

REVIEWS

ROBERT K. MARTIN, ed. *The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman: The Life After the Life*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992. xxiii + 258 pp.

He loved to knit together the fragmentary audiences of city and province, of women and men, of color and whiteness, of grass roots and high theory, for his patented mix of trenchant critique on the one hand, on the other the church picnic where everyone could sample and be appreciative about each other's pies and fried chicken and magically see their own name in print the next day.

Upon first reading, this epigraph may seem to describe Walt Whitman, at least until the phrases "high theory" and "trenchant critique"—and even then we may hear (in the latter at least) a reminder of "Democratic Vistas" and the glaringly analytic eye Whitman cast on his beloved nation after the War's ruins and amidst the other ravages resulting from the unbridled expansion of capital. These lines, however, refer not to Walt Whitman, but rather to one of Whitman's most engaged readers, the scholar and gay activist Michael Lynch, who died of AIDS on July 9, 1991. Beginning with these lines from Eve Sedgwick's tremendously moving memorial for Lynch (*Lesbian and Gay Studies Newsletter* 18 [November 1991]), I purposefully replicate the way Robert K. Martin's new collection of Whitman essays begins, with a simple dedication: "To Michael Lynch, 1944-1991."

Sedgwick's memorial for Lynch also characterizes in telling and significant ways both Whitman and Martin's new volume, and I want at the outset to note how generous a tribute this collection of essays seems to me to be to the spirit and the legacy of Michael Lynch. For in the volume Martin has compiled, we see precisely the kind of bringing together of disparate groups that Michael Lynch spent his life working to bring to fruition, and that Whitman at his best also instantiates and celebrates. *The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman* weaves a wide-ranging tapestry of responses to Whitman, although—to return to the metaphor of the church picnic a moment longer—it is not always or only a harmonious gathering that takes place. But that is not to suggest that this is not a fruitful commingling; quite to the contrary, as Whitman suggests, it is often in the interstices that the important meanings emerge: "My words itch at your ears. . . ." Perhaps the metaphor of a typical family reunion might be even more applicable.

Not only as dedicatee, but in his contribution to the volume, Lynch's work on Whitman is a kind of touchstone for the collection as a whole. When he writes at the outset of his wonderful account of Whitman's "visits" to Ontario—the first, which took place during the poet's lifetime, and others that he seems to have made in a somewhat less corporeal form—that "Whitman is less a cultural icon than a node of possibilities for proliferating cultural icons" (141), he proffers a most concise version of the achievement Martin's collection represents. The most valuable and useful of these essays are provocations in the

best sense of the word: they open out to us versions of Whitman that merit scholarly attention and reappraisal, and they challenge us to re-think the positions that Whitman occupies, or that he has come to occupy, in our histories of writing in the United States and, indeed, in the Americas and overseas as well.

These essays are provocative in other ways as well, for many of them read as prospectuses for further study, sketching out the outlines of more expansive topics, and coaxing the reader (again, à la Whitman) to further study, further consideration. I have in mind, for example, the volume's opening essay by Eric Savoy, a discussion of Henry James's changing responses to Whitman over the course of his long writing life, a shift that Savoy compellingly links to "the evolution of Whitman's reception by gay men in the years between 1865 and 1898, particularly in England" (10). As Savoy explains, "[l]iving in England and connected to such enthusiastic readers of Whitman as John Addington Symonds, Henry James could not have avoided attaching a gay signifier to the 'currency' of the Whitmanian signifier in the emerging discourse community" (10-11). Likewise, George Hutchinson's essay on "Langston Hughes and the 'Other' Whitman" concludes by foregrounding "an intertextual field connecting Whitman, Hughes, Garcia Lorca, and such Latin American poets as Guillen, a field which considerably alters our vision of 'American' poetry and the relationships between its 'black' and 'white' avatars" (26). And while one might have liked to find in Hutchinson's essay some reference to the question of Hughes's elusive sexuality and the role Whitman may have played in relation to it, his essay nevertheless represents well this collection's strongest contributions to the ongoing construction of our multiple Whitmanian icons.

