

## REVIEWS

ED FOLSOM. *Walt Whitman's Native Representations*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994. xvi + 194 pp., 194 pp., illus. \$54.95.

In the hands of a less insightful critic, or in the days when a poet's culture was viewed as no more than raw material to be selectively extracted and then hammered into a beautiful product, Ed Folsom's four topics of concern in *Walt Whitman's Native Representations*—Whitman and American dictionaries, Whitman and baseball, Whitman and American Indians, Whitman and photography—would have merited no more than footnotes in the critical literature. None of Whitman's major poems or essays take these topics as a central theme. His references to them are often brief and are widely scattered. But just as surely as other cultural phenomena—the Civil War, science, the performing arts, politics, language, and sexuality—proved for Whitman rich sources of poetic language and energy, so also the topics Folsom considers occupied an as yet unacknowledged and little understood place of privilege in the poet's life and work.

Using the four topics as perspectives on the poet's overall development, Folsom is able to demonstrate more effectively than perhaps any previous critic how deep Whitman's investment in American culture actually was and how, instead of applying some established poetic technology to the cultural ore of his times, Whitman drew upon a diverse set of activities and energies from every corner of American life to transform the practices and principles of poetic art. Thus, Folsom writes in his conclusion, "Many writers incorporated cultural events and technological developments into their work by describing them, but few had the genius to throw out the old ways of describing and to discover new ways generated *out* of the new forms and actions and tools that the national culture was describing itself with." Whitman made it his challenge "to 'word the future' with a poetry that was truly in rhythm with the burgeoning dictionaries, the emerging national sport, the fading autochthonous cultures, and the stunning new technologies of representation" (176-77). Folsom's notion that Whitman employed "cultural acts as writing *tools* more than writing subjects" (177) may strike some readers as too heavily instrumental for a theory of poetics (even for the carpenter-poet Whitman), but few, I suspect, will come away from reading this book without a far better sense of what these topics meant to Whitman and how they supplied him with special modes of signification as well as native subject matter.

Since all of the book's topics are related to signification and thus involve language, it is appropriate that Chapter 1 sets the stage with a discussion of Whitman's interest in the first American dictionaries. Like Noah Webster and other nineteenth-century lexicographers, Whitman himself was engaged in a "language experiment" devoted to capturing the new forms of life and new ideas of American experience. As a fellow spirit, Whitman followed closely the

work of Webster and drew frequently upon his dictionary in its various editions. In recognition of this practice, Folsom argues, "We now read Whitman with the wrong wordbook, glossing his words with our definitions and with our current sense of the history of the language"; we "tend to forget that he was using Webster's dictionaries with their often eccentric and incorrect etymologies, with their spirited and sometimes quirky definitions . . . and . . . examples of usage" (22-23). If we attune our ears properly, Folsom suggests, "we can hear in Whitman's use of certain words the same Shakespearean or biblical echoes that Webster has set up in his definitions: the frequent allusions to Shakespeare and the Bible in *Leaves* may derive as much from [the poet's] study of Webster's as from his study of the direct sources" (23).

Whitman's use of the dictionaries may also have stimulated some of his strongest thinking about poetics. Consider, for instance, his assertion that "The Real Dictionary [should] give all words that exist in use, the bad words as well as any" (19), or his idea that language is like a "vast living body, or perennial body of bodies" (21), or the notion that every etymology is a literal reading of a "fossil poem" (21). Whitman's study of the dictionary—an activity marked by considerable creativity, the kind of "athletic reading" Whitman demanded of the audience for his poetry—thus provides a dramatic illustration of the kind of dialectical encounter with cultural phenomena that each of Folsom's chapters seeks to reveal.

The treatment of Whitman and baseball in Chapter 2 also deals with the inspirations Whitman discovered in his meditations on American culture, but the suggestiveness of this second topic, thanks to Folsom's inventive scholarship, is even more surprising. Here we learn that, in a certain tradition of literary wit, Whitman has always been connected with baseball, even if scholars have ignored the relation. Whitman's early disciple Ernest Crosby employed a Whitmanesque style to celebrate baseball and other areas of American life in his 1899 *Plain Talk in Psalm & Parable*. Jonathan Williams dedicated his 1959 poem "Fastball" to Whitman, "Hot for Honorary Installation at Cooperstown." Virginia Woolf, who said that Whitman was the "real American undisguised" and that "in America, there is baseball instead of society," connected the American poet with the American pastime for the same reason that Ed Folsom does. In baseball and in poetry, Woolf said, the Americans "are doing what the Elizabethans did—they are coining new words," and "when words are being made, a literature will be made out of them" (28).

