WALT WHITMAN
QUARTERLY REVIEW

Volume 24 | Number 1 (2006) pps. 41-43

Folsom, Ed. Whitman Making Books / Books Making Whitman: A Catalog & Commentary [review]

Joel Myerson

ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)
ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

Copyright © 2006 Joel Myerson

Recommended Citation
Myerson, Joel. "Folsom, Ed. Whitman Making Books / Books Making Whitman: A Catalog & Commentary [review]." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 24 (Summer 2006), 41-43.

Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.1810

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Walt Whitman Quarterly Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

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.

Hope College WILLIAM PANNAPACKER

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

important example), and even sold copies of his works out of his home. His continued textual revisions of one book, *Leaves of Grass*, are well known, but he also created a bibliographical tangle in his packagings and repackagings of the various printed versions of *Leaves* by creating combinations of the sheets of *Leaves* and shorter works, such as *Drum-Taps*, or by such special editions as the 1889 "Birthday Edition."

Using the bibliographical history of Whitman's books as an architecture for his own work, Folsom starts with the 1855 *Leaves* and follows Whitman as he creates his books, as both physical and intellectual objects. That is, Folsom adds to bibliographical description (in language understandable by lay people—there are no numerical signature collations here) a discussion of the creative importance of the physical nature of Whitman's books. In so doing, he overturns many critical assumptions about Whitman's writings. For example, Folsom argues persuasively that Whitman did not choose the large format pages of the 1855 *Leaves* so that his sprawling verse lines could be accommodated by them, as most critics have assumed, but as a result of the printer having this size paper in his office because his major work was legal forms, and Whitman "passively accepted" these because it was cheaper and easier to use what was at hand than to special order new paper. By arguing that the 1855 *Leaves* "clearly seems to be an arrangement based on spatial concerns rather than thematic ones," Folsom will surely initiate a critical debate (9-10). Similarly, he points out how new research demonstrates that the seeming lack of a period in the last line of "Song of Myself" in the 1855 *Leaves* ("indicating," according to many critics, "the endless ongoing process that the poem celebrates" [13]) is in fact the result of type slippage. Similar contributions are throughout this book, from comments on the (literally) spermatic typeface used in the title page to the 1860 *Leaves*, to how publishers of books about Whitman spent more on them than on the books they published by Whitman himself.

Folsom's gracefully written narrative is accompanied more than one hundred color illustrations of the works he discusses, most from the splendid collection of Whitman materials assembled by Kendall Reed, which were exhibited in public for the first time at the occasion of the 2005-2006 "Whitman Making Books / Books Making Whitman" exhibition at the University of Iowa Museum of Art, which Folsom's book commemorates. Very few people have ever seen copies of all of Whitman's first editions in color, and this book now makes that possible.

Anyone who believes that Whitman always thought in print, and had significant input into the physical rendering of his words, should assign this book for reading along with whichever biography of Whitman they choose. And some university press should ensure that this book gets wide distribution *and* stays in print: it is much more than the record of an exhibition—it is a biography of Whitman that will stand the test of time.

University of South Carolina, Columbia JOEL MYERSON