

REVIEWS

DAVID S. REYNOLDS, editor. *A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman*. Oxford University Press, 2000. viii + 280 pp.

When *The Walt Whitman Handbook* was first published in 1946, it contained chapters on Whitman's literary technique, his "Fundamental Ideas," "World Literature," and "Social Thought: Ideas in Action." Young scholars today might smile at Gay Wilson Allen's old-fashioned headings, but Allen himself confesses that his presentation necessitates "artificial categories" and "terms which the poet himself might not have recognized" (325). Pages later he cautions, "The student of Whitman cannot afford to ignore the times, the conditions, and states of mind in which LEAVES OF GRASS germinated and flourished" (369). Historical context is essential. Imperialism, immigration, slavery, free trade, etc., Allen maintains, are reflected in one way or another in the poetry and prose.

The contributors to *A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman* assume the same contextualist principle. Some themes have changed—race and sexuality replacing technique and mysticism, for instance—and there is a slight inclination to relate Whitman's corpus to "subjects of contemporary social, political, and cultural relevance" (see frontispiece), but the historical researches are illuminating and broad, the analyses insightful. The frontispiece description of the Historical Guides to American Authors series perhaps over-hypes the volumes as "historically sensitive," as attuned to the "vibrant relationship between literature and society," as bearing a "strong sense of time, place, and history" and offering "a complete and rounded picture of each author in his or her America," but the contributors display a judicious and knowledgeable use of contemporary materials. The chronology, photographs, and bibliographical essay (by editor David Reynolds) are useful to even the most experienced Whitman scholars.

The *Guide* begins with a quick Introduction and a "Brief Biography" by editor David Reynolds. The copious information he offers in the latter belies the brevity in the title, and piles one interesting historical fact upon another in a compact narrative of the poet's life. The following piece, Ed Folsom's "Lucifer and Ethiopia: Whitman, Race, and Poetics before the Civil War and After," opens on a defensive note: "It would perhaps be nice if Walt Whitman, our great poet of American democracy, had possessed a spotless attitude toward race in the United States and if he had clearly and unambiguously espoused the equality of all individuals, regardless of race" (45). Folsom proceeds to interpret the context and meaning of two poems presenting "the only two black characters to whom Whitman gave voice in *Leaves of Grass*" (46). The result is a fascinating account of the complex genesis of these figures, built upon, first, a political analysis of "Ethiopia" as a label, a mythical place, and a modern country, and second, a reconstruction of Sherman's march north from Savan-

nah. Folsom derives his conclusions from concrete materials, such as the seizure of the British Embassy by Ethiopian patriots in 1855, the eyewitness reports of Sherman's foot soldiers, and the congressional debates over the Fourteenth Amendment, during which "Ethiopia" was composed.

The next essay is "The Political Roots of *Leaves of Grass*" by Jerome Loving. Having just completed a major scholarly biography of the poet, Loving moves with seasoned skill through Whitman's and the nation's antebellum political life. We learn who Whitman believed were the real enemies of equality: "not southern slaveholders but the political representatives of northern merchants who profited from cheap slave labor" (103). Three pages (106-109) recount the well-publicized "Socialistic Discussion" between Horace Greeley and Henry Raymond (soon to found the *New York Times*). A tantalizing paragraph suggests that "*Leaves of Grass* in 1845 would more likely have been a long, leftist-leaning speech" (105). After the War, "*Leaves of Grass* becomes his lens," the bookmaking activity that converted politics into history, or "poetry that celebrates (and laments) the human condition" (115).

The subsequent essay by M. Jimmie Killingsworth, "Whitman and the Gay American Ethos," proposes a weighty advent: "*Leaves of Grass* remains distinctive not only in the wildness and enduring power of its style of celebrating the body but also in recording the emergence of a special character, or ethos, of modern life, which Michel Foucault has called the 'homosexual species'" (121). Later, Killingsworth writes, "Whitman helped to invent gayness" (122), "he laid the groundwork for a new discourse of social consciousness" (129), and "'Calamus' signals . . . the poetic province of the first gay American" (131). These assertions are best taken as speculative propositions, for Killingsworth never really substantiates them with strong analyses of the poetry or sufficient invocations of social context. Instead, he poses further lines of inquiry into what might be construed as homophobic reviews of *Leaves* (130), into Whitman's intimacy with nature (136), into Whitman's "associational rhetoric" (135), and into Whitman's alienation from readers as parallel to the alienation a gay man feels in a heterosexual society (141).

