

## REVIEWS

BETSY ERKKILA AND JAY GROSSMAN, eds. *Breaking Bounds: Whitman and American Cultural Studies*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. xii + 292 pp.

In 1876, in a lengthy footnote to the Preface for *Two Rivulets*, Whitman revealed "the special meaning" of the "Calamus" poems:

... the special meaning of the *Calamus* cluster of LEAVES OF GRASS, (and more or less running through that book, and cropping out in *Drum-Taps*), mainly resides in its Political significance. (LG 753)

Nearly a century before Stonewall, before the emergence of gay and lesbian studies, cultural studies, or queer theory, Whitman had announced and highlighted the "Political significance" of his cluster of poems about spiritual and erotic love among men, "the manly love of comrades" (LG 117), "the beautiful and sane affection of man for man" (LG 753). Yet, beginning with the commentary written by Whitman's friends and disciples during the decade after his death and continuing through the 1990s, Whitman studies have often overlooked the political significance of Whitman's representation of male-male love and desire. Many Whitman critics and biographers as well as teachers have defensively and erroneously denied Whitman's homosexuality or, perhaps more frequently, it seems, simply ignored the poet's sexual orientation or separated the study of Whitman's democratic politics and aesthetics from any discussion of his sexuality.

In *Breaking Bounds: Whitman and American Cultural Studies*, one of the most diverse, important, exciting, and responsible collections of critical essays on Whitman ever published, Betsy Erkkila and Jay Grossman have brought together a body of literary and cultural criticism that seeks to undo the academic structures and strictures that erase the vital, conspicuous, "special" relationship between the political and the sexual in Whitman's life and work. Yet, even while the blurb on the back cover announces, not incorrectly, that these essays offer "new vistas" on Whitman, the emphasis on the political significance of Whitman's (representation of) sexuality seems not so much "new" as a return to what Whitman had said at the outset.

Appropriately, then, *Breaking Bounds* is dedicated to the memory of Tom Yingling, whose academic-activist criticism continually examined the link between the political and the sexual, just as Whitman had. Yingling died of an AIDS-associated illness in July 1992, just a few months before the University of Pennsylvania hosted "Breaking Bounds: A Whitman Centennial Celebration," the original forum for the papers collected in *Breaking Bounds*. Yingling's unfinished paper on "Homosexuality and Utopian Discourse in American

Poetry” is also included here as “a place-holder for the paper he did not live to deliver” (251).

The essays in this volume are wide ranging. Yingling’s and Michael Davidson’s essays examine Whitman in terms of the homosexual tradition in U.S. poetry, while Jonathan Arac, Sylvia Molloy, Jorge Salessi and José Quiroga, and Walter Grünfzweig all write about Whitman in transnational contexts. Michael Warner, Wai Chee Dimock, and Allen Grossman (in very different ways) analyze Whitman’s writings in terms of liberal political theories of the self. Katherine Kinney, Alan Trachtenberg, and Arac make use of an urban studies perspective to explore Whitman’s work. Many of the essays are interdisciplinary—like Elizabeth Johns’s literary historical-art historical essay, which compares “Whitman’s willed confidence in the democracy” (151) to the elitist mid-century genre painters and the postwar painters Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins, who “combined the poet’s affection for the human being with his subtle destabilizing of individual identity” (156). Several address questions of sexuality or gender, including Vivian R. Pollak’s look at Whitman’s complex and contradictory feminism. No one critical approach, perspective, or topic unites the seventeen essays by twenty authors in this collection.

And that is one of the notable aspects of this collection: it is diverse and expansive; it contains multitudes; it contradicts itself. For example, the collection calls for and enacts the breaking of bounds: not only the disciplinary boundaries that keep the study of literature detached from politics and sexuality, but other boundaries as well, like the putatively neutral academic perspective that would separate the study of the past from present concerns and imperatives, like the cultural borders that isolate the study of American culture from its connections to other world cultures. Yet, just when the volume’s bound-breaking claims start to sound brash, Grünfzweig questions the morality and desirability of breaking bounds by focusing on Whitman as a poet whose influence crosses national literary boundaries: “Where do we draw the line between internationalism and colonialist hegemony? . . . Can such a line be drawn?” (245-246). Although the volume provides no precise answer to these questions, it does raise and consider them in a way that is conscientious and self-critical.