Appropriately, the collection's vitality is manifest in its sheer catalogic inclusiveness, its propagation of sets of connections—in a word, its lists. Gregory Woods's essay is representative in this regard, for in " 'Still on my Lips': Walt Whitman in Britain," he traces one branch of Whitman's expanding literary reputation to Wilde, Symonds, Edward Carpenter, Gerard Manley Hopkins, E. M. Forster, and D. H. Lawrence, some of whom figure as "the most enthusiastic readers" of Whitman's writing "not primarily for the innovation of his poetic line but for his exuberant homoeroticism" (129). Likewise essays in the volume by Maria de Sousa Santos and by Susan Brown provide something like a crash course in the poetic affiliations between Whitman and Portugal's major modern poet, Fernando Pessoa. To this already ample list, we can add Amitai Aviram's very suggestive piece reconceiving the liberatory dynamics of free verse in Whitman and Ginsberg, and Robert Martin's essay (in addition to his introduction, about which I shall have more to say in a moment) on the importance of Whitman in the careers of both David Hockney and Thom Gunn. A glance at the title page of the collection reveals the pervasive scope of influence and confluence Whitman has wrought, even as the book jacket presents a Warholesque mock-up in green half-tint of the engraved frontispiece from the first and second editions of *Leaves of Grass*. Like Warhol's ubiquitous reproductions of Marilyn Monroe or of the can of Campbell's soup, the jacket cover attests at once to the pervasiveness of the Whitmanian presence as well as to its (literal) duplicity and multiplicity. Or, in the words of Martin's introduction: "I have no illusions . . . about the ability of any of the

contributors to discover the 'real' Whitman—indeed, one can wonder if Whitman could have found it, despite his repeated claims that he had done so" (xxi). Martin knows, and his volume attests, that, indeed, the payoff often comes from the chase: "Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged, / I stop *somewhere* waiting for you[.]"

Not the least of the achievements of the collection is the opportunity it affords Robert Martin to review his earlier positions with regard to the question of Whitman and homosexuality. One of the earliest literary scholars to confront this and related issues in Whitman studies (in *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry*), Martin importantly and eloquently revises the framework and the assumptions of that earlier work, in part by means of this single, eloquent paragraph:

Like most gay critics of my generation, I sought to understand my sexuality through the lenses of the civil rights movement. This essentialism was responsible for some of the univocal thinking that made me believe there was a single gay tradition, from which blacks were apparently absent, and a single gay way of living. I would be embarrassed by such naivete today. What I do not regret is my insistence on the ways in which the reading and appropriation of Whitman had been part of a cultural politics of disenfranchisement and silencing. While I can no longer think of Whitman as *the* gay man, a concept that I now see must be much more fully historicized than I was prepared to do in 1975, I still see Whitman as a challenge to a set of cultural values that includes homophobia as well as a terror of the body. . . . Whitman still continues to challenge our assessment of our sexuality and the ways we organize it. He still refuses the tyranny of the family and compulsory heterosexuality. (xxi)

This paragraph performs a particularly enabling function by replacing an essentialist reading of Whitman as "*the* gay man" with an historically-inflected reading that takes into account the wide-ranging, sophisticated work on the history of sexuality that has been produced in the years since, and, in part, as a result of, the publication of *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry*. With these lines, Martin opens out the necessity of coming to terms with what we might call Whitman's "queer-ness," by which I mean not simply his refusal of "the tyranny of the family and compulsory heterosexuality," but also the specifically nineteenth-century discourses within which Whitman cast such refusals. The "set of cultural values that includes homophobia as well as a terror of the body" that Martin quite properly sees Whitman challenging, challenges us as critics, teachers, and readers as well. The task becomes one in which we may not simply locate "Whitman our Contemporary," but rather must attempt to isolate in fully historicized ways the terms and the modes in which Whitman's anti-hegemonic significations about what we now call "sexuality" and "homosexuality" functioned.

