

## REVIEWS

Kerry C. Larson. *Whitman's Drama of Consensus*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988. xxiv, 269 pp.

Whatever else it may be, *Whitman's Drama of Consensus* has to be one of the more original works of Whitman criticism since Emerson's letter of 1855. It approaches its subject with a degree of analytical subtlety and rigorous probing that we might expect to find in commentary on Rilke or Mallarmé. The Whitman who appears in these pages is a poet of extraordinary sophistication and complexity, a master of intricate shadings, an artist of delicate tensions whom the New Critics themselves might have celebrated, if only they had known how. This study suggests a way.

The book is divided into three sections. The first deals primarily with Whitman's relationship to his readers (the fullest discussion available on that important subject), with special attention to "The Sleepers" and "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," as well as to the lessons and practices of Emerson; the second section examines the speaker's relationship to his language, with emphasis on "Song of Myself"; and the third considers "the body, comradeship, and death," particularly in the poems of *Children of Adam*, *Calamus*, *Sea-Drift*, and *Drum-Taps*. There is little mention of poems written after 1865.

No summary can adequately represent the arguments of *Whitman's Drama of Consensus*, but in general it can be said that the book deals with the *dynamics* of Whitman's poetry. It looks into the intricate strategies of language, and it identifies conflicting impulses and implications. It considers modes of discourse and rhetoric, with all their tensions and balances, directions and indirections, concealed purposes and threatening undercurrents, weights and counterweights, and impulsions toward completion and self-destruction. It examines what one might call the *vectors* of the poetry, the lines of force and magnitude, and it calls attention to the unstated meanings that hover behind statements and verbal gestures—the shadows, as it were, that reveal themselves to be substance.

The author's emphasis is made clear in his remarks on the "central motive" of Whitman's poetic. This motive, he writes, "involves the evolution of a consensual framework which the poem does not recommend so much as embody in 'one broad, primary, universal, common platform.' By 'permitting all and rejecting none,' the proper business of a poem is not to sustain a drama, develop a cast of characters, mount an argument, explore a soul, plead a cause, or render a judgment; more fundamentally, its ideal aim is to gather together without artificially dichotomizing a host of 'opposite equals' in what amounts to a convocation and tallying of their diverse energies." The reader will note how, according to this description, the "proper business of a poem" is an internal matter, detached from the life of its author, directed neither toward subject nor audience, ultimately free from historical, cultural, sociological, and ideological concerns. The poem, rather, folds into itself, self-contained, with its "diverse energies" playing off each other like atoms; and these interior move-

ments are its primary concerns. As a result of this critical approach, Whitman's poems are generally discussed as though they were paintings, with all their elements existing simultaneously, rather than as works that move sequentially, like music. At a time when much literary criticism would emphasize ideology over art, the author's assertion about the proper business of a poem is startling, as it opposes the view that literature does indeed mount arguments, plead causes, and render judgments (and not always the right ones, either). In this book, poetry asserts only itself; as the author states, "What distinguishes poetry from other forms of communication is that it does not move *toward* a condition of acknowledged legitimacy but settles the question of legitimacy itself." Its autonomy would seem to be complete; it exists in a realm beyond argument.

So intent is the author on his approach that at times Whitman's *method* appears to be the *subject*: the *how* becomes the *what*. In a provocative reading of "The Sleepers," for example, the author comments that "The withdrawal of a mediating center of consciousness has of course been the true subject of this poem all along." The "of course" may surprise: Is *that* what the poem has been about? One may find the emphasis excessive. To take another example, the author comments that "what is striking about the end of section six [of "Song of Myself"] is the way that it enacts what it appears to prohibit, the way it protests against reductiveness in a manifestly reductive fashion." One may doubt that many readers have found that *that* was what was striking about the end of section six; but one may nevertheless agree that it *is* striking when—and only when—the poem is approached from a certain narrowly defined perspective. One could go on; such intense single-mindedness happens often in criticism, and readers may supply their own examples.