Though direct references to baseball appear rarely in Whitman's poems, the poet's conversations and comments about the game serve as an indicator of many of his attitudes toward American life. As Folsom puts it, "Whitman, growing up with the sport, eventually came to see baseball as an essential metaphor for America" (34-35). Baseball, like Whitman's poems, was an urban phenomenon that yet remained outdoors. It was, to Whitman's delight, enthusiastically embraced by the working classes: "The occupations listed on early team rosters," Folsom tells us, "often read like a Whitmanesque catalog of working-class America" (36). Moreover, baseball provided a field for the play of "adhesive" emotions, "sanctioning . . . open expressions of male-male friendship" and thereby answering Whitman's call for opportunities to realize "manly" and "athletic" love; indeed, as Folsom notes, "Baseball remains in

American culture one of the few public sites where men embrace, pat other males' rears, drape their arms around male teammates, without causing homophobic reactions" (39). As a boy, Whitman played the game with his brothers. He pitched and batted with his students as a young school teacher on Long Island. Observing the earliest organized teams as a newspaper editor in the 1840s, he endorsed the healthfulness and camaraderie of the sport. During the war, he certainly watched and may have played in ball games featuring teams of soldiers and government officials.

The fate of baseball, however, was for Whitman a sad one, emblematic of the post-war changes in American life that nearly brought him to despair over the democratic experiment. By the time of Whitman's death, the sport had become a spectator affair for the ordinary citizen, with highly specialized professional players organized into a corporate phalanx—another example of the decline of the artisanal democratic culture and the rise of corporate America that critics like Wynn Thomas and Alan Trachtenberg have shown to be the great disappointment of Walt Whitman with his dream of participatory, egalitarian democracy. As Folsom demonstrates in this fascinating chapter: "What he had begun by celebrating as the natural union of good fellowship and team camaraderie (a team spirit so strong it could heal the divisions of the Civil War) had hardened over the years of his adult life into a corporate unity based on profit, greed, and control" (54).

The passing of the "Golden Era of baseball" coincided with the yet more disturbing tragedy of the American Indians. The systematic destruction of Indian resistance to Western expansion left Whitman in an attitudinal quandary, which Folsom documents in his third chapter more completely than any previous critic. As a journalist throughout his adult life—an era "framed by the Great Removal . . . and the Wounded Knee massacre" (57)—and as a clerk in the Indian Bureau during his Washington years, Whitman followed closely the results of the Indian wars, the relentless press of white settlements to the west, and the comings and goings of Indian delegations in the east. Whitman recognized that the Indians "had been abused and treated unjustly, but he also subscribed to the notion of progress and social evolution and believed that it was inevitable and ultimately valuable that America extend itself from sea to sea, in service of the 'largest result' of the 'whole body of the states' " (57). Though he shared many of the racist attitudes of his contemporaries, Whitman admired the "vital quality" the Indians represented and mourned the loss of their cultures. As Folsom puts it, "for Whitman, depending on his moods and motivations, Indians could be the debris of evolutionary progress, the primitive versions of American selves that were left behind . . . , or . . . the advance guard, the model fit survivors, embodying qualities that Americans had to move *toward*" (92). As his moods and motives shifted, however, the interests of the Union always came first in Whitman's politics, so that, as Folsom rightly notes, "the only clear thing" for the poet "was the certainty that the Indians themselves would be 'wiped out' " (57).

Whitman's greatest tribute to the life and culture of the American Indians was his incorporation of them in his poems, but even this is touched with ambivalence. His preservation of Indian place names (Paumanok, Mannahatta), his memories of Indians in the past tense (the striking story of the red woman's

visit to his mother in "The Sleepers," for example), and even his incorporation of the character he calls the "free and flowing savage" into the persona of "Song of Myself" bespeak Whitman's effort to internalize the Indian as a passing phenomenon of history. Ultimately, however, "the 'savage' came to be not the brutal native out there, but the wild vitality within the [white man's] soul" (62). One hundred years later, as Folsom shows, Indian writers like Leslie Marmon Silko and Simon Ortiz hear and admire the native spirit of Whitman's poems even as they resist his imperialist tendency to reduce the Indian to an element of the white man's inner life and a figure of his memory.

