

REVIEW

On Whitman: The Best from American Literature, ed. Edwin H. Cady and Louis J. Budd. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1987. x, 295 pp.

American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography was the first such periodical in its field. Launched by Jay B. Hubbell in 1929, it appeared at a time when the national literature was widely regarded as no more than a minor branch of British letters. In the "Foreword" that opened the journal's first issue, founder Hubbell declared that "until recent years our scholars were slow to study the national letters or their relation to European literatures and to American life and thought. American Literature has been so continually overpraised in certain quarters and so neglected in others that we may well say of it—as Schopenhauer said of life—that it needs neither to be wept over nor to be laughed at but to be understood." Elsewhere in the introductory issue, Henry Seidel Canby seconded the call for a thorough, scholarly approach to native authors and their writings:

It was only day before yesterday that Whitman came into his own; but yesterday when Melville was acknowledged as one of the great novelists of the nineteenth century. Emerson had his due, but lost it, and is only now regaining the reputation he deserves. Thoreau has not yet reached the peak of his fame. Cooper went into eclipse, but is likely to shine again, though with diminished glory. Irving has sunk to a glow, but it is a serene and steady light. Longfellow must be re-established on a new and lower plane. Emily Dickinson is rising. Mark Twain has fought his way into literature, but his work has never been properly studied as such. Poe's case is better. Holmes, Bryant, Jewett, Webster, Simms, Crane, Bierce, the Alcotts, Lanier—to take a handful of minor names, and Hawthorne to choose a major, all need orientation, explanation, appreciation on the sound bases of exact knowledge, and by the finer intuitions of trained taste, which have long been available for older literatures.

Now in its sixtieth year of publication, *American Literature* can boast of a long and distinguished record. "With very few notable exceptions," as its current editors claim, "the movers and shakers of the profession have since the beginning joined in cooperating to create and sustain the journal." Even an informal review of the pages of this scholarly quarterly discloses many fine contributions to the "orientation, explanation, [and] appreciation" of American authors. Thus it seems quite appropriate at this point for Edwin Cady and Louis Budd to edit a series of critical anthologies, each volume focusing on a particular author or topic and consisting of the outstanding articles and notes from "the whole sweep of *American Literature*." *On Whitman* inaugurates the series, while similar collections are planned on Twain, Melville, Dickinson, Cather, Faulkner, The Frontier Myth, and The Transcendentalists.

Over the years, Whitman has commanded, in *AL*'s pages, his share of attention. There were two articles on him in the 1920s (i.e., in 1929), thirty-three in the 1930s, sixteen in the 1940s, twenty-two in the 1950s, fourteen in the 1960s, and fifteen in the 1970s. There have been thirteen studies of the poet thus far in the 1980s. In other words, from Vol. 1, No. 1, dated March 1929, through Vol. 59, No. 4, dated October

1987, *AL* has published on Walt Whitman a total of one hundred fifteen articles, or about two a year. Of course, some of these, perhaps as many as four dozen, have been quite brief and are better identified as notes than as articles. Typical examples would include Rollo G. Silver's "Whitman and Dickens," 5 (January 1934), 370-371, and William White's "Whitman's First 'Literary' Letter," 35 (March 1963), 83-85. Most, though, have been substantial treatments, ranging in length from 8 to 35 pages. The longest essay has been Edward Hungerford's "Walt Whitman and His Chart of Bumps," 2 (January 1931), 350-384.

In *On Whitman: The Best from American Literature*, Professors Cady and Budd reprint sixteen of the more than one hundred articles at their disposal. The term *best*, they say, applies to work that is "original yet sound, interesting, and useful for the study and teaching of an author, intellectual movement, motif, or genre." Their selections comprise some older commentaries, essays first printed as far back as the early 1930s, but most of the articles—ten, in fact,—are recent, having been published within the past two decades. The authors of the selections include Floyd Stovall, Sculley Bradley, Alfred H. Marks, Henry Alonzo Myers, Emory Holloway, Lawrence Buell, Lawrence Templin, Robin P. Hoople, Robert Scholnick, John B. Mason, Stephen J. Tapscott, David W. Hiscoe, Myrth Jimmie Killingsworth, Ivan Marki, and Harold Aspiz.

