



Lawson, Andrew. Walt Whitman and the Class Struggle [review]

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REVIEWS

ANDREW LAWSON. *Walt Whitman and the Class Struggle*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006. 186 pp.

Andrew Lawson, senior lecturer in North American Literatures at Leeds Metropolitan University, refutes a longstanding and cherished belief about Whitman that was started by the poet himself. Whitman, Lawson argues, was not “one of the roughs”; rather, he was lower middle class, as demonstrated by his political affiliations and the peculiar tensions of his diction in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

Part of the Iowa Whitman Series, *Walt Whitman and the Class Struggle* is a short and vigorous book, essentially an expansion of two scholarly articles with a compelling, detailed introduction and a brief postscript. Lawson’s larger project is a series of books on class identity in nineteenth-century American literature, focusing on Louisa May Alcott, William Dean Howells, Henry James, Stephen Crane, and Charles Chesnutt in addition to Whitman.

In his introduction, Lawson argues that Whitman’s “class identity has been either assumed or ignored or fixed wide of the mark—and that, as a result, a great deal of what Whitman has to say about the institutions of culture and the politics of class has been missed, or else misinterpreted, by even the most ‘revisionary’ of his readers,” such as David Reynolds, Betsy Erkkila, and Christopher Beach (xiv). Unlike M. Wynn Thomas’s Whitman, who exists on the boundary between the working class and the lower middle class, Lawson’s Whitman belongs unambiguously “to the antebellum lower middle class: a class location more complex and indeterminate than that of the ‘proletarian’ and one that needs to be understood in its historical particularity” (xvi).

To build his case, Lawson gives attention to the notable contradictions of the first *Leaves*: Whitman desires a mass audience, but his book is priced beyond the means of ordinary readers; the frontispiece depicts Whitman as a worker, but the book is bound for display on a Victorian parlor table. Moreover, if Whitman was so proletarian, why does he sprinkle *Leaves* with so much upper-crust language such as “equanimity,” “cartouches,” and “amies”? Of course, Whitman includes plenty of vernacular language too: “shuffle and breakdown,” “life is a suck and a sell,” as well as his notable denunciation of “fofoos.” But it seems like Whitman can’t make up his mind about whether he wants to speak to the people en masse or make a bid for membership in the Fireside Poets.

Taking this tension as his starting point, Lawson sets out to address two problems: first, “deciding exactly what kind of political identity or persona Whitman presents and whether there is any slippage between persona and identity”; and, second, “the problem of the linguistic texture of *Leaves of Grass* and about the cultural politics of the antebellum period” (xiv). In short, what is the difference between the historic Whitman and the tough guy depicted in the frontispiece, how is this difference reflected by Whitman’s poetry and other writings, and how is all of this a reflection of the political and cultural currents

of the United States in the 1840s and 1850s?

In chapter one, “Sex, Class, and Commerce,” Lawson shows how Whitman’s self-created publicity for the first *Leaves* presented him as an authentic, working-class American who stood in contrast to the refined people with curly locks and Anglophile pretensions who typically produced poetry. This dramatic persona invented by Whitman continued in authoritative literary histories such as F. O. Matthiessen’s influential *American Renaissance* (1941), and it made the imaginary Whitman easy to appropriate for a whole range of causes that the “not-too-damned radical” Whitman would never have supported wholeheartedly. Lawson takes a firm stand: just because Whitman says he is working-class does not make it so, and neither do all the proletarian sympathies of his disciples and their scholarly successors. Whitman may have known something about life in the factories at second hand, but, apart from his poetic posturing, Whitman was an artisan, an entrepreneur, and a literary professional with middle-class ambitions.

Lawson reviews the familiar shift in Whitman’s youth from an artisanal culture to a market economy, when an alienating wage system and cycles of unemployment replaced the more humane culture of apprenticeships in the building trades. Whitman’s “self-assertion and anxiety,” Lawson argues, “can be traced to the uncertain position of the lower middle class as it moves from agrarian folkways to the urban marketplace” (4). In this context, Whitman self-consciously portrayed himself as a b’hoy. Of course, Whitman was not a b’hoy, though he had seen some of them in fact and fiction, and Lawson describes the b’hoy as found in contemporary journalism, memoirs, and stage representations, such as Benjamin A. Baker’s *A Glance at New York* (1848). Despite this romantic identification with the b’hoy, Lawson maintains Whitman always kept his “commitment to lower-middle-class respectability, independence, and clean living” (11). He shows how Whitman’s affiliations with the Locofoco Democrats—and the social background that implied—meant he was too invested in the system to become a proletarian revolutionary. For the most part, Whitman was a *laissez-faire* capitalist, a member of the “rising middle class” (17).

