

HAROLD BLOOM, ed. *Walt Whitman*. Broomall, PA: Chelsea House, 1999. "Bloom's Major Poets" series. 109 pp.

J. MICHAEL LÉGER, ed. *Walt Whitman: A Collection of Poems*. "The Harcourt Casebook Series in Literature." Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt College, 2000. xvi + 194 pp.

GARY WIENER, ed. *Readings on Walt Whitman*. San Diego, CA: Greenhaven, 1999. "The Greenhaven Press Literary Companion to American Authors" series. 224 pp.

In the last couple of years a new genre of Whitman book has emerged. It goes under various names, like "study guide," "handbook," "manual," "companion," or "casebook." These books, as the introduction to the Harcourt volume puts it, are created "to facilitate student research—and to facilitate instructor supervision of that research" by providing in one "convenient" package "all the resources students need to produce a documented research paper on a particular work of literature." It is as if the increasingly vast resources of the Worldwide Web have spawned a counter-reaction: to "supervise" students' sources (and presumably reduce the chances of plagiarism), we now have books that delimit the materials they can use for their Whitman papers. Harold Bloom's version of this new genre is called a "Comprehensive Research and Study Guide" and is described on the back cover as "the ideal aid to all students, . . . a definitive guide for independent study and a single source for footnoting essays and research papers." The Greenhaven Press "Literary Companion Series" describes each "unique anthology" as "designed for young adults" and "provid[ing] an engaging and comprehensive introduction to literary analysis and criticism." These books, claims Greenhaven's general introduction to the series, are ideal tools "for introducing students to literary analysis in the classroom or as a library resource for young adults researching the world's great authors and literature." Let's look, then, at how these three anthologies present to the beginning literature student the world of Whitman criticism and the nature of a good research essay.

Bloom's anthology is the most irresponsible of the three: it is a grab-bag of extremely short excerpts from a wide variety of critical essays and books. Sixteen of the twenty-seven excerpts are from the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* or its predecessor, the *Walt Whitman Review*. All these excerpts were printed without permission; no one at Chelsea House even informed the journal of the fact that its essays were being used to form the bulk of Bloom's book. Most of the excerpts are so truncated that it would be impossible for students to get much of a sense of the main points of the essays; perhaps the "viewpoints" were kept to no more than two pages or so in the belief that this constituted "fair usage" and thus freed Chelsea House from seeking permissions (nothing in the book suggests that permission was sought for any of the selections).

The "User's Guide" to the "Bloom's Major Poets" series promises that each volume contains "a detailed biography of the author, discussing major life events and important literary accomplishments," as well as "a bibliography of the author's writings (including a complete list of all books written, cowritten, ed-

ited, and translated).” Let’s begin by quoting the bibliography—“Works by Walt Whitman”—in its entirety:

*Leaves of Grass*, ten editions. (1855-1892)

*Democratic Vistas*. (1870)

That’s it. Even beginning students might wonder just what those “ten editions” are, since no reputable bibliography of Whitman’s works lists ten editions (the generally agreed-upon number is six, though some bibliographers have argued for up to nine, but in the absence of any indication of what the ten editions are, it’s hard to know what Bloom has in mind here). This has to be the first “complete list of all books written” by Whitman that fails to mention *Specimen Days*, *Collect*, *Drum-Taps*, *Memoranda during the War*, *Two Rivulets*, and so on. The “detailed biography,” meanwhile, is less than three pages long. Here is the totality of what we learn about Whitman in the Civil War: “Whitman was a nurse during the Civil War. He went to Washington, D.C., in 1862 to care for his wounded brother George and stayed on to help as many of the ailing soldiers as he could.” The factual error here (Whitman in fact went to see George in Fredericksburg) is not the only one Bloom squeezes into this tiny narrative. He has Whitman going to Brooklyn after his 1873 stroke and tells us Whitman’s mother died there; in fact, of course, Whitman went to Camden, where he was with his mother when she died in Walt’s brother George’s home. Bloom also tells us Whitman came to Tennyson’s attention when the British poet saw “the 1876 edition of *Leaves of Grass*,” even though Whitman and Tennyson started corresponding in 1871, and Whitman sent Tennyson a copy of the 1871 edition of *Leaves*. Even more inexcusably, in a book that bills itself as “a single source for footnoting essays and research papers,” Bloom makes major errors in citation, including attributing to Roger Asselineau Gay Wilson Allen’s *A Reader’s Guide to Walt Whitman*, even describing Asselineau in the headnote to the excerpt written by Allen! There are other serious errors as well, including the assigning of one essay (by A. James Wohlpart) to the wrong journal and dating it thirty-two years before it appeared!

Bloom’s book deals with seven poems, and he offers his own “thematic analysis” of each poem before printing the critical excerpts. These brief explications do not do much to raise the overall quality of the book. The opening of his analysis of “I Sing the Body Electric”—“‘I Sing the Body Electric,’ simply entitled Poem No. 1 in the original 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*”—proffers the bizarre misinformation that Whitman entitled the untitled eighth poem of the 1855 *Leaves* “Poem No. 1”! Enough said. It is sad to see one of the most distinguished critics of our time lending his name to this shoddy enterprise (and it’s hard to believe that Bloom did much more than sign off on this book, which was probably compiled by assistants, since Bloom could hardly actually be editing what seem like hundreds of these Chelsea House books that have piled up, as if falling off the end of a quick-moving assembly line, during the past few years). The frightening thing is that some teachers or students may be fooled by Bloom’s reputation into thinking that this “comprehensive research and study guide” (“the perfect introduction to critical analysis of the greatest poets through history”) is actually what it claims to be.