In manner *Whitman's Drama of Consensus* is clinical and dispassionate. The poems of *Leaves of Grass* are treated as verbal artifacts, complete in themselves, and immensely complex; they are analyzed as one might describe a game of chess, with strategies and movements working to formulate design. The resulting commentary is frequently fascinating, although bloodless and lacking in human passion. Note, for example, the author's comment on "the Whitmanian eros," surely a topic rich with emotional possibility: ". . . the Whitmanian eros is nothing if not a play of sliding surfaces, a shimmering flux of disparate impulses which suffice in themselves to generate their own machinery of delight." Somehow the human being has disappeared, body and soul alike; the author's use of the word "machinery" is perhaps unintentionally revealing. (Incidentally, if one substituted "a poem" for "the Whitmanian eros" in the sentence just quoted, the result would suggest a concept of poetry central to *Whitman's Drama of Consensus*.)

Many readers will find this book formidable, if not intimidating. Its language is remote and abstract, and there is frequent need for definition and particularity, as in, for example, the following representative generalization: "Much as it would at times like to do so, [Whitman's] verse does not ultimately sponsor a static opposition between legislated union and spontaneous accord but tends to fuse both options into an ongoing dynamic of vacillation which generates the extraordinary clash between aspiration and skepticism that is at the heart of his search for a 'living principle' of solidarity." What Thoreau said of *Leaves of Grass*—"to be sure, sometimes I feel a little imposed upon"—readers may feel to be true of this book as well.

Nevertheless, *Whitman's Drama of Consensus* compels admiration; its difficulties should not obscure its value. It asks much of its readers, but it is frequently provoca-

tive and rewarding. There are superb comments on individual poems (e.g., "This Compost," "Spontaneous Me," "The Wound-Dresser"), as well as stimulating responses to others ("The Sleepers," "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd"). While the Whitman who appears in these pages is far from complete, a disembodied intelligence rather than a full human being, still, the partial view we are given is impressive. It should do much to enhance understanding of Whitman's complex art.

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Charley Shively, ed. *Drum Beats: Walt Whitman's Civil War Boy Lovers*. San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1989. 256 pp.

This book is a companion volume to Shively's *Calamus Lovers: Walt Whitman's Working-Class Camerados* (1987; reviewed in *WWQR* [Fall 1987]). Both books include collections of letters written to Whitman by various males, most of whom Shively believes to have been Whitman's homosexual lovers. While *Calamus Lovers* investigated these relationships across the span of Whitman's life, from his 1850s association with Fred Vaughan (whom Shively identifies as the inspiration for the *Calamus* poems) to his late involvements with Harry Stafford and Bill Duckett, *Drum Beats* focuses solely on Whitman's relationship with Civil War soldiers. As such, the book is an extension of Chapter Four of *Calamus Lovers*, "Many Soldiers' Kisses," which discussed soldiers Tom Sawyer, Lewis Brown, Alonzo Bush, and Elijah Douglass Fox, and printed some of their letters to Whitman. *Drum Beats* adds more letters by more soldiers and reprints parts of some originally printed in *Calamus Lovers*; it also offers an interesting collection of illustrations—photos of Whitman's soldier friends, other photos and engravings of Civil War soldiers, a facsimile of one of the letters, and various other visual documents.

As with *Calamus Lovers*, Shively is again identified as "editor" of the book even though nearly half of each volume is composed of his critical/biographical analyses of the relationships that the letters document. Shively's volumes form the most aggressively homosexual reading of Whitman that we have; written in reaction to generations of Whitman critics and biographers who have in Shively's view either misrepresented or evaded Whitman's sexual life, these books are written in the rebellious tones of someone who is fed up with the current state of Whitman scholarship and who is anxious to embrace Whitman's advice to "*Resist much, obey little*." Shively resisted much and obeyed little of scholarly convention in *Calamus Lovers*, refusing to clearly identify where the originals of the various letters are housed, making frequent careless errors in transcription, neglecting to acknowledge much of the previous work investigating these relationships, offering no annotations or bibliography, and generally thumbing his nose at established Whitman criticism. In *Drum Beats*, Shively continues to resist but obeys a little more than in the previous volume. The book is generally better produced than *Calamus Lovers* (though the back cover copy announcing "an exciting addition [*sic*] of letters to Walt Whitman from fifty soldiers and lovers" does not inspire immediate confidence), and this time Shively at least lists the location of the manuscript collection for each letter he prints. In a surprising use of his "Acknowledgements" section, Shively devotes space to acknowledging his