The sixteen essays in the volume bespeak a wide range of critical and scholarly interests: the way in which "key-poems" of Whitman reflect the principal political, philosophical, and religious developments of nineteenth-century America; the poet's experiences at Timber Creek, New Jersey, upon which he drew in writing *Specimen Days*; the concept of "spiritual democracy" articulated in the first (1855) edition of *Leaves of Grass*; Whitman's prosodic forms, those revolutionary experiments in rhythm and meter; his "triadic imagery," a result, perhaps, of the influence of Hegelian thought or of Emerson's discussions of "polarities"; his relationships with women; the importance of his catalogues—to his style in particular and to Transcendental idealism in general; his indebtedness to Quakerism; the significance of "Chants Democratic and Native American," a poem-cycle of the third (1860) edition of *Leaves of Grass*; the manner in which Whitman was treated by the editors of four nineteenth-century magazines: *Atlantic*, *Scribner's*, *Galaxy*, and *Harper's*; the function of the catalogues in "Song of Myself"; the way in which Whitman's interest in Egyptology is manifested in "Song of Myself"; the poet's understanding and use of the European Middle Ages; the theme of motherhood as it is treated in his poetry; the last eleven (of the twelve) poems in the 1855 *Leaves*; and, finally, the link in Whitman's poetry between sexual ecstasy and artistic creation.

Although all the articles chosen by Cady and Budd exhibit signs of solid scholarship or astute criticism, or both, more than half are rather limited in scope. Quite a few, in other words, will appeal only to the specialist. At least six of the essays, though, have broad applicability and should be of interest and relevance to almost all students and teachers of Whitman. I am referring to Stovall's "Main Drifts in Whitman's Poetry" (1932), Bradley's "The Fundamental Metrical Principle in Whitman's Poetry" (1939), Buell's "Transcendentalist Catalogue Rhetoric: Vision Versus Form" (1968), Templin's "The Quaker Influence on Walt Whitman" (1970), Hiscoe's "Whitman's Use of the Middle Ages" (1980), and Aspiz's "Walt Whitman: The Spermatic Imagination" (1984). While one ought not go so far as to call these "the best of the best," this half dozen does go a long way toward making *On Whit-*

man, as its compilers intended, "a live resource, [rather than an] homage to once vibrant but petrifying achievements in the past."

On the whole, the editors deserve praise for their choices. Nevertheless, with a collection of this sort, one is tempted to second-guess those choices, to speculate on what might have been, or should have been, included. It is safe to say, I think, that some extremely fine essays have been passed over. Consider, for instance, Willie T. Weathers's "Whitman's Poetic Translations of His 1855 Preface," 19 (March 1947), 21-40; Edward F. Grier's "Walt Whitman, the *Galaxy*, and *Democratic Vistas*," 23 (November 1951), 332-350; C. Carroll Hollis's "Whitman and William Swinton: A Cooperative Friendship," 230 (January 1959), 425-449; Russell A. Hunt's "Whitman's Poetics and the Unity of *Calamus*," 46 (January 1975), 482-494; Diane Kepner's "From Spears to Leaves: Walt Whitman's Theory of Nature in 'Song of Myself,'" 51 (May 1979), 179-204; and James Perrin Warren's "The 'Real Grammar': Deverbal Style in 'Song of Myself,'" 56 (March 1984), 1-16. The essays by Weathers, Grier, and Hunt would have been useful additions, for they focus on works, major ones, that are now largely ignored in the volume. The Hollis and Warren studies would have been most welcome in light of the current interest in Whitman and language. And, given its thorough treatment of an important subject, Kepner's article surely should have been a strong candidate for inclusion, doubly so if one considers that *On Whitman* contains no contribution by a woman. Yet if one is an editor and has only so much space available, what piece must go in order to make room for another? The decision can be difficult.

Two misprints require attention. On the first page of the table of contents the publication date of the Buell article should read 1968 rather than 1958. At the end of the book, in the "Notes on Contributors," the publication date of Holloway's *Free and Lonesome Heart: The Secret of Walt Whitman* should read 1960, not 1921. But these are minor matters. Generally speaking, *On Whitman* is well-edited, handsomely printed, and companionable—made even more so by its detailed, five-page index. Certainly not the least of its virtues is that it gathers articles seldom encountered in comparable collections. Most college and university libraries will want to own it, as well as many public libraries, where back numbers of *American Literature* are often unavailable.

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