The book’s title announces its focus on “American” cultural studies, yet several of the essays cross the cultural and ideological borders that detach the United States from the rest of the world. Some of the essays see Whitman within an “American” literary tradition conventionally-conceived—a tradition that would include Barlow, Dickinson, Thoreau, Emerson, Poe, William James, Frank O’Hara, Ginsberg, and Hart Crane, for example. Other critics in this volume read Whitman in relation to a different “American” tradition, as Salessi and Quiroga put it, “the ‘other’ America (*Our America, said Cuban patriot José Martí*)” (124). Salessi and Quiroga re-investigate the reception of Whitman’s work among Latin American writers, including Octavio Paz, Jorge Luis Borges, Pablo Neruda, the Uruguayan poet Armando Vasseur, and the openly gay Mexican poet Xavier Vilaurrutia. Molloy’s essay examines José Martí’s attraction to (and anxiety about) the intense and polymorphous circulation of male-male affections in Whitman’s writings, its potential as a “new family model” (84), and its political significance. Arac’s and Grünfzweig’s contributions set

out “to redefine the grounds for transatlantic comparative study of Whitman” (51-52). In one of the boldest redefinitions of the boundaries of “America,” Yingling uses Barlow’s *The Columbiad* to conceptualize “America” as “an unwritten text, an entity that exists only as a promise” (140). According to Yingling, it is within this “America,” this still empty signifier, this textual utopian dream, that Whitman, Crane, and Ginsberg begin to imagine and ask questions about the convergence of utopia and homosexuality.

While Yingling’s work, Erkkilä’s introduction, and several of the other essays treat Whitman as a gay poet, a couple of the essays raise questions about Whitman’s “gay” sexual identity. None of the critics claim that Whitman was straight; there’s no attempt to downplay the fact that Whitman loved men and wrote extraordinary love poetry about men’s relationships with other men. The poet’s romantic-erotic love for working-class young men is documented by and provides the context for many of the essays in *Breaking Bounds*, including Ed Folsom’s important and historically rigorous analysis of “Whitman’s Calamus Photographs,” the ‘marriage’ photographs that Whitman had taken with four of his boyfriends, Peter Doyle, Bill Duckett, Harry Stafford, and Warry Fritzing. Nevertheless, some of the critics here question the notion of Whitman’s “gay” identity by queering what we know about Whitman’s sexuality and his verbal expression or performance of sexuality. In “Confusion of Tongues,” Michael Moon and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick use Sandor Ferenczi’s account of children’s “faculty for miming the erotic desire that adults feel for them” (27) to explore the dynamic of desire in Whitman’s relationship with his mother, Louisa. Rejecting the tired, misogynistic, and homophobic theories about how domineering mothers and/or absent fathers make their sons gay, Moon and Sedgwick examine Whitman’s relationship with his mother in an antihomophobic manner that pays careful attention to the letters and the “queerness” of both Walt and Louisa Whitman, “this nonheterosexual man and this woman-loving woman” (29), as they put it. Similarly, with a focus on cross-dressing as a way of describing Whitman’s “performance of gender” (222), Davidson avoids consigning Whitman’s writings to one side of the male/female or heterosexual/homosexual binary. He sees no unitary gay male persona in Whitman’s or O’Hara’s work, but rather a “constant shifting of positional relations” (224), “a series of theatrical roles” (228), not homosexuality *per se* but “an identity in formation, an identity in drag” (235).

There are other contradictions in this collection as well, contradictions that raise questions about the very process of collecting and classifying. In “Making Capital: War, Labor, and Whitman in Washington, D.C.,” Katherine Kinney contrasts the memorialization of the dead and wounded in the informal, seemingly random scribbling of Whitman’s bloodstained Civil War memoranda to the categorizing and abstracting techniques of other Washington memorials, the Army Medical Museum and the Washington Monument. Rather than dismiss Whitman’s war prose as disorganized or non-literary, Kinney examines the way it resists rhetorically the taxonomic and the abstract. Erkkilä and Grossman likewise critique taxonomies, specifically the usual classifications dividing up Whitman studies: the International Whitman, Whitman and Science, Whitman as Reporter, the Political Whitman, Whitman and Sexuality, etc. These categories, they believe, mask the diverse inter-

actions between history, society, culture, the personal, and the everyday in the production, reception, and uses of Whitman's work. Nevertheless, despite the volume's dislike and distrust of taxonomy, Erkkila and Grossman invent their own mode for classifying these essays: "Genealogies," "America's Whitmans," "Whitman's Americas," and "Legacies." These categories are not necessarily more accurate or coherent than previous classifications organizing Whitman studies. Moreover, the editors decided not to present the essays in alphabetical order or provide a user's guide that arranges the essays in multiple, alternative, overlapping categories, as some recent cultural studies anthologies have done. Instead, they use these section divisions not so much to prescribe the new structure of Whitman studies, but to describe promising alternatives. Erkkila and Grossman's hope here is that their classifications will spur further discussions and more border crossing, rather than set up new bounds.

