

REVIEWS

PHILIP CALLOW, *From Noon to Starry Night: A Life of Walt Whitman*. Chicago, Ivan R. Dee, 1992. xvi + 395 pp.

A note on the author at the back of this volume tells us that Philip Callow is an English writer of poems, short fiction, novels and autobiography, and biographies of D.H. Lawrence and Vincent Van Gogh. This history of publication explains the imaginative, and the somewhat British, cast of this study. Callow's poetic prose renders the stream of life as an impressionist painter might, with Whitman surfacing in that stream like some great water animal, a prodigious genius embodying the vitality of uncivilized nature. The foreword gives us the flavor of Callow's style. It is concerned not with analysis but with celebration, and so the book begins by reproducing the image that Whitman makes on the mental retina of the individual who has been deeply stirred by his poetry and finds no analogous literary figure by which to domesticate this great anomaly. "Others abide our question. Thou art free," Callow says of Whitman as Arnold said of Shakespeare; and so he approaches Whitman not with a historical net that is dryly chronological but by metaphors that express the *feel* of Whitman's fluidity:

. . . mixed in him seems to be an uncanny element: the salt sea. He is curious, a great puzzle. Backing away just beyond our reach he has a curious appeal, all animal, which makes us feel we are in touch with something different. At our too hasty approach he slides off. He is on the margin, a beach creature, hankering after the sea as if compulsively. On land he never feels quite sure, or quite clean enough, always washing and bathing. He has a thing about water, about cleanliness. He lumbers awkwardly and looks clownish, sensing a loss of grace. The poetry of his lost grace, if it is ever to break and run, has to be in submission to the ancient rocking of the sea, slithering out in long pulses across the page in a sea-language, advancing broadly like the sea. (xiii)

A psychological oddity, he loves the ebb and flood of crowds, yet is fundamentally a solitary, with a weird sexual fluidity that remains a riddle to this day, carefully hidden from others as it is from himself. Fearing intimacy, he becomes an enchanter, a stubborn innocent branded as an obscene immoralist, shocking contemporaries with his candor. His health shattered by the "butcher" wards of the Civil War hospitals, he experiences transactions of love there which are the most satisfying of his life. We seem to know everything and yet nothing about this baffling subject. Contradictory to the last, he affirms life and is inspired by death. (xiv) . . . Where has he sprung from, this blend of seer and insurance salesman, with—in Lorca's loving phrase—"his beard full of butterflies"? He seems intimate and public, both at once. Reading him is like meeting him. (xvi)

Callow's primary texts are Whitman's *Collected Poems*, the uncollected prose and poems, the collected letters, and the prose essays (drawing chiefly from *Specimen Days*, *Memoranda During the War*, *A Backward Glance*, and

November Boughs). He extends these with frequent quotations from Traubel's *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (volumes 1-5: he seems unaware of the subsequent volumes) and by references to collections and studies of Whitman's journalism. We can get a distinct idea of the way Callow handles Whitman's working history from 1830 to 1855 by reminding ourselves of how this "formative" period was treated in recent biographies by Justin Kaplan (1980) and Paul Zweig (1984). Viewed side by side, the three works seem aptly named. By presenting Whitman as a social being who interacted with an inexhaustible stream of personages and groups, Kaplan's *Whitman: A Life* convinces us of Whitman's normality. Zweig's *Walt Whitman: The Making of a Poet* presents a Whitman who transmuted his ordinary social experiences into poetry and himself into the poet of the ordinary, and who, by so doing, made himself exceptional, a man apart. Callow's Whitman, by turns gregarious and isolated, is painted in a more vividly physical, sensory world of light and shade, noon and starry night, place and situation.