After encountering the Bloom study guide, the Harcourt Casebook, edited by J. Michael Léger, seems relatively innocuous. Its four-and-a-half page biography of Whitman is more detailed than Bloom's account and has fewer errors of fact (though one wonders how the editor/author could have read *Specimen Days* and still ended up describing it simply as Whitman's "notes from the Civil War years"). The most disconcerting aspect of this book is its claim that it contains "all the resources students need to produce a documented research paper on a particular work of literature," including the "literary work" itself, in its "most widely accepted version." In this casebook, that means the first two sections of "Song of Myself," "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," and seven very short poems (none longer than fifteen lines). In choosing the "most widely accepted version" of those two sections of "Song of Myself," Léger presents the 1881 (final) version but unfortunately dates it 1855. The book is subtitled *A Collection of Poems*, but the ten pages of poetry are dwarfed by well over a hundred pages of "secondary sources," including Whitman's 1855 Preface (here attributed to both Whitman and "Sculley Bradley, Ed.," with the running head "Bradley, Ed. / Preface to 'Leaves of Grass'"—Léger's notes indicate that he is under the misapprehension that Sculley Bradley holds the copyright to Whitman's Preface), Rufus Griswold's 1855 unsigned review of *Leaves*, Emerson's 1855 letter to Whitman, and articles by Harold Aspiz, William Birmingham, Mark DeLancey, D. R. Jarvis, Dana Phillips, and Carmine Sarracino—an interesting, if somewhat idiosyncratic, grouping of essays that do not respond specifically to the handful of anthologized poems. Students using this "self-contained reference tool" are given very little poetry to put up against this formidable critical bulk.

At the end of Léger's book, as if to demonstrate that it is indeed possible to "produce a documented research paper" using only the materials in this book, we are given a "sample student research paper" by one LaTasha Priscilla Sampson, written for "Professor Léger" and including in its "Works Cited" list the very book Professor Léger has edited (and *only* the essays that appear in the book, of course). The paper, inexplicably, is dated "7 May, 2000," a couple of months *after* the book appeared! Throughout the book are lots of "discussion questions" and "research topics" ranging from the elementary to the arcane (one question asks students to take George Hutchinson's notions of how "Whitman aligns himself with shamanic, 'pre-institutionalized' forms of 'religious' or spiritual experience" and apply them to the brief poem "Cavalry Crossing a Ford," even though Hutchinson's work is not represented in the book). Since so few poems are printed in the book, students are asked to apply a lot of critical pressure to some very short texts, as when Léger suggests that in "Cavalry Crossing a Ford" a "transcendence" is brought on by "the ambiguous combination of images of injury, Union-army identity, and African-American racial identity [!], as well as in its central image, the ford itself." As in the Bloom book, there are some major bibliographic mistakes, again especially embarrassing in a book that bills itself as a guide to good documentation procedures and that even includes a twelve-page appendix on "Documenting Sources." In its own bibliography, for example, under "Prosody, Form, and Influence Studies," eight articles from the *Walt Whitman Review* and the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* are listed, and fully six of them give the wrong jour-

nal title. After insisting on the importance of careful bibliographic citation, the editor also makes several mistakes in the credits, including listing the wrong journal for one of the permissions. The bibliography is suspect in other ways, too: "Biographical Sources," for example, lists only four works, two of them obscure articles, and does not mention biographies by David Reynolds, Jerome Loving, Justin Kaplan, or Paul Zweig, to name a few. Other categories have striking omissions or contain entries that have nothing to do with the stated topic. "Gay Studies and Queer Theory Sources," for example, fails to list key books by Michael Moon, Byrne Fone, or Charley Shively. The bibliographic apparatus in this book is, in short, unreliable and incomplete.

Of the three casebooks under review, the most satisfying by far is *Readings on Walt Whitman*, even though it offers no clear statement of what its audience or purpose is: the vaguely stated goal of the series is to help "young adults" develop "analytic thinking skills," presumably by offering them numerous models of critical essays. There is very little pedagogical apparatus here—no study questions or paper topics—and at least the book does not pretend to be self-contained but rather points students out to Whitman's work. The selected essays are grouped under "The Man and the Poet," "Themes," "Analyses of Individual Poems," and "Influence: Other Poets Evaluate Whitman" (with reprinted essays by Langston Hughes, Louis Simpson, and Lewis Putnam Turco). Some of the articles, we are told, "have been edited for content, length, and/or reading level," and in some cases new titles and section headings have been added to make the essays more inviting for "young adults." The book is attractively laid out and the selections are generally strong and, unlike in Bloom's anthology, are given in full-enough form to allow for the arguments to develop and to be supported. The eighteen-page biography (unsigned, but apparently by the editor, Gary Wiener) feels monumental in comparison with Bloom's and Léger's, and its few errors of fact are minor (we are told, for instance, that "Whitman produced a two-volume edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1876 to celebrate the centennial," when in fact he actually issued a two-volume set of his works, with *Leaves* as one volume and *Two Rivulets* as the other; and there is the usual confusion over number of editions of *Leaves*, leading at one point to the claim that Whitman "composed an eighth edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1888"). There are a number of brief excerpts of various materials (ranging from Thoreau's letter about Whitman to Roger Asselineau's *Evolution of Walt Whitman*) that are scattered throughout the book as sidebars but that never get mentioned in the table of contents. These annoyances are minor, though: the essays are solid and written in accessible language; many are by some of the best critics of the past half-century (including Gay Wilson Allen, Alfred Kazin, Henry Nash Smith, and R. W. B. Lewis), and they cover a wide range of topics (including frank discussions of Whitman's sexuality by Robert Martin, Alan Helms, and Gregory Woods). As I read through these selections, I find myself thinking that this book would in fact be a fine companion for those students just beginning to read Whitman in a serious way.