Nevertheless, what makes this collection so lively and valuable is not that it contradicts itself (many lesser collections do that) but that it draws attention to these contradictions, these "critical faultlines, or major areas of contestation" (17), as Erkkila's introduction puts it. Dimock's brilliant account of Whitman's place within a liberal universalizing philosophical tradition stretching from Kant to Noam Chomsky and John Rawls takes a much different approach to the self in Whitman's writings than Warner's essay, "Whitman Drunk," which emphasizes "self-incoherence" and "forms of internal heteronomy" (38) in *Franklin Evans*. According to Warner, "Whitman's writing thematizes a modern phenomenology of self . . . in order to make the pragmatics of selfing a mess" (40). Rather than bury such tensions, the editors place Warner's and Dimock's essays in the same section. Moreover, an important section of the introduction is devoted to drawing explicit notice to the divergences, disagreements, and incongruities among and between the essays.

The volume's diverse and multidisciplinary approaches to Whitman are the referent of the subtitle's "American Cultural Studies." The apparent fusion of cultural studies and American Studies signaled in a term like "American Cultural Studies" may vex scholars with a more traditional conception of American Studies, with its strict minding of national and cultural boundaries. It may also disappoint folks who prefer a more precise definition of cultural studies based on a Marxist genealogy that includes Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, etc. On the other hand, *Breaking Bounds* seems in accord with some of the most encouraging changes in American Studies, including the ongoing redefinition of what counts as "American." Moreover, most of the essays in this volume exemplify cultural studies' hope that academic writing perform useful cultural work, that it acknowledge and engage its own cultural contexts and the problems, suffering, injustices, possibilities, and promises therein.

Other recent essays in Whitman studies have performed the kind of engaged, committed bound breaking that this volume admires, promotes, and enacts. I am thinking of Michael Moon's "Rereading Whitman under Pressure of AIDS: His Sex Radicalism and Ours" (*The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman: The Life After the Life*, edited by Robert K. Martin [1992]), Martin's "Whitman and the Politics of Identity," and Erkkila's "Whitman and the Homosexual Republic" (both from *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays*, edited by Ed Folsom [1994])

among others. Yet, because of its sustained volume-long effort at bound breaking, making vital new connections, and remembering forgotten or stifled connections within Whitman studies and American cultural studies, this book is “special.” Although the title and cover art, a nude photograph of (possibly) Whitman by Eakins (recently rediscovered by Folsom), may make the collection seem controversial, transgressive, or improper, one of the most admirable aspects of this collection is its moral vision and social responsibility. *Breaking Bounds* asks teachers, scholars, and readers to consider Whitman in relation to the political and cultural contexts of his time as well as our own. For the critics in this volume, how we write about, talk about, and teach Whitman matters in an immediate, political, crucial way. In their detailed, historically-specific analyses, they remind us that the culture Whitman inhabited was different from ours, but also that the culture in which we read and talk about Whitman is our own present—it is a now marked by life-threatening epidemics (the AIDS pandemic and the suicide epidemic among gay teenagers) and cruel and pervasive discrimination against gay men, lesbians, queers, and people living with AIDS. When it rejected the “Breaking Bounds” conference’s request for support, the National Endowment for the Humanities asked the organizers, “Does it matter to you that Whitman was gay?” (260). The answer *Breaking Bounds* provides is: it matters, a lot.

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EZRA GREENSPAN, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. xiv + 234 pp.

This anthology of ten essays suggests the vitality and variety of critical responses to Whitman today, or, as Ezra Greenspan writes in his introduction, how Whitman “has again become one of the most current figures in American literary criticism” (3). While Greenspan notes that this variety of scholarly responses reflects the “wide-open, decentralized” nature of current Whitman scholarship, what strikes one is how so many of these essays intersect and comment upon certain distinctive features of Whitman’s poetry. Foremost among these is what Alan Trachtenberg, in a fine phrase, calls “Whitman’s most audacious claim on poetics, that the reader completes the poem as life” (200). These essays suggest the diversity of ways in which Whitman’s readers complete his work—from radical women reformers of the 1850s who were galvanized by Whitman’s message of sexual liberation to modernist artists like Hart Crane and Isadora Duncan who found in him a visionary prophet to inspire a radical newness in their work.

What strikes one, too, is how many of these essays are deeply immersed in the historical contexts both of the production and reception of Whitman’s work. Six of these essays are especially illuminating in this regard. David S. Reynolds and M. Wynn Thomas describe how Whitman’s poetry emerges from and responds to the political and social crises that defined the United States at mid-century. Ed Folsom examines how Whitman adapted the emerging technologies of printing illustrations in books in order to fashion self-representation. And Alan Trachtenberg, Ruth Bohan, and Sherry Ceniza illumi-