Notwithstanding the poet’s limitations from the perspective of labor, Lawson makes some radical claims for Whitman on the basis of “his sexualized poetics” (17). Drawing on the discourses of sexual economy, specifically the drama of spermatic “hoarding and spending” described by G. J. Barker-Benfield, Lawson describes how Whitman “wants to spend freely and receive the vast returns due to him,” even as he fears that to “spend is not to gain but to lose oneself” (18, 23). Yet “Whitman found a way out of these paradoxes” through “an eroticized class identity, based on an ideal of loving apprenticeship that maintains the lower-middle-class distinction of the honest artisan” (24). It was, perhaps, this erotically charged conception of working-class male mentorship in the context of alienated labor that attracted disciples such as Edward Carpenter and Horace Traubel to Whitman in later years (though this topic is beyond the scope of Lawson’s study).

For Lawson, Whitman is a “figure of liminality,” a writer who constructs a “fluid self” that is typical “among a lower middle class whose identities are dependent on both their limited resources and their own resourcefulness” (2). And Lawson’s segue into chapter two shows, remarkably, how the Boston

publishers Thayer and Eldridge may have been among the first responders to Whitman's call. Their letter to the poet suggests a lower-middle-class fraternity that makes the third edition of *Leaves* seem all the more conspiratorial against literary elites, given how Whitman appeared in the frontispiece of their edition in 1860-1861. The lower-middle-class writer must walk the line between satire and selling out; he must remain true to his roots, while courting the favor of the affluent taste-makers.

Chapter two, "The American 1848," starts with an intensely close reading of the first several lines the 1855 *Leaves*. "The wager that I make here," Lawson, writes, "is that a detailed explication of the stratified layers of language that comprise 'Song of Myself' will force these conflicts into the light of day" (29). He notes the weird—but nearly invisible because familiar—juxtaposition of words such as "atom," "soul," and "loafe," reflecting a mixture of science, Emerson, and street culture: just what one might expect from a lower-middle-class autodidact caught between ambition and populism. Lawson refutes critics who see linguistic mixture as presenting "an essentially harmonious democracy, a pluralist utopia" (33). "Song of Myself," according to Lawson, "was written at an extraordinary pitch of loathing and expectation, of class hatred and cosmic optimism" (35). Whitman was no respecter of linguistic boundaries; the use of popular diction in the context of elite literary forms "became the stake in a conflict between a ruling merchant elite and its professional, middle-class challengers" (39).

Lawson then turns his attention to race, showing how tensions in the slavery debate influenced Whitman when he was writing *Leaves*. Slavery, as Lawson points out, was not just a Southern economic system; it was sustained by Northern capital, much of it concentrated in New York City. Consequently, lower-middle-class Freesoilers like Whitman were agitating against local capitalists as well as distant slaveholders whom he regarded as enemies of freedom and opportunity for his class. Whitman's "Song for Certain Congressmen" (1850), for example, attacks "dough-faces," Northerners who kowtowed to slaveholders, in a manner that, like the examples Lawson provides from "Song of Myself," violates conventional class boundaries in such lines as "we labor as they list." In a memorable phrase, Lawson writes, "southwestern humor erects a kind of cordon sanitaire around popular speech," but Whitman's poetry—which does not enclose verbal transgressions within a respectable narrative voice—violates it, "flouting of the neoclassical standards of perspicuity, purity, and propriety—and, by extension, the class rule of the elite responsible for their maintenance" (48-49). Nevertheless, such radical gestures are undermined for Lawson by Whitman's commitment to American possibility: class struggle is not compatible with nationalism and the doctrines of Manifest Destiny.

In chapter three, "The Class Struggle in Language," Lawson presents Whitman, possibly inspired by Carlyle's *Sartar Resartus*, as a satirist in the Menippean tradition, which involves the "shocking juxtaposition of irreconcilable opposites" (63). In many respects, as Lawson shows, "Song of Myself" is derivative of the German Idealist writers who were available to Whitman. In the "Urge and urge and urge" sequence, for example, Whitman's borrowing reaches a point of parodic imitation, particularly when these lofty ideas are followed by the images of trades: "plumb in the uprights," and so on. In such passages,

Whitman laudably “exploits linguistic mixture for the purposes of social criticism, bringing down the lofty and elevating the low” (64).

Similarly, Larson identifies a possible source for some of the diction in the “twenty-eight young men” sequence of “Song of Myself” in George Thompson’s *Boston: A Romance of City Life* (1849), showing how Whitman’s portrait of an upper-class woman who observes the naked male swimmers from her window is a target of both sympathy and satire. Lawson’s take on “They do not think whom they souse with spray” proposes a new reading of the poem in tones of mockery of the isolated rich as well as empathy for their entrapment behind walls of propriety. Whitman’s mockery is compounded by the woman’s earthy “puff” so near to “the Latinity of ‘decline,’” which is further “exacerbated by its inclusion in a mock-Augustan periphrasis” (69). It’s one among several compelling instances of formalist and historicist readings in this book.

