

ED FOLSOM, ed. *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994. xxiv + 262 pp. \$32.95 cloth; \$17.95 paper.

This interesting, varied collection of essays is a welcome addition to Whitman studies. Ably introduced and edited by Ed Folsom, the volume is the outgrowth of "Walt Whitman: The Centennial Conference," held at the University of Iowa in March 1992. The "the" in the titles of both the conference and the resultant volume may seem, at first glance, a bit brash, considering the numerous Whitman conferences, lectures, poetry readings, and critical writings that the centennial year produced. But this volume merits the distinction the word implies. Represented here are many scholars who have established themselves as leading voices in Whitman criticism.

Appropriately, the lead essay in the volume is by Gay Wilson Allen, whose biographical and critical work on Whitman remains seminal and, in many ways, unequalled. It is refreshing to hear from this dean of Whitman biographers, "Biography is not dead yet; it will continue to supplement semiotics and linguistic studies as we go on reconstructing Walt Whitman" (8).

At the same time, the volume includes pieces by younger scholars who bring to bear current perspectives such as Foucauldian theory and gay studies. Several of the contributors show an admirable willingness to modify or expand upon (not merely parrot) their previously well-defined positions. Robert K. Martin, who has been one of the most careful close readers of Whitman's poetry in terms of its homosexual themes, argues convincingly that in an era before the notion of sexual identity, Whitman constructed a model of same-sex love derived largely from working-class notions of manliness. Betsy Erkkila, adding a fresh dimension to her fine work on Whitman's politics, points out that in a period when sexual categories were permeable and fluid, Whitman virtually dispensed with barriers between what would later be designated as "homosexual" or "heterosexual" passion, envisaging a nation cemented by same-sex love.

As these arguments suggest, there is an effort among current scholars to place Whitman in historical context, to show how his attitudes and techniques were deeply embedded in his contemporary culture. Successful in this regard is M. Jimmie Killingsworth, who discovers intriguing parallels between Whitman's sexual imagery and the eroticized discourse of antebellum abolitionists. Also illuminating is M. Wynn Thomas, who focuses on the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* to demonstrate that Whitman, despite his hatred of slavery, determinedly presented the South in a conciliatory light in order to make a plea for national unity. The race issue is deftly dealt with by Alan Trachtenberg, who notes that Whitman's valorization of common workers applied principally to whites, and Arthur Golden, who traces Whitman's utopian cultural agenda to his conservative racial views and his profound disillusion with the political and social status quo.

One of the many paradoxes about Whitman is that his occasionally conservative pronouncements on public issues belie the undeniably progressive, liberating effects of his poetry. A promising direction for scholars is outlined in George B. Hutchinson's essay on Whitman's legacy in the Harlem Renaissance. With originality and specificity, Hutchinson shows how several twentieth-

century black writers—Alain Locke, Jean Toomer, James Weldon Johnson—saw in Whitman a precursor of the erotic and stylistic freedoms they sought to establish in African-American literary contexts. The capacious nature of Whitman's influence is suggested by Kenneth Price, who reveals that John Dos Passos admired the poet first from the Left and then from the Right, and by Walter Grünfzweig, who shows that Whitman has remained a touchstone among German lyrical poets of varied political stances.

If Whitman's "I" contained multitudes, so does this volume. There are few critical approaches that are neglected. Joel Myerson, who has recently made landmark contributions to Whitman scholarship with *The Whitman Archive* and *Walt Whitman: A Descriptive Bibliography*, contributes a perceptive bibliographical piece on the publishing history of various editions of *Leaves of Grass*. Jerome Loving, who is at work on a new life of the poet, traces the career of one of the poet's early biographers, Henry Bryan Binns. Vivian R. Pollak explores Whitman's poetic development before and after the Civil War in terms of his shifting relationship to American presidents.

As for the remaining contributors to the volume, their names read like a roll-call of Whitman stars: Roger Asselineau, C. Carroll Hollis, James Perrin Warren, Harold Aspiz, James E. Miller, Jr., and V. K. Chari. These scholars discuss, respectively, Whitman's European roots, discourse markers in his poetry, the reconstructive language of *Democratic Vistas*, mixed responses to his erotic themes, and his poetic oeuvre in light of Indian poetics.

In the course of reading the volume, one becomes aware of ways in which tensions or potential contradictions in Whitman scholarship might be resolved. The gap between linguistic/stylistic approaches and cultural/historical ones is bridged in several of the essays that explore simultaneously Whitman's language and its roots in nineteenth-century cultural discourse. Even that most apparently private aspect of Whitman—his affection for men—was, as Martin and Erkkilä point out, partly a discursive product of its time. This argument could be strengthened by reference to social historians like George Chauncey, who shows how common same-sex relationships were among nineteenth-century men, or Timothy Gilfoyle and Michael Lynch, who demonstrate that homosexuality was rarely a matter of public concern or criminal prosecution in a time when such relationships were normative. Hence Whitman's perception of himself as a celebrant of the kind of love that prevailed among working-class men; hence, too, his rejection of John Addington Symonds's interpretation of his sexual orientation, based upon the European intellectual notion of "sexual inversion."

This volume is a vivid reminder that a writer so multifaceted as Whitman can be best understood by open-minded readers who take into account his many dimensions, from the erotic to the spiritual, from the political to the linguistic. *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays* is must reading for anyone seriously interested in the poet.

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