

REVIEWS



SUSAN JAFFE TANE AND KAREN KARBIENER. *Poet of the Body: New York's Walt Whitman—An exhibition based on the Walt Whitman Collection of Susan Jaffe Tane on the occasion of the Bicentennial Anniversary of Whitman's Birthday*. New York: The Grolier Club, 2019. 218 pp.

When considered as artifacts, books offer windows onto the foreign country called *the past*, where, as L. P. Hartley famously observed, they do things differently. Normally, the line between past and present is gradually—albeit relentlessly—drawn, as subsequent mornings roll into a heap under which are buried the faces, manners, and mores of our yesterdays. Occasionally, however, there are those radical shifts when we feel the calendrical curtain fall abruptly, finding ourselves on the other side of life-as-lived, when the past becomes suddenly and irrevocably unfamiliar. Such a moment of temporal demarcation was March 2020, the beginning of the global pandemic under whose margin lie more than a million American fatalities. Reviewing a book published less than a year previous requires an acknowledgment of its position on the other side of this historical divide, especially for a book so intimately related to New York City, the pandemic's epicenter from March to May of 2020. For many of us living in New York at the time, the yearlong celebrations of Walt Whitman's bicentennial birthday in 2019 are among the last treasured memories of pre-pandemic life. During lockdown in our Upper West Side studio, I often found myself flipping through the pages of *Poet of the Body: New York's Walt Whitman*, reliving in memory the Grolier Club's momentous exhibition—which ran from May 15 to July 27, 2019—and the rich lectures given in the ground floor gallery. I recalled the faces of my friends reflected in the glass cases, and the intimacy of the scene felt so remote. There was a strange poetry to meditating on Whitman as the “poet of the body” at a moment when bodies were to be kept six feet apart, when we collectively feared a bare handshake and uncovered breath.

Whitman birthday celebrations abounded in 2019 but generated comparatively little literary output. Featuring an annotated checklist of over three hundred items then displayed—skillfully compiled by Julie Carlsen of the Colorado Antiquarian Book Seminar—*Poet of the Body* stands as by far the most comprehensive documentation available of any celebration of Whitman's bicentennial.

It celebrates, too, the enthusiastic community of scholars, collectors, archivists, and artists whose labor and devotion made the eponymous exhibition possible. In her brief preface, Susan Jaffe Tane details her 2014 acquisition of Francis O. Mattson’s extensive Whitman collection, and the subsequent work in cataloguing and presenting these materials that preponderated the Grolier exhibition (items also appeared on loan from the Feinberg Collection at the Library of Congress, Bryn Mawr College’s Special Collections, the Brooklyn College Library, the New York Public Library’s Berg Collection, and private collections). Working from the unsorted boxes of the Mattson collection to the opening of the Grolier Club’s exhibition took multitudes—“great teamwork and working friendships,” Tane says—and in the list of those Tane recognizes are many names familiar to readers of *WWQR*, including her co-curator Karen Karbiener of New York University. Karbiener’s eleven-chapter chronological exploration of “New York’s Walt Whitman” follows, incorporating rich full-color illustrations. The text masterfully maintains accessibility for a general audience and a thoroughly researched contextualization of the exhibition’s artifacts (each chapter includes endnotes constructing a rich web of literary and scholarly interrelations). “The aim,” Karbiener argues, “is for visitors (and here, readers) to feel that they not only learned about Whitman, but experienced him.” Whitman’s presence saturates the book, from the prominent display of the exhibition’s logo—a horizontal pen-in-hand Whitman, designed by Allen Crawford, whose *Whitman Illuminated: Song of Myself* (Tin House Books, 2014) was the subject of his Grolier Club lecture, “A Year in the Basement with Walt Whitman”—to the several full-page reproductions of Whitman photographs and engravings. Readers also encounter clippings of Whitman’s hair (both loose and enshrined in two gold rings), his blackthorn walking stick, and numerous samples of his handwriting, enacting the simulation of physical intimacy central to Whitman’s poetic project, epitomized in his assertion that “Camerado, this is no book, / Who touches this touches a man.” (High-resolution digital photos of items from Tane’s collection, taken by Gabriel Mckee who also provided the index to *Poet of the Body*, are available online at gabrielmckee.hosting.nyu.edu/whitman/.)