Somewhat surprisingly, Martin's anti-essentialist revision of his own earlier work in the introduction is the source of some of the difficulties with regard to the volume's overall coherence (although the extent to which "coherence" is a necessity in a volume on Whitman may itself be a point of contention). Consider, for example, David Eberly's reading of the well-known daguerreotype of Whitman from the early 1840's that shows

a young dandy with walking stick and smart hat, a cosmopolitan man-about-town, news editor, and opera lover, the same "dainty dolce affetuoso" that he would later renounce. This young Whitman strongly resembles the young Frank O'Hara, smitten with New York, with its size, opportunities, and arts, with seeing and hearing so much and meeting so many. . . . (70)

I felt obliged, while reading, to place Eberly's verb "resembles" in quotation marks, as a way of highlighting the important historical differences that must necessarily *distinguish* Whitman from O'Hara as well. To say as much is not to disavow the possibility of resemblance but rather to nuance it in the direction of historical specificity, and to do so at the figures of both a vastly different New York City one hundred years after the first appearance of *Leaves*, and, conceivably, as vast a distinction in the possible meanings of the technologies of self upon which such (surface) resemblances would reside.

In the same way, I found myself resistant to the kind of historical evacuation that underwrites generalizations like the following, also taken from Eberly's essay: "O'Hara faced an equally protracted, if not as virulent, reaction against homosexuality during most of his productive years" (76). Elsewhere in his essay Eberly alludes to the "number of critics [who] have established the specifically homosexual context of Whitman's poetry" (75), but he seems to have missed the subtlety in many of these critical accounts. That is, it seems anomalous to compare the relative "virulence" of Whitman's and O'Hara's encounters with homophobia during their writing lives, for reasons that critics such as Michel Foucault and many others have established in some detail: namely, the social identity and the concept of the modern homosexual are not in place at the time Whitman is writing. Thus, it seems necessary, at the very least, to specify in historical terms the nature of this "virulence," as well as to formulate in specific terms the cultural dissonance to which Whitman is responding in his most homoerotically-explicit writing. What's more, it may simply be inaccurate to call the "homophobia" Whitman experienced more "virulent" than that experienced by O'Hara, unless we are to dismiss the "protracted" nature of the red-baiting, the House Committee on Un-American Activities, and the witch-hunts against homosexuals that characterize the years around the time Frank O'Hara is coming to voice. The nineteenth century has no clear analogs to these profoundly troubling aspects of twentieth-century American history, and the result may be that Eberly's overarching conclusions about "resemblance" suffer a diminution as a consequence.

For similar reasons, Alan Helms's sustained account of Whitman's "Live Oak with Moss" fails ultimately to convince when he posits the reasons that Whitman never published the series—or rather, why Whitman transmuted it into the better-known "Calamus" cluster first published in the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*. In Helms's reading, "Live Oak" No. 8, "Hours continuing long" ("Calamus No. 9" in the 1860 *Leaves*), is central. In particular Helms directs our attention to a parenthetical intrusion that occurs about halfway through the poem: "(I am ashamed—but it is useless—I am what I am;)." In Helms's reading, the phrase "'It is useless' describes the related efforts to love a man and to write about that love, for everything in Whitman's culture tells him that both efforts are wrong. He thus enacts the centuries-old response to such cultural judgment—he stifles his cries, harbors his feelings . . . and he ends the

