

pressed onto these pages, and you become aware why the word "press" was so vital for Whitman: "The press of my foot to the earth springs a hundred affections"; "This is the press of a bashful hand"; "I merely stir, press, feel with my fingers, and am happy"; "O truth of the earth! I am determin'd to press my way toward you." Always for Whitman, the key was to have more than a superficial (offset!) encounter, to leave an impress, to "feel through every leaf the pressure of your hand." On every leaf in this book, we can feel—in a double sense—the pressure of Whitman's words.

The Library of American Poets has printed 2,500 copies of the facsimile and is offering it for \$95.00 per copy (plus \$5 for shipping and handling). For subscribers to the Library of American Poets series (which will include facsimiles of books by Robert Frost, T.S. Eliot, Emily Dickinson, and others), the cost is \$75.00. The original sold in 1855 for between seventy-five cents and two dollars, but by today's standards, less than a hundred bucks is a small price to pay to come so close to the original.

The University of Iowa

ED FOLSOM

PHILIP AKERS. *The Principle of Life: A New Concept of Reality Based on Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass*. New York: Vantage Press, 1991. vi + 186 pp.

Writing in the heyday of American Marxism in the 1930s, Newton Arvin predicted that "what is weakly transcendental" or "waywardly personal" in *Leaves of Grass* will be "rapidly discarded and forgotten" (*Whitman*, New York: Macmillan, 1938, p. 289). But today, the personal aspects of Whitman's work (wayward and otherwise) continue to stimulate new biographical studies, and the transcendental claims of the poet-prophet still command attention—not only among professional writers and scholars in the high culture, such as Lewis Hyde, George Hutchinson, and David Kuebrich, but also among popular readers and amateur scholars. After all, it was by such people—the likes of William Douglas O'Connor and Richard Maurice Bucke—that the tradition of Whitman studies was founded.

Both O'Connor and Bucke admired just the aspects of the Whitmanian character that set Arvin's historical-materialist nerves on edge. Whereas Arvin claimed that the "flaccid irrationalism" and spiritualist pretensions of *Leaves of Grass* threatened to undermine the poet's insistence that his book was "per-vaded by the conclusions of scientists" (174), O'Connor and Bucke interpreted Whitman's contribution to Western culture as primarily religious; and Bucke in particular saw in *Leaves of Grass* a powerful synthesis of universal spirituality or "cosmic consciousness" and the key principles of modern science, above all evolution. He championed Whitman as an exemplar of the higher consciousness toward which he believed all human life evolves. Bucke presented his case first in *Walt Whitman*, published during the poet's lifetime in 1883, then in *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind* (1901), a book still available in print (as a Dutton Paperback since 1969) and now a classic among "New Age" enthusiasts.

It is Bucke's cosmic and yet scientific Whitman that appears again in Philip Akers' *The Principle of Life: A New Concept of Reality Based on Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass*. Akers takes cosmic consciousness as his point of departure, summarizing in his first chapter Bucke's treatment of the evolution of human spirit. He argues that there are two distinct stages in this development—first the transition from simple consciousness to self-consciousness, which distinguishes human beings from other animals, and then the transition to cosmic consciousness, which entails the ability to perceive an order and a *telos* beyond the mundane realm in which most of us spend our time. In the current state of evolution, only a few mortals are privileged with a glimpse of the higher state, but the human species as a whole is destined ultimately to enjoy cosmic consciousness as its primary mode of perception. Prophets of cosmic consciousness have appeared in every age, from Buddha and Jesus down to Blake, Balzac, and Whitman. These seers experience an instantaneous conversion when the cosmic sense overtakes them, revealing the ultimate goodness, sinlessness, and pervasive love of the universe. Insofar as they are able to sustain their vision, they become the instruments of human evolution, leading others toward the final enlightenment. They must proceed cautiously, though, veiling their deepest meanings with indirection and figurative language, so that each new initiate into cosmic consciousness comes into the fold through a personal realization, not through a blind adherence to the simple words of a great master. According to such logic, Whitman's best poems may be seen as either disguised accounts of the poet's own experience of cosmic consciousness (such as the famous Section 5 of "Song of Myself," which Bucke singles out) or allegories of this experience and of the revelations attendant to it.

Akers devotes the first half of his book to an extension of Bucke's notion of cosmic consciousness. His claim in the title that his concept of reality is "new" apparently rests on his introduction of new metaphysical details into Bucke's scheme (the full import of which, I admit, eludes me) and an updating of the connections between this metaphysical view and the findings of modern science since Bucke's day, mainly fleeting references to the Big Bang and other cosmological theories and to quantum mechanics and the space-time continuum, which, according to Akers, proves that space and time, as perceived through ordinary self-consciousness, is an illusion. The spirit of modern science, above all is skepticism, finds no place here, nor is there any room for Kuhnian paradigm shifts and other more recent developments in the philosophy of science. Akers' views reflect a persistent adherence to the nineteenth-century idea of progress, which holds that science promotes the overall evolution of humankind and "edge[s] ever closer to reality" (30).

The second half of the book presents an exegesis of *Leaves of Grass* based on the doctrines of cosmic consciousness developed in Part I. Akers' interpretive method is unremittingly allegorical. Everything in the text bears a one-to-one relationship with a key component of the "principle of life." Of one phrase from "Song of Myself"—"reach'd till you felt my beard"—Akers says, for example, "A beard is an outgrowth from the face of a man, and the 'outgrowth' of which [Whitman] speaks is the higher concept of reality that he gained as a result of his experience. He tells us that his contact with Unity continued for long enough, and with sufficient intensity, to produce a permanent, radical

change in his character, and the difference between the old character and the new is what he refers to as his 'beard' (52). Akers' reading of Whitman's reference to "this round and delicious globe moving so exactly in its orbit for ever and ever" follows a similar path: "The globe to which [the poet] refers is not the Earth, of course[!], but the whole universe, which is considered to be 'in orbit' around Unity" (59). Likewise, Akers says that, appearances to the contrary, "Whitman was not referring to sex as *we* think of it" in "Children of Adam" and "Calamus" (72); nor was he referring to the historical event of the American Civil War in *Drum-Taps*, but rather to "the 'war' that is automatically waged against us until we are safely on our curving paths back to Unity," the war "between harmony and disharmony, reality and unreality, fact and fiction, one's real identity and one's presumed identity" (106). Through all such readings, I have been reminded of Umberto Eco's provocative vision in *Foucault's Pendulum* of an underground network that has kept alive the neoplatonic ritualism and lore of the Knights Templar and Rosicrucians, the devotees of which find obvious the things that those of us looking through the lens of modernism cannot even glimpse.

I expect that few professional scholars will take Akers' allegorical readings any more seriously than Arvin took Bucke's prophetic musings. But, in an age of Whitman studies dominated by the heritage of skepticism, the fact remains that the popular appeal of *Leaves of Grass* draws strength from metaphysical phenomena that many of us treat dismissively. Perhaps this popular tradition of reading deserves more serious attention.

Texas A&M University

M. JIMMIE KILLINGSWORTH