The interactions of the Anglo and Indian cultures—the wars, the treaty negotiations, the interchanges of trade—were among the first major American activities to be photographically recorded. The new visual technology, which evolved during Whitman's lifetime, fascinated the poet and affected his understanding of the world more than any of the other technical achievements he celebrates in his poems. In the two chapters on photography, Folsom discovers the most perfect realization of his thesis on Whitman's use of cultural "tools." He convincingly argues that in admiring photography as a "truly democratic art"—a mechanical means of representation that left out nothing, as honest as the sun on which it depended for its success—Whitman came to see reality, and its poetic representation, as "something like a photograph being developed: beauty is 'latent' in the rejected refuse of the world; discarded objects and vulgar experiences need only impress themselves through the lens of the eye, on the poet's sensitized imagination, and then, slowly, the image will develop, beautiful in its detail, radiant in its newfound significance, released from its degraded position in old hierarchical value systems" (106-107). Whitman was thus a leader in the literary movements that, under the charm of the photographic imagination, emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century. In Folsom's view, all the burgeoning modernist movements displayed "an obsessive concern with the present moment, an equating of reality with what can be seen . . . ; a focusing on detail . . . ; a recording of personal experience of the world; an emphasis on absorptive vision; [and] an exploration of abrupt juxtapositions of separate moments that gained resonance by their often dissonant conjoining" (110-11).

In addition to its impact on the literary imagination, photography affected the concept of the self in American culture, with photographic portraiture deeply altering habits of self-contemplation. In the generation that followed Whitman's, for the first time, a person could observe carefully the changes that life wrought upon the body as the stages of a developmental process. Both process philosophy and developmental psychology appeared as the intellectual products of this photographed generation. Whitman anticipated these developments—not only in poems like "Faces" with its gallery of photographic studies and "To Confront a Portrait," a neglected meditation on the power of photography, but also in his choice of the portraits that he used as frontispieces in his book, a choice he undertook with a great deal of thought and energy. With his flowing beard and striking gaze, the poet became the subject of the most famous photographers of his age, pioneers in the profession like Alexander Gardner and Mathew Brady. Whitman counted these men among the heroes of democratic culture, but as he reviewed the portraits he kept in his

later years, he confessed to Horace Traubel that he was sometimes disturbed by what he saw. He often failed to remember the attitude or even to recognize the face that the camera had captured. Thus, in late life, the "one-self" that had buoyed him up in the whirling quicksand years of his early adulthood now came to seem fragmentary and disjointed. Even as he realized a modern way of seeing, a sustained focus on the details and images of the present time, the past came to haunt him as unknowable and irretrievable.

In Folsom's study of photography, then, a kind of Emersonian compensation emerges as a theme. Both cultural and personal advances appear to be purchased at some cost, while even great losses are usually accompanied by a compensatory progress. This relatively conservative viewpoint seems always to have attended Whitman's reflections, but was especially prominent in his post-war writings and conversations. By treating each of his topics as perspectives on Whitman's total development as a person and a poet, Folsom tends to emphasize attitudes that prevailed toward the end of the poet's career, the completion of a life journey that coincided with the unfolding of the four cultural phenomena. The first American dictionaries appeared in Whitman's youth and were established as institutions by the time of his death—the spirit of controversy and ferment that accompanied the early dictionaries giving way to something like institutional rigor by the end of the century. Likewise, Whitman grew up playing baseball and watched the sport develop into a national pastime and then fall victim to the factory model of corporate management. In the same span of years, Whitman saw Indian resistance to Westward expansion weakened, then destroyed by an increasing reliance on military troops and racist attitudes. As if to balance the destructive forces of institutionalization, industrialization, and ethnic cleansing, Whitman looked eagerly upon the first phases of the revolution in representational technology, which put the power of instruments like the camera at the disposal of artists and finally ordinary citizens, changing forever the way people viewed their relation to the world and to themselves. So went the march of progress, in an unrelenting cycle of take and give, with only the Whitmanian faith in human evolution to make the big picture and the long run tolerable.

Such is the wistful narrative that takes shape in this exciting new book. The story is all the better because of Folsom's prose style (always engaging and readable and often eloquent) and his critical technique, which gently probes the theoretical issues surrounding the concept of cultural representation while offering frequent illuminations of the specific language and images in Whitman's writings. With scholarly care and critical energy, Folsom transforms what might have seemed four marginal topics into four crucial issues with subtle interconnections.

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