian beliefs concerning the final deathbed struggle of the soul. Whatever the authorial intention or the cultural impetus behind the sentimentalizing of the final moments of life, such widely-encountered pictorial and literary death-bed scenes effectively served as communal *memento mori* devices maintaining death's provocative visibility during the nineteenth century.

Whitman's poems not only reflect his century's awareness of death and his own negotiation of apprehensions relating to mortality, they also reveal the poet's deliberate effort to revise his culture's attitude toward dying. If Whitman's poetry is a form of consolation literature, it is a specifically Transcendentalist recasting of *ars moriendi*, art-of-dying writings devoted to a proper understanding of death. For Whitman, death is a good in itself. It is simply a productive stage in the infinite and processive development of each individual consciousness. "Nothing can happen more beautiful than death," he boldly pronounced in "Starting from Paumanok." "Praise! praise! praise!" he likewise wrote in "When Lilacs Last in Dooryard Bloom'd," "For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death." Such a radical claim was provocative in its day, just as the poet intended it to be.

No wonder D. H. Lawrence described Whitman as America's "great post mortem poet." No wonder, too, that in *So Long!: Walt Whitman's Poetry of Death* Harold Aspiz deftly assesses the long debate among critics concerning the implications of Whitman's abiding interest in—some would say his peculiar preoccupation with—death. Aspiz finds that much of this critical debate derives from the fact that the poet "never develops an overarching or consistent theory of death" (3). While Whitman affirmed death as a wonderful passage to an afterlife, he did so by a precarious leap of faith or by an erratic mystical intuition. Sometimes, as a result, he struggled with both grief and doubt. In "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," for instance, he appears to fear the possibility of nature's indifferent caprice. The poet's inner struggle over the meaning of human mortality notwithstanding, Whitman never wavered in his desire to believe that dying served some ultimate good in the cosmic scheme. Over time, moreover, his attention shifted from an idealization of the body to a celebration (without much elaboration) of the progressive journey of the immortal soul.

While the precise relation between the soul (consciousness) and the body remains vague in Whitman's writings, the poet does not represent the mind as synonymous with the physical brain or nervous system. Although each self (personal identity) journeys beyond the corporeal realm, both soul and body are positively aligned through their affinity with the spiritual underpinning of creation. At one point Aspiz nicely summarizes these points and his understanding of Whitman's developing representation of death through each edition of *Leaves of Grass*: "The fear that had surfaced in earlier poems—that death may be only [an] eternal nothingness—has [in the later poems] become sublimated into a faith in an afterlife during which the elements of conscious (mortal) identity are somehow preserved" (209).

A testament to Aspiz's enviable intimacy with Whitman's poetry, *So Long!* mimics the poet's manner. As much symphonic as narrative in his technique, Aspiz advances his theme through strategic repetition and variation. Notable, as well, is a remarkable access to pertinent information dexterously drawn from closely-read poems as well as from their milieu. These details sometimes sparkle for a moment, then vanish, their afterglow lingering in the reader's mind. As with the poems, too, there are stray bits of inconsistency, particularly concerning the destiny of the soul in Whitman's scheme (117, 124, 130, 160). Also as with the poems, there are curious places where the reader resists a claim. Does, for example, the word *doubtless* really signify the poet's uncertainty in "A Song of Joys" (133)? Is "A Noiseless Patient Spider" really about the poet's "leap of faith" concerning his immortality (210)? Do not Transcendentalist ideas, as much as revised Christian concepts, inform Whitman's beliefs about death?

Such moments matter little to the reader absorbed in Aspiz's deep and rewarding meditation. If his book cannot quite be the last word on Whitman's response to mortality—for debated topics likewise prove immortal—it is the fullest and best treatment of the subject to date. An exemplary work, *So Long!* is the crowning achievement of Aspiz's career-long devotion to Whitman's poetry.

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SHEILA COGHILL AND THOM TAMMARO, eds., *Visiting Walt: Poems Inspired by the Life and Work of Walt Whitman*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003. Iowa Whitman Series.

More than twenty years ago, Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom, and Dan Campion had the kind of idea that always makes one wonder why no one had thought of it sooner. In *Walt Whitman, The Measure of His Song* (Holy Cow! Press, 1981) they collected the poems, letters and essays in which writers around the world did what readers of Whitman have always felt an irresistible impulse to do: "talk back" to Whitman. Not all poets elicit such a response, and some (Poe, for instance) positively forbid it. (It is hard to imagine a response like, "Yes! That raven rapped on my door too!") But both our national "poetic parents," Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman, invite interchange with their readers and literary progeny.