From Whitman’s perspective, as Lawson shows, English was an ongoing battlefield between the old Anglo-Saxon (the language of freedom and common sense) and oppressive admixtures of Norman and Latin. But “Whitman occupies a linguistic middle ground that implies a median class location: the shifting and variable space of the middle class” (76). For Lawson, “Whitman hits his stride as a poetic innovator” in passages that include alternative words: “I chant a new chant of dilation *or* pride,” as well as “ducking *and* deprecating” (77). Of course, this accomplishment is not something to admire too uncritically. The hybridization of language does not mean the breakdown of class boundaries; it might mean exactly the opposite.

It’s on this point that Lawson makes his strongest critique, arguing that previous critics of Whitman—and not just the disciples and blindered ideologues—misinterpret “the political salience of Whitman’s mixed style: all traces of class confrontation and tension are erased”; Whitman is all too often celebrated unambiguously as the poet of *E Pluribus Unum* (84). As Lawson observes in his introduction, literary critics often invoke Mikhail Bakhtin to make antebellum New York seem like a joyful carnival rather than an arena of “economic inequality and political conflict” (xix).

In the context of the Astor Place Riots, Lawson argues, Whitman’s mixed use of language “doesn’t so much dissolve social boundaries as highlight them” (85). Lawson’s Whitman, ultimately, cannot decide whether to be on the side of labor or capital, and, as a result, he cannot commit to any kind of racial class politics: “All Whitman can offer is a moral exhortation to employers to be more generous” (88). Whitman, then, is a poseur, who “never established links with the shirtless Democracy” (95). Invoking Sacvan Bercovitch, Lawson regards Whitman’s “rhetoric of affirmation” as jeremic discourse, converting decline in the present into aspiration for the future grounded in American nationalism (95). Whitman was “fractured by the struggle to reconcile national identity and class division” (98). “Small wonder, then,” Lawson laments comically, “that Whitman should end by imagining his own organic decomposition” (98).

“Admittedly,” Lawson writes, “I end up with an altogether darker, more conflicted Whitman than the one we have been used to dealing with” (xx). And, I think it is fair to say, Lawson has persuasively discredited both the traditional and popular vision of Whitman as a Guthrie-esque, working-class hero, along with the allied notion that his poetry was an unambiguous effort to assuage class tensions. Such a forceful argument, no doubt, involves some apparent

simplification of the positions of the critics named by Lawson, but that does not invalidate his argument by any means. This revision of Whitman's class position has the potential to inform many new readings of the poetry as Lawson himself has superbly demonstrated.

In this respect, my principle criticism of Lawson's book is the opposite of what Samuel Johnson said of *Paradise Lost*, that "none ever wished it longer." *Walt Whitman and the Class Struggle* is a short book that sets the stage for a larger, more comprehensive study. By focusing on the first edition of *Leaves* and the context of New York City, Lawson excludes a lot of evidence that might have enriched his argument. For example, he never mentions Whitman's sojourn in Woodbury, or the Leech letters from the early 1840s in which Whitman laments having to associate with the rural poor. Lawson might have explored the development of *Leaves* and the relation of the various editions to Whitman's changing class position in the context of an increasingly ambiguous class system, along with corresponding shifts in the literary marketplace. Lawson might have considered Whitman's long and bitter rivalry with James Russell Lowell and juxtaposed it with his mostly cordial relations with Longfellow and Emerson. He might have examined Whitman's pseudo-exile in Camden, during the years in which he was becoming famous as a neglected author and was being lionized by cultural elites. But these are not objections so much as a call for a much longer book that might complicate Lawson's essential thesis by making Whitman, *Leaves*, and American culture into moving targets that are harder to hit with such confidence.

I am sure many scholars will be grateful to have this important revision of Whitman as a springboard for other projects. Lawson has given us a more complex and interesting Whitman than we had before.

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ED FOLSOM. *Whitman Making Books / Books Making Whitman: A Catalog & Commentary*. Iowa City: Obermann Center for Advanced Studies, University of Iowa, 2005. 80 pp.

Ed Folsom's book must be added to the list of recent biographies of Whitman. Yes, *biographies*. Any life of Whitman that fails to take into account his work as a printer and publisher fails to capture one of the most important aspects of his life. Reversing this usual perspective, Folsom focuses on Whitman's print career to tell us about his life, both internal and external. A short section at the end discusses posthumous editions of Whitman's writings and what their physical presentation tells us about how Whitman was marketed.

No other American author was more involved in the publication process than was Whitman. As Folsom describes the situation, Whitman is "the only major American poet of the nineteenth century to have an intimate association with the art of bookmaking" (3). For his books, Whitman set type, selected the paper, designed the bindings, wrote the advertisements (and often the reviews), sent out review copies to publications and individuals (Emerson being the most