Callow's emphasis on the visual can be seen in his placing and pacing of his narrative camera and his choice of where to hurry, where to hover, in his chronicle of Whitman's work in journalism. Early on he establishes what for him is a distinctive feature of the American press in the early nineteenth century. Unlike their European counterparts, American newspapers had to create their publics, Callow maintains, preaching and proselytizing the religion of American can-do exceptionalism, addressing readers as "individuals with the power . . . to work out their own salvation," speaking like Chamber of Commerce boosters of "what may be" as though it were already "in actual existence" (9, 10). But Callow does not, as we might expect, connect the attitude he finds in the journalism to a similar tendency in Whitman. His method is instead to treat the particular newspapers for which Whitman worked as independently interesting in themselves. Each is named; Whitman's duties at each are described; the newspapers' management, political sympathies and readership are delineated; and Whitman's daily circumstances and routine of work and leisure are imaginatively reconstituted. Callow describes some of the pieces Whitman wrote, the political and cultural developments he reported and commented on, his reaction to the progressive movements and historic figures of those days. Callow uses the moves from newspaper to newspaper as an iterative device to structure his narrative in chapters 4-6, leading up to the publication of *Leaves of Grass*. He describes each of Whitman's journalistic positions as a distinctive setting in the stream of life, detailing, for each situation, what might have been Whitman's sense-experiences and emotions in that location. These sympathetic recreations give Callow occasions to jump ahead to the future poetry, and to observe regularly to the reader: "Later he would put his experience into the following lines. . . ." Callow will then loop back to the specific position on the specific newspaper, to explain why a particular job came to an end and what Whitman did next. Kaplan and Zweig also use a sideways-and-forward-looping narrative method, but not so noticeably. The effect is to present a chronological chain, loop by loop, but at the same time to suggest that time does not matter. Callow's brooding vision can view the life as a whole from present to past to future, as Whitman himself

could not, and he can collapse past, present and future from his vantage point: "Soon now the aroused singer he would become . . ." (182).

As a contribution to the understanding and appreciation of Whitman, Callow's book has several limitations. One is its vague treatment of its textual sources. No page or line numbers are provided for its quotations from primary texts—the journalism, the early fiction, the poetry, the poet's prose, the letters. It can be argued, from the pleasurable reading that this sympathetic biography *does* contribute, that Callow is writing for general readers who have little knowledge of *Leaves of Grass* or access to Whitman's works, but who are curious about Whitman the cultural icon and who want to be able to *imagine* him. Callow's work meets this aesthetic standard very well so long as we focus on one of the root meanings of "aesthetic"—the sensory *feel* of physical existence. He does not claim to add to our knowledge of Whitman's views—religious, sexual, philosophic. His allusions to such inner views are a little over-quick: the religions in Whitman's background are rendered as colorful aliment only; Whitman's sexuality is treated distantly as uncertain and "troubled"; and Whitman's "cosmic" philosophy is referred to in summaries that are capable, as the following quotation will show, but that raise questions which are left unacknowledged and unanswered:

Leaves of Grass was a language experiment, he insisted, and indeed life itself could be seen as an experiment and "mortality but an exercise." He held firm to his Hegelian view of democracy as a marriage between the individual and the "aggregate," a contest between paradoxical elements which carried nations forward in an evolving struggle toward an absolute that was "the last, best hope of earth." (356)

Readers familiar with the prose that Whitman attached to various editions of the *Leaves* will recognize the 1872 preface as the source of the first sentence in this passage. And there are critics who would agree with Callow's characterization of Whitman's view of democracy as Hegelian, and with his attribution to Whitman of a Darwinian view of the history of nations. But these positions are not undisputed; so by what steps does Callow arrive at them? What is the source of the concluding phrase in quotation marks, "the last, best hope of earth"? If we look to Callow's endnotes we find no entry for page 356. Elsewhere Callow notes that it was a defect of R.M. Bucke's 1883 biography of Whitman, prepared in close collaboration with the poet, that the marks of Bucke's independence of judgment are erased under Whitman's, so that we cannot tell "whether we are reading Bucke's words or those of the poet" (349). The same objection can be made of Callow's treatment of texts: the lines distinguishing the thoughts of the biographer and those of his sources are effectually erased, since he does not register them.

A second limitation of this biography, for purposes of Whitman scholarship, is its unselfconsciousness as to the interpretive nature of its textual sources and also of its own enterprise. A chief example is the absence of any discussion of the question of Whitman's sexual orientation, an issue that has become increasingly important in Whitman criticism since Robert K. Martin's 1979 study. When Kaplan and Zweig published their works, the theory that Whitman identified himself as a homosexual was still being treated as a putative hypothesis that only gay scholars gave credit to, a case of special pleading. But

this hypothesis has now entered into the general discourse of Whitman criticism, to such an extent that we have to challenge a 1992 work which fails even to mention it or to acknowledge that it could affect our interpretation of at least the "Calamus" poems, which Callow considers run through with "humiliation" (306). It can be argued in defense of Callow's silent editing on this point that the sexual orientation and practice of individual artists are their own private business, or that a biography for a general audience is not obliged to recapitulate all the scholarly debates that proceed on every front. But these arguments are difficult to maintain when the artist is Whitman, the celebrator of democracy, body and soul, who again and again in his writings placed human sexuality at the center of human identity and at the center of his hopes for democracy.

