

*Whitman's Champion* [1978] that he may have contracted a venereal disease). Citing Edward J. Renehan's mediocre biography of Burroughs, Morris imagines O'Connor smoked "cigarettes" (they were cigars) and sneaked women into his flat in the Burroughs attic when his wife was not home. This last unfounded detail comes from Rehehan's book, where absolutely no evidence or sources are provided.

Even though *The Better Angel* occasionally has the feel of a TV docudrama (at one point Whitman is scuffling with another patron at Pfaff's), it is an honest and for the most part reliable portrait of the Good Gray Poet who may have also been the Good Gay Poet. The operative word here, however, is "good," for nobody gave himself to his country and its "good cause" of democracy with any greater love and risk than Walt Whitman did during the Civil War. We've had this tale in pieces thus far, either in editions of his wartime sayings or passing chapters of biographies, but Morris now sums it up beautifully and effectively in one work. The book reminds me in its style and verve of Haniel Long's meditation on the bard in *Walt Whitman: The Springs of Courage* (1938). *The Better Angel* is a most welcome addition to the important and useful books on this great poet.

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JEROME LOVING

BRYAN K. GARMAN. *A Race of Singers: Whitman's Working-Class Hero from Guthrie to Springsteen*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000. xi + 338 pp.

Bryan Garman takes his title from "A Backward Glance o'er Travel'd Roads," where Walt Whitman calls for "a race of singers" to limn the "land and people and circumstances of our United States." But the spirit of Garman's book is best captured by an image: the representation of a man that prefaced the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*. His hat cocked, his body at arrogant ease, he wears the casual clothes of a workingman. It is an image shot through with contradictions: the figure is anonymous, it is a picture of Walt Whitman; it is a representation of a workingman, it is a portrait of a poet; it celebrates the working class, it idealizes an individual. *A Race of Singers* explores allied contradictions in Whitman and his work, in his reception among the twentieth-century American Left, and in his political and artistic heirs—particularly in Woody Guthrie and Bruce Springsteen, who rank among America's best-known, most Whitmanesque, and most deeply conflicted artists.

The conflicts within Whitman's heirs reflect conflicts within the poet they idealized as a "heroic spiritual grandfather," in the words of Michael Gold. Whitman was the most radically democratic of nineteenth-century American poets, but his politics were shaped by the antebellum ideal of the artisan republic. Whitman's vision was inclusive, embracing black as well as white, the woman equally with the man. Yet the artisan republic imagined a community composed of equally privileged white men.

Early twentieth-century socialists attempted to turn Whitman, a product of Jacksonian democracy, into a fellow traveler. First, they had to deal with his

homosexuality. Horace Traubel, the would-be Boswell who shadowed Whitman during the last years of the poet's life, vigorously denied any hint of homosexuality in *Leaves of Grass* or its author. ("Homosexuality is a disease—it is muck and rot—it is decay and muck—and Walt uttered the master-cries of health, of salvation, and purity, of growth and beauty," he wrote.) At the same time, he had a homosexual affair with a Boston Whitmanite and employed a Whitmanesque language of adhesiveness in his correspondence with Eugene Debs. ("Dear brother, I still feel you near me just as when you took me in your arms when the time came for us to separate the other night. I am waiting here with radiant memories and strong for the fight.") The socialist program advanced by Traubel and Debs—and later by Michael Gold and other Whitman admirers—was race- and gender-inclusive. Yet what they actually achieved was white male solidarity grounded in a Whitmanesque homoeroticism. Still, for all his acute critique of the early socialists, Garman also notes the way in which women like Tillie Olsen and blacks like Langston Hughes were able to appropriate Whitmanite discourses for their own progressive purposes.

Numerous critics have traced Whitman's influence on American poetry; Garman is the first to show how important he is to our popular music. Woody Guthrie envisioned himself as a modern Whitman, and like *Leaves of Grass* his songs celebrate both the footloose self and the human community. However, the tension between those ideals wracked Guthrie in a way it never did the more equable-tempered Whitman. Guthrie's son Arlo said that his father was perpetually "bent in two directions at once: to escape the world and to change the world." Guthrie's autobiography *Bound for Glory* begins with a scene of escape: he is in a boxcar heading west. In a fine close reading of the text, Garman shows how Guthrie employs Whitmanesque homoeroticism to elide racial difference and forge interracial solidarity. However, like the communities fostered by earlier Whitmanites, Guthrie's hobo republic excludes women.

If Guthrie's life was shot through with contradiction and compromise, his songs were consistently radical critiques of oppression and celebrations of the common man. Yet the "Woody Guthrie" embraced by American culture over the past fifty years is a de-radicalized shadow of the militant singer. Pete Seeger kept Guthrie's music alive, but the Harvard-educated Seeger lacked a working-class edge. The young Bob Dylan embraced Guthrie's music and his politics, but left both behind when he turned to rock-and-roll and existentialism. Most Americans know Guthrie only as the author of "This Land Is Your Land," which has been circulated in a sanitized version minus the more radical verses. Garman shows how American culture has constructed a Guthrie as reassuringly patriotic as the widespread image of the Good Gray Poet known largely for "O Captain! My Captain!"

Bruce Springsteen, Guthrie's best-known successor, has also seen his message appropriated and reshaped by the surrounding culture; the singer responded uneasily when Ronald Reagan cited him in a campaign speech. Yet like Whitman and Guthrie, Springsteen has to some extent played into conservative hands, mixing songs of social justice with celebrations of nationalism and male bonding. Springsteen has covered Guthrie's songs and talked about his influence; his debts to Whitman are less clear. Garman doesn't attempt to argue for a direct influence from poet to rocker; however, he shows that despite nods to

the populist Guthrie, Springsteen as working-class hero is in many ways closer to Whitman. Both Whitman and Springsteen turn away from Guthrie's Marxist-influenced politics and construct economic and racial oppression in individualistic, moral terms. Garman shows how Springsteen's career, for all his concern with social justice and his stands against sexism, racism and homophobia, can be seen as an enactment of Walt Whitman's advice to Traubel: "Be radical—be radical—be not too damn radical!"

Garman's lucidly written study deftly mixes biographical analysis and close reading, Marxist critique and recent theoretical work in gender and sexuality. *A Race of Singers* is, appropriately, as conflicted as its subjects, whom it both celebrates and criticizes. Garman's clear-eyed affection offers a superb model of how to read Walt Whitman and his twentieth-century heirs.

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