

is viewed in some poems reverentially, in others as revelation, but perhaps the biggest—and funniest—surprise is Thomas Gannon's completely literal treatment in "Meeting the Master," which progresses from the poet's awareness of having felt a sudden *squish* underfoot to his peeling off his left boot a "teeny Walt / Whitman, flat as a / leaf of grass, only a lot / wider." For my tastes, humor works best, as it does in Gannon's poem, when dealing with Whitman lines that have been beaten to death by scholars, critics, and serious classroom discussion. It explodes them—with laughter—so that, oddly, they can come to life again.

But of course we all have different tastes, and the greatest strength of this wonderful collection of poems is that there is something here for everyone. This is a collection not only for Whitmaniacs who have carried on their own interactions and imaginary dialogues with Walt, but for lovers of poetry in general, for many of these poems, apart from the connection with Whitman, are brilliant and moving in themselves.

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ANGUS FLETCHER. *A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of the Imagination*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. xiv + 316 pp.

In defining "the environment" broadly as anything that surrounds (what is surrounded being usually some distinctly human endeavor), Angus Fletcher's highly original (and occasionally eccentric) effort at redefining American poetics expands the field of ecocriticism while all but ignoring the thematic connection to such matters as environmental protection, wilderness celebration, endangerment of species and land forms, and technological intrusions upon nonhuman (or pre-modern) communities. Rather than sticking with what has become the usual canon, beginning with the Romantics and following the development of nature writing through Emerson and Thoreau and on to such worthies as John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Edward Abbey, Gary Snyder, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Mary Oliver, Fletcher treats Whitman as the central figure in a historical tradition of descriptive poets rooted in the eighteenth century and including John Clare on one side and John Ashbery on the other in a two-hundred-year continuum. As a genre, the "environment-poem," according to Fletcher, originates with Whitman. The poems in *Leaves of Grass* "are not *about* the environment, whether natural or social," Fletcher argues, "They *are* environments" (103). Fletcher arrives at what seems to me a special version of formalism that insists on a radical separation of these poetic environments from the natural and social world, which entails an insistent separation of rhetoric from poetics and a separate treatment of place and space. While American democracy, according to this theory, may have created the conditions for a shift in focus from place to space, the environment-poem does not seem to sustain a dialogic relationship with the social context that made it possible. Though he does not make the connection himself, Fletcher's treatment of the environment-poem in Clare, Whitman, and Ashbery seems to foretell not the ecological crises of modern times so much as the concern with

virtual reality and cyberspace in artificial intelligence, computer engineering, and science fiction.

Fletcher's perspective opens a new vista on Whitman's work in many ways. Placing works such as "Song of Myself" in relation to the descriptive poetry of the British eighteenth century offers new insights into Whitman's enumerative style as well as the principles of movement and observation shared particularly among urban poets, whether on the street or rambling out into the countryside. Thinking about poetics in relation to Jacksonian reforms in American democracy sheds light on the leveling of hierarchies involving not only people but also objects observed and organized into poetic descriptions. Remembering Whitman's lifelong geographical relationship to the ocean suggests the origins of the persistent wave-like motion of his poems and the formation of what Fletcher calls "the Whitman phrase," the paramount syntactical unit in his compositions. The poet's interest in close observation, the problem of scale, and descriptive writing accounts largely for his resistance to abstraction and his connection with science and natural history—as well as with journalism. Remembering Whitman's background in journalism helps to explain the openness of the structure of *Leaves of Grass*, its unfolding over the years in newly expanded editions, as well as the resistance to closure we find in the best poems, the tendency of the poetic topic or even the figure of the poet to solidify before our eyes and then dissolve back into the fabric of life. While we can see traces of the journalist in *Leaves of Grass*, however, it was the poet in Whitman, says Fletcher, "that caused his troubles and his final break with the news business that he knew so well, from print shop and pressroom all the way up to the publisher's office. The poet in him had to slow up the pace of his perceptions, placing them at the service of diurnal knowledge, instead of yesterday's news" (84-85). "Clare, Whitman, and Ashbery all write poetry as if it were a revelatory or metaphysical journalism" (76).