poem ‘taciturn and deprest’ in a mood reminiscent of a Poe nightmare. By shaming Whitman, by isolating him, and—most disastrous for a writer—by silencing him, homophobia wins the determining agon of ‘Live Oak’ ” (190). There is much that is compelling in the narrative as Helms has it, and yet there is an historical complication in his interpretation, evidenced by a reader’s report with particular cultural authority pertaining to the attempted suppression in Boston of the 1881 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. What remains the most striking element in Boston District Attorney Oliver Stevens’s list of passages that needed to be excised from the “Banned in Boston” edition of *Leaves* is the fact that not a single word from the “Calamus” series was found to be objectionable. The list of passages to be expunged uniformly encompasses sexually-explicit or ambiguously-sexual passages—ambiguous, that is, with regard to the particular acts being depicted, not in terms of the genders of the participants. Stevens’s list does not specifically target male homoeroticism; in fact, if it targets any dimension of *Leaves* disproportionately, the list aims at representations of female sexuality and active female desire. At the very least, this recognition may require us to qualify Helms’s assertion that “everything in Whitman’s culture tells him that both efforts are wrong”; as the Boston D.A.’s list attests, these sanctioned repressions are nascent and by no means uniform, rather than categorical (see Richard Maurice Bucke, *Walt Whitman* [Philadelphia: David McKay, 1883], 148-153).

If we adopt Helms’s homophobic-defeated Whitman, moreover, we lose the triumphant and overtly political agenda of the “Calamus” series that represents not Whitman’s “defeat” but rather his wholehearted political engagement. In the words of “Calamus No. 5” in the 1860 edition, “Affection shall solve every one of the problems of freedom, / Those who love each other shall be invincible, / They shall finally make America completely victorious, in my name.” These lines’ reappearance in “Drum-Taps” five years later makes even more overt the co-implication of the personal and the political in Whitman’s conception of comrades and of comradely affections:

Over the carnage rose prophetic a voice,
 Be not dishearten’d, affection shall solve the problems of freedom yet,
 Those who love each other shall become invincible,
 They shall yet make Columbia victorious. [emphasis added]

I would be absolutely clear here that I do not intend to desexualize Whitman’s relations with men, but rather to complicate our understanding of what we call sexuality and homosexuality as they appear to be represented in these writings. Helms’s hyper-privatized assessment of the “Live Oak” to “Calamus” transition diminishes the significance of the political dimensions of eroticized love between men that Whitman definitively depicts as the means for securing the Union that is collapsing in 1860-61. That is, it is not simply debatable whether “homophobia wins the determining agon of ‘Live Oak’ ”—and we should remember, again, that twenty years after “Calamus” first appears, the Boston District Attorney still did not insist upon the excision of any homoerotically-inflected passages from the cluster—but rather it may be the case that “Calamus” represents what Whitman might have called a different

“purport”: a public and political mission to save the Union through the bonds of male friendship and comradely love. What Helms calls “a kind of whistling in the homophobic dark” (194) takes away precisely Whitman’s radicalism in the 1860 “Calamus” and the volume as a whole: to secure the bonds of the Union through the ties of male love, and to insist, in the face of an increasingly privatized model of heterosexual marriage, that the bonds between men must have politically radical consequences in the face of the nation’s imminent dissolution.

For the largely historicist reasons that I have been outlining, then, I find Michael Moon’s contribution to *The Continuing Presence* the best among those essays that treat the question of Whitman’s homosexuality, and for reasons that Moon’s title itself makes clear: “Rereading Whitman under Pressure of AIDS: His Sex Radicalism and Ours.” That is, I appreciate in Moon’s account his keeping in balance a sense of historical movement, the way in which he aligns his homologous account of Whitman’s challenges to sexual/gender orthodoxy in the nineteenth century with the present generation’s response to the tragedy and the challenges posed by AIDS. In fact, I take this sentence by Moon to lie at the very center of his project:

What the works of Whitman and other aggressively “queer” writers suggest is that all sexuality resides “in touch,” that all sexuality is mediated and textual, that there is no such thing as unmediated exchange between persons, including unmediated sexual exchange. (58)

Moon’s contention that “there is no such thing as unmediated exchange between persons” refers as well to the exchange that we more commonly call reading. And to the extent that such is the case, we come face to face once more with the contingent nature of the re-presentations and re-formations of Whitman that this collection evinces. The most impressive essays in the collection foreground some awareness of these mediations and their own contingent nature, while at the same time adding to our knowledge of Whitman’s multifariousness—that is, of the uses to which he has been put, the causes he can be and has been made to serve, the affiliations he variously and multiply initiates.

