

Florence Bernstein Freedman. *William Douglas O'Connor: Walt Whitman's Chosen Knight*. Athens, Ohio & London: Ohio University Press, 1985. xiv, 368 pp. \$35.00.

When speaking of William O'Connor, it is easy and tempting to represent him either as a "parfit" knight in shining armor always ready to fly to the help of the weak and the oppressed or, on the contrary, as a wild bull instinctively charging upon the first red rag that was shown to him. In her biography, Florence Freedman very skillfully steers a middle course between these two excesses. Though she takes up in her title the phrase "chosen knight" that Whitman himself applied to his valiant champion, she draws his portrait with both sympathy and lucidity. She praises, but without any undue hyperbole, that unselfish generosity which made him devote all his spare-time and all his energy to the defense of Whitman for the greater glory of *Leaves of Grass*, a spontaneous generosity which he showed in everyday life too, as when, for example, he sent his unopened pay envelope to his wife month after month after the break-up of their marriage at a time when alimony was not the institution it has become and no one forced him to do so. It was out of generosity also that he killed himself with work, doing the job of two or three clerks in the Life-Saving Department to assure its efficiency and help save more lives. He fought gloriously for Whitman, but also more humbly and just as disinterestedly for his fellow-employees in the Government services, who were often scandalously underpaid. On the other hand—and Florence Freedman does not hide or minimize the reverse of the medal—his generosity and enthusiasm were sometimes misguided and he fought for worthless causes with the same impetuous intrepidity as he did when Whitman or even Poe were concerned. He thus plunged into the Shakespeare-Bacon controversy and gave full support to Delia Bacon and later (at the end of his life, which shows how stubborn he was) to Ignatius Donnelly, without realizing that it was undemocratic to claim that Shakespeare's plays had been written by an aristocrat rather than a commoner. His conviction was so infectious that Whitman shared it—in private at least—though he should have been aware that there was a difference in kind between the dry light ("lumen siccum") of Bacon's reason and the many-faceted imagination of "myriad-minded" Shakespeare, but he probably had never read a single page by Bacon, and anyway, thinking of his own *Leaves of Grass*, he thought there might be hidden mysteries in Shakespeare's plays, a mystic cipher, as he pointed out in one of his last poems, "Shakespeare-Bacon's Cipher."

So this is a perfectly impartial and admirably complete biography of O'Connor, carefully and thoroughly researched, often based on unpublished documents, the fruit of a long quest which began when the author attended an undergraduate seminar conducted by Emory Holloway. The only regret I have to express is that, though there are many references to the *Correspondence* of Walt Whitman edited by Edwin H. Miller, there is not a single one to the *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts* edited by Edward Grier. But they probably appeared too late.

Reading the story of O'Connor's life, one cannot help feeling sorry for him. True, he wrote *The Good Gray Poet* thanks to which his name will forever be associated with that of Whitman, but, for all his remarkable gifts, he never wrote anything of any value in his own name. Like all brilliant talkers and great conversationalists, he preferred to talk rather than write and the drudgery of his work as a clerk exhausted him and absorbed all his energy, for he did not know how to spare himself and never

did things by halves. He never knew what leisure was. He was still working shortly before his death at fifty-seven years of age. He was younger than Whitman by thirteen years and died three years before him. In a way he was a pathetic failure, all the more as he also wanted to be an inventor like Edison and wasted time and money making experiments, pottering about and never finding anything. His intimate friendship with Whitman made him happy, but his passion and obstinacy in discussion led to a ten-year estrangement and to the break-up of his marriage. To make matters worse, the premature deaths of both his son and his daughter affected him deeply. Yet, he carried on to the end stoically, heroically; without a word of complaint.

After Jerome Loving's excellent study of O'Connor *the writer* in his book *Walt Whitman's Champion*, we thus have now an authentic portrait of O'Connor *the man*. Actually we get more than the man, for Florence Freedman generously provides us with information about the numerous minor figures which gravitated round him, and, very often, Whitman steals the show, as was to be expected, but this makes the book all the more valuable.

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William Heyen, *Eight Poems for Saint Walt*. Roslyn, New York: The Stone House Press, 1985. 13 pp. \$20. [Limited edition: 26 lettered copies, and 135 numbered and signed copies.]

In this handsomely designed chapbook with three striking wood engravings by John De Pol, William Heyen continues the century-old tradition of talking back to Walt Whitman. Like countless poets before him—from Swinburne to Richard Eberhard, from Pound to Louis Simpson, from Lorca to Erica Jong—Heyen evokes Whitman in his own poems in an attempt to complete the embrace that Whitman initiated, to encounter Whitman face to face, to capture for a moment the magical joining that Whitman's poetry promised—a conquering of space and time within the charged field of a poem. These poems make a significant contribution to this tradition of continuing conversations with Whitman.

As Heyen's title suggests, there is a religious air to this book; Heyen associates Whitman with Jesus, a conjoining that has its own long tradition, going back of course to O'Connor, Bucke, Burroughs, Harned, Kennedy, and initiated in poetry in the 1880s by Robert Buchanan (who saw Whitman "Touch'd with some gentle glory of the Christ!"). Heyen grounds the Jesus-comparison in Whitman's *Drum-Taps* poem, "A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim." Heyen offers a vision of "Jesus and Walt together, building a fire at Shiloh" that seems to release "the souls of dead soldiers" from a cold black pond into the "island of light" formed in the sky above the fire; Jesus's redeeming of the dead is associated with Walt's redemption of the Civil War slain, Whitman's lilacs becoming as symbolically charged as roses in the Christian tradition: "Jesus' tears were tiny roses, / lilacs welled in Walt's eyes." The religious iconography and worshipful tone are perhaps the least satisfying elements of the book; Heyen has more original insights into an ongoing relationship with Whitman that he fortunately explores in some depth.

Heyen begins his series of poems with an image of walking over a pond of ice and