Roberta K. Tarbell's "Whitman and the Visual Arts" is an exercise in juxtaposition, not analysis. It begins not with a thesis, but with an overview: "During his years as a journalist in New York City, Whitman was directly involved in the arts: he attended countless operatic, theatrical, and musical performances, frequented art galleries, befriended many artists, understood the global perspectives they represented, and critiqued them in his newspaper columns" (153). The involvement is explored in a series of subchapters describing various art scenes in the city and inferring Whitman's exposure to them or their influence upon *Leaves*. Tarbell notes how this or that artist or art form is "paralleled in," "shared by," or "illustrated by" Whitman and his works. The commentary strives to discover formal and thematic similarities, not determinate relationships. But as a contextual study, the essay imparts considerable knowledge of the arts surrounding the poet. Whitman's interest in physiognomy is introduced through the practice of death masks (155). His Egyptological references originate in visits to Henry Abbott's private collection and George Gliddon's public lectures (158). His concept of American poetry derives from William Cullen Bryant's aesthetic nationalism as mediated by the sculptor Henry Kirke

Brown (163-165). His democratic realism is a form of verbal photography (168-170), his seascapes are analogous to those of Eakins and Homer (178-183), his anti-traditionalism an inspiration to the "Stieglitz circle" (188). These are suggestive interpretations, useful to students hoping to pursue Whitman studies across genres and art forms.

The final essay, "Whitman the Democrat" by Kenneth Cmiel, accepts Whitman's pose as prophet of democracy, but asks "What *sort* of democrat was Whitman?" (205). Arguing that "Whitman [is] a bit less radical than is often portrayed" (206), Cmiel returns to nineteenth-century political theory to examine concepts of sovereignty, the state, liberalism, and popular rule as they circulated in Whitman's time. The essay is particularly rewarding in its placement of those concepts within contemporary debates over the nature of freedom and constitutionalism in a range of political thinkers whose names are unknown to most literary scholars today.

As a whole, the volume offers a rich fund of source materials and historical contexts. Although most of the contents can be found in Reynold's "cultural biography," Folsom's "native representations" book, and Loving's recent opus, for undergraduates and beginning graduate students, *A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman* is one of the best places to start.

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ROY MORRIS, JR. *The Better Angel: Walt Whitman in the Civil War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. ix + 270 pp.

In *The Better Angel: Walt Whitman in the Civil War*, historian and biographer Roy Morris, Jr., tells us that he undertook this highly readable and generally reliable study because "Until now . . . no one has seen fit to devote more than a passing chapter, at best, to Whitman's Civil War years." This is true in the sense that Charles I. Glickberg's *Walt Whitman and the Civil War* (1933), Walter Lowenfels's *Walt Whitman's Civil War* (1960), and John Harmon McElroy's *The Sacrificial Years: A Chronicle of Walt Whitman's Experiences in the Civil War* (1999) are collections instead of narratives, but the wartime adventures of Whitman have been to one extent or another rather thoroughly treated in the major biographies by Gay Wilson Allen, Justin Kaplan, David S. Reynolds, and most recently myself. Readers of these books will not discover anything new in *The Better Angel* pertaining specifically to Whitman, but they will find that Morris has wedded all of the biographical facts to the facts of the war in an intelligently written narrative. For what Morris brings to the canon of writings about Whitman is both his knowledge of the Civil War and his seasoned talents as a writer. He is not a Whitman scholar *per se* or even a professor of literature at a university; he is the editor of *America's Civil War* magazine and the author of biographies of Ambrose Bierce and General Philip Sheridan.

The Better Angel, consisting of six chapters and an epilogue, portrays Whitman as stagnating in New York while the war rages for almost its first two years, going to Washington and Fredericksburg to find his wounded brother, and returning to Washington, where he began his long and noble career as hospital