Rather than finding in Whitman a version of ourselves, then, Moon’s essay and others (Alicia Ostriker’s “Loving Walt Whitman and the Problem of America,” for example) foreground the contingencies of their interactions with, and readings of, Whitman’s writings. In this regard, the poetry of Ronald Johnson (a sample of which concludes the volume), as well as Ed Folsom’s essay about it, become particularly significant. As Folsom cogently explains in “Whispering Whitman to the Ears of Others: Ronald Johnson’s Recipe for *Leaves of Grass*,” “Johnson’s poems talk *on* with, more than they talk back to, Whitman” (84), and the notion of an ongoing dialogue is a singularly important aspect of Johnson’s poetic practice. For example, Johnson produced his long poem *RADI OS*, as Folsom notes, “by literally canceling out letters of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, allowing a new poem with contemporary themes to emerge from the partially silenced full text of Milton’s poem. . . .” What’s more, Folsom notes, Johnson’s “version of Milton’s epic is just as meticulously accomplished

as any edited version; he scrupulously acknowledges what he has deleted by allowing the proper empty spaces (once occupied by Milton's other letters) to appear on the page" (84).

The best criticism on Whitman in *The Continuing Presence* functions a lot like Johnson's poems, derived from Milton or from Whitman, and yet different from them, and announcing those differences at the outset, sometimes in their very mode of presentation. Contiguity with a difference, as well as a self-consciousness of our various historical appropriations, engagements, and textual gaps. "His Sex Radicalism and Ours." *The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman* fruitfully points up what we still have to learn about our ever-elusive Whitman and what Robert Martin memorably calls "the crazy quilt of his never-masterwork" (xxii).

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JAY GROSSMAN

WALT WHITMAN. *Leaves of Grass*. Brooklyn, NY: 1855; rpt. New York: Library of American Poets/Collectors Reprints, Inc., 1992. xii + 95 pp.

My first reaction on picking up this striking facsimile reprinting of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* was that I now knew what it felt like to hold Whitman's remarkable 138-year-old volume *new*. Over the past couple of decades, in various collections, I've held and leafed through at least twenty-five copies of the first edition of *Leaves*. They are all in relatively fragile condition, with the pages brittle and yellowed. This new facsimile has the exact heft and feel of the original, but the pages are supple and clean, the goldstamping bright and sharp. It's a breathtaking moment—bibliophilistic time-travelling—to encounter a copy that looks both real and new.

In 1855, 795 copies of Whitman's book were printed; they appeared in at least three different bindings (including paperback) with different endpapers, a variety of goldstamping and gilding, different styles of frontispiece, etc. It would be useful to know just how many copies of the original edition survive; to my knowledge, no one has attempted an inventory, but it's clear that a remarkably large number of them are extant. Many research libraries own a copy, and a sizable number are still in private collections. Every year or so, one goes on the market; last year a copy sold for over \$20,000 (over ten thousand times its original cost!). Since a personal copy is beyond the means of most of us, accurate facsimiles offer the best chance we have of living with an exact copy of the book that altered American literature.

There have been several attempts during the past century to create an authentic-feeling facsimile. For scholars and students today, of course, the most common encounter with the 1855 *Leaves* is through Malcolm Cowley's 1959 edition, kept in print by Penguin. It is not a true facsimile, however, since it adds section numbers and titles to the poems, and makes no effort to recreate the actual typeface, page size, binding, etc. Many people own a copy of the Chandler Facsimile Edition, published in 1968. This was a paperback edition, based on a copy of the first edition housed in the University of California at Berkeley collection. The cover of the Chandler facsimile reproduced a photo-