Fletcher's theorizing remains refreshingly free of the jargon and formulaic thinking that too often pass for theory. His interest in composition and creativity links him more with poetics in the traditional sense. But his own terminology seems in some instances to stretch to the breaking point—I'm thinking particularly of terms like "horizon," "diurnal," even "environment" itself—before ever being used in demonstrative acts of reading. The readings never materialize. There are, for that matter, very few specific quotations, only glancing mentions of the poems. One result is that the description-centered theory that emerges seems to reach farther than it really does. It might well yield a good reading of "Song of Myself," "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," many of the *Drum-Taps* poems, and such later works as "Sparkles from the Wheel"—all of which get nods from Fletcher. But what about "This Compost," arguably the most powerful ecological poem in American literature, the drama of which seems to resist the tag of "descriptive"; or "Song of the Redwood-Tree," a rhetorical tour de force that replaces the descriptive power of the witness with the abstraction of allegory at a distance and exchanges the democratic leveling of hierarchies for a reissue of the Great Chain of Being? In final analysis, Fletcher's trend toward generality (not to mention his expansive title) overstates the importance of his findings. His theory accounts for at best a single thread in the complexity of Whitman's poetic achievement and a

single path of influence that runs from the eighteenth century to our own times, finding its fullest realization perhaps in the work of John Ashbery.

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JONATHAN NED KATZ. *Love Stories: Sex between Men before Homosexuality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001; issued in paperback, 2003.

In 1989, when I reviewed Charley Shively's *Drum-Beats: Walt Whitman's Civil War Boy Lovers* in this journal, I called for "a revisionist biography of Whitman that does not assume that the poet was *heterosexual* (we've had those biographies before) or that he was *asexual* or *omnisexual* or *monosexual* or passively *homoerotic* (we've had those, too), but one that . . . represents a full life built on the assumption that (not built out of the suspicion that) Whitman was gay." Shively's own work, along with the pioneering efforts of critics like Robert K. Martin, Michael Lynch, and Martin Duberman, helped pave the way for such a study. There have been a number of excellent and suggestive studies of Whitman as a gay writer since that time, most notably Byrne R. S. Fone's *Masculine Landscapes: Walt Whitman and the Homoerotic Text* (1992) and Gary Schmidgall's *Walt Whitman: A Gay Life* (1997). Neither of these books was a full-fledged biography, however, and Jonathan Ned Katz's *Love Stories*—published in 2001 and recently issued in paperback—certainly is not a biography of Whitman either. But Katz does offer the most fully contextualized study we so far have of Whitman's affections for males. *Love Stories* uses Whitman as a kind of leitmotif in an extended anecdotal history of what Katz calls "men's lust and love for men in the nineteenth century United States, with a glance across the Atlantic." The book will strike some readers as uncomfortably voyeuristic, but Katz's purpose is precisely to peer into sexual practices that have been silenced for so long and to tell some of the first documented "love stories" between men.

Nearly half of the book's twenty-four chapters focus on Whitman or on Whitman's influence on and relationships with others. Chapter 3, "A Gentle Angel Entered," analyzes Whitman's 1841 story "The Child's Champion," echoing Michael Moon's reading in *Disseminating Whitman* but going on to emphasize how in this story Whitman struggles to name a new kind of love between men, grappling with a language and a set of cultural assumptions that still set a barrier between "sex-love" and "pure love": "Bodily love and spiritual love were thought of then as inhabiting distinct realms—the sensual and the spiritual never met and mated." Whitman, of course, would devote much of his poetry to affirming the marriage of the body and the soul, the physical and the spiritual. Katz reads Whitman's "The Child's Champion" as his first faltering attempt to merge male/male love and male/male lust, and thus to transform "an illicit sex story into a romantic sex-love tale." Katz argues that Whitman could get away with publishing what seems to our ears a dangerously explicit story of male/male sexual love precisely because the culture of the time, under the spell of "the asexual love ideal," would have blocked the sexual allusions so as to keep pure the declarations of love. John Lankton and the young boy Charles, the main characters in "The Child's Champion," then,