Had Callow treated this issue as a question he would have given us a more openly, self-consciously interpretive work. For even if, as Callow seems to think, Whitman's sexual orientation is ambiguous and undeterminable, the question makes us see more strongly the presence of indeterminacy in the poet and the poetry. Surely this ambiguity and indeterminacy have relevance for any image of Whitman—adding to the aesthetic qualities of sensory shimmer and iridescence that Callow puts into his portrait and to the image of an elusive creature of nature that he sets at the opening of his book. And surely this question is of interest to those who take seriously the poet's invitation to each reader ("what I assume you shall assume") and who want to consider seriously the full range of his meanings.

Callow is entitled, as a critic, to assume a "straight" vantage point that considers heterosexuality a shared norm, and to present his interpretation from that perspective. But because he does not inform readers that his interpretation is selected from a number of perspectives presently available, his interpretation (and even more, his *presentation*) falls short of present-day standards of reliable criticism. These standards have been shaped by the "post-modern" historical situation we find ourselves in today, a situation that is forcing us to acknowledge the fallibilistic, non-objective status of our "knowledge." These standards require us, when we would share with others the results of our inquiries and findings, to share also whatever awareness we may have as to the subjective factors that condition our hypotheses, definitions, and methods.

There are other examples of Callow's silent policy of withholding from his readers information about the factors that entered into his interpretive decisions as a biographer. They can be seen especially in the close, tight correspondence that he suggests obtains between the life and the verse. For example, Callow draws from a poem such as "There Was A Child Went Forth," written for the 1855 edition when Walter Whitman Sr. was still alive, a reading that casts light back onto the poet's early life: Whitman's boyhood relations with his father were unhappy; the father gave him little emotional support, no physical demonstrations of love. Callow goes on to read a shift of attitude in "As I Ebb'd," written in 1859 well after his father's death: the physical removal of the father releases the son who attains a more detached, forgiving perspective on the earlier wrong. This circular use of the writings to read the life, the life to read the writings, leads Callow to do some surprising juggling with time: in "Song of Myself" Whitman foresees what he will actually experience with the wounded

in the Civil War; in the 1865 "Lilacs" he anticipates the slow progress of his own death, more than two decades later.

Callow has given the general reader, then, an artistic meditation on Whitman's life, rather than a documented, annotated, assembled developmental portrait that carefully sums up the views of our time. And it must be said that ours is probably not the time for a study that "pulls everything together." The Whitman who attracts us today, a complex, multitudinous kosmos, warns against a totalizing account. For now we seem to need (and to be getting) studies that help us to see, separately, the threads that might have connected Whitman to the distinctive cultures that inhabited American society in his time—cultural threads that students of Whitman can trace out and combine to weave their own portraits.

It is fitting, then, that I opened this review by describing Philip Callow's portrait of Whitman as an impressionist painting rather than a weave or a tapestry. For Callow, Whitman is a visionary prophet of nature, a "pagan" in the tradition of Van Gogh and Lawrence and, before them, of the Wordsworth who wrote:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for every thing, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.—Great God! I'd rather be
A pagan, suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.

Like Proteus or Triton, Callow's Whitman calls us back to a powerful, moving "Nature" that we feel separated from by the civilization we have constructed. But all of the learning of our time, all that has happened in history since Wordsworth and Van Gogh and Lawrence, is teaching us that "nature"—the mystery of sex, birth, and death—is everywhere mediated by cultures. Some cultures seem to foster closer, fuller contact with "nature" than others; when we would understand another human being whose relations with "nature" intrigue us, we need to inquire as to the cultural influences behind that being's relations. (Even the unorthodox attitudes of Wordsworth, Van Gogh, and Lawrence toward "Nature" can be culturally understood.) In Callow's affectionate portrait, however, the figure of Whitman, poet of Nature, is painted with vivid, sure, self-enclosing strokes, and the threads of mediation, interpretation, and influence are painted over.