Summarizing the project of *Poet of the Body*—both exhibition and catalogue—Karbiener writes that the curatorial team has “sought to materialize the inspiring stories of Whitman’s life and art, with the particular goal of shedding light on his most obscure years.” “Obscure” here describes the decades before the publication of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, and indeed Whitman’s pivotal work does not appear until chapter six, “I celebrate myself: Manhattan’s Son Rises,”

midway through the catalogue's main body. The first five chapters explore the Whitman family's Long Island history and Whitman's early years in Brooklyn, his work in Manhattan as a printer and writer of conventional prose and verse, and his relationships, both neighborly and romantic. Especially interesting are photos showing the various books once owned and annotated by Whitman—the works of Burns, Homer, and Shelley, and Frederick Hedge's *Prose Writers of Germany*—that illustrate Whitman's engagement with Western literary traditions (the latter three books were on loan from Bryn Mawr; for more of Whitman's personally-owned books included in the exhibition but not pictured in the catalogue, see items 150-160 in the item checklist). In these first five chapters, Karbiener reconstructs Whitman's cultural milieu, the world into which *Leaves of Grass* arrived, a world decidedly displayed on the streets of New York. The goal is to “highlight New York's role in the extraordinary transformation of Walter Whitman Jr. to ‘Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son.’” The chapter on *Leaves of Grass* is thus a fulcrum between the two identities, on the other side of which readers encounter Whitman's experiences in Washington D.C. during the Civil War, the correlated decline of Whitman's physical health and increase of his literary recognition, and his strenuous efforts toward self-promotion during his years in Camden, New Jersey. The final two chapters—“Poets to come! Whitman's Legacy in the Book Arts” and “I give you my hand!: Collecting Whitman's Body (of Work)” —detail Whitman's posthumous influence and continued cultural depictions. In these final entries, Karbiener connects her fleshed out depiction of Whitman's nineteenth-century context to our own present, highlighting recent works including a linocut from Barbara Henry's *Walt Whitman's Faces: A Typographic Reading* (Harsimus Press, 2012) and illustrations from Brian Selznick's *Live Oak with Moss* (Abrams ComicArts, 2019). The collection features ephemeral commercial objects as well—beer bottles, cigar boxes, canned good labels—demonstrating how Whitman “has become more than just another pretty face: he is a symbol, a brand, an identity” that we might encounter in unexpected territory.

This catalogue's meticulous artistry communicates the evident love that went into its creation, including the three-year gestation period of research and planning described by Tane and Karbiener. The book is also noteworthy physically: its roughly 8” x 11” size and mauve dustjacket make *Poet of the Body* stand out proudly on the shelf. Beneath the dustjacket, Crawford's stylized title and butterfly are stamped in silver foil on cloth boards of deep purple. The interior is equally pleasing to the eye, set in Scala and Scala Sans types. Far from the ephemeral paperback and stapled booklets common to other exhibitions, *Poet of*

the Body offers a high-quality production that is bound to withstand numerous readings, a lasting statement of New York City’s devotion to Whitman. It is a fitting tribute to the poet who was himself concerned with the physicality of book production, and who understood that the message and the medium require equal artistic treatment.

While I know I am not alone in considering *Poet of the Body* a reliquary for memories of another time, this review is also a tribute to this catalogue’s continued significance. Tane invites us to ask two questions of *Poet of the Body*: “will it have done justice to the life and work of a great American literary hero?” and has the effort to present Whitman been “of durable and sustaining intellectual value?” From the vantage point of 2023, both questions can be answered affirmatively. Its artistry could be called “High Whitmanesque” from concept to execution, as we have here the tangible presence of “the poet of the body,” never sundered from its here unspoken correlative: “the poet of the soul.” It is this confluence of soul and body—their essential and personal inseparability—which allows the poet to “graft and increase” the “pleasures of heaven” and to “translate into a new tongue” the “pains of hell.” In the past four years, we have had an ample share of both pleasure and pain, heaven and hell, and in all of this, *Poet of the Body* continues to offer a relevant and colorful depiction of New York’s Walt Whitman.

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