



Kummings, Donald D., ed., *A Companion to Walt Whitman* [review]

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REVIEWS

DONALD D. KUMMINGS, ED. *A Companion to Walt Whitman*. Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006. xvi + 607 pp.

A Companion to Walt Whitman is the latest in Blackwell's well-received series of "companion" volumes, a series remarkable for the scope that it provides editors and contributors, and this text is a worthy addition. Donald D. Kummings is an ideal choice for editor; his work as co-editor of *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia* (1998)—now an essential reference work—demonstrates his ability to handle the enormous task of editing a volume that can do justice to its vast subject. At just over 600 densely-packed pages of essays, the book is clearly not intended to be read from start to finish; however, those who do so will be rewarded with a comprehensive view of much of the significant scholarship done on Whitman in the past twenty years, with suggestive glimpses of what is to come. While the work as a whole is not as innovative as some other collections—Betsy Erkkila's and Jay Grossman's *Breaking Bounds* (1996) still serves as a striking benchmark for me—it offers an essential introduction both to the life and work of Whitman and to many of the major scholars in the field today.

Given the length and variety of the essays included (thirty-five in all), Kummings wisely resists attempting to provide comprehensive summaries in his introduction, electing instead to sketch out the four parts of the work—"The Life," "The Cultural Context," "The Literary Context," and "Texts" (further subdivided into "Works of Poetry" and "Prose Works")—and to provide succinct one- or two-sentence descriptions of the authors' arguments. The remainder of the introduction is devoted to grounding the volume in the current moment, noting that "*A Companion to Walt Whitman* hopes to contribute to the excitement and energy generated by sesquicentennial activities" (2). Kummings also alludes to the current political situation in the United States, and here he may betray a bit of wishful thinking in suggesting that "many" readers may find Whitman's bitter political critique "To the States, To Identify the 16th, or 17th, or 18th Presidentiad" "relevant to today's political scene, and to the George W. Bush administration in particular" (2-3). As Ed Folsom has recently demonstrated, Whitman and his legacy have become one more point of partisan contestation, and, when David Brooks employs *Democratic Vistas* to justify the Iraq invasion, we are reminded that Whitman can be the poet of the red states as well as the blue.

Part I, "The Life," opens with a breezy yet thorough biography by Gregory Eiselein, a real accomplishment given the volume of information to choose from, and this biography frees the contributors from having to cover the same material. Considering the number of essays, there is surprisingly little repetition of biographical information. The essays that follow in Part II, "The Cultural Context," take up a variety of issues and themes and are written by scholars who have in many cases written foundational works on the subjects. To name only a few, one finds M. Wynn Thomas writing on "Labor and Laborers," Martin

Klammer on “Slavery and Race,” Walter Grünzweig on “Imperialism,” Folsom on “Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture” and Luke Mancuso on “Civil War.” In nearly all cases, these essays represent strong new additions to Whitman Studies. At the same time, however, because a number of the writers have previously done extensive work on their subjects, they can occasionally appear self-referential. Grünzweig’s essay, “Imperialism,” for example, in many ways reflects a re-appraisal of his own critical writings, becoming what he at one point terms his “present reconsiderations” on the topic (161). While Grünzweig is perhaps more overt about it, several critics offer at least partial reconsiderations of their prior work. As a result, experienced scholars familiar with the field may find some entries almost retrospective; however, newcomers will certainly gain a good understanding of the rich heritage of criticism that produced these essays.

This is not to suggest that these essays simply rearticulate past explorations. Brett Barney’s essay “Nineteenth-Century Popular Culture,” for instance, offers a promising new approach by exploring the influence of circuses, museums, and panoramas on Whitman and his poetry. Barney outlines the nineteenth-century view of circuses and discusses what they meant to Whitman, arguing, “In the circus, Whitman saw a double-duty classroom: a place to observe proper social behavior and to learn lessons in human anatomy and locomotion,” lessons that would inform his poetry (238). Luke Mancuso grounds his discussion of Whitman and the Civil War in Svetlana Boym’s recent work on “restorative nostalgia” and Pierre Nora’s “sites of memory” and provides intriguing new readings of Whitman’s journalism for the Brooklyn *Standard* in 1861 and 1862. While Whitman’s writing of the time notably omits reference to the growing conflict, Mancuso outlines how it represents the poet’s re-appropriation of the past to meet the nation’s present crisis: “Whitman makes repeated use of the Revolutionary War as a kind of recovery of the social solidarity in the nation’s founding moment. . . . [T]housands of Revolutionary heroes are being enlisted here for a re-enlistment in Whitman’s desire to create a Union victory against the Confederacy” (295). Mancuso’s essay provides a productive new way of thinking of Whitman’s writings during this period. Similarly, in their exploration of the varied ways in which Whitman has permeated popular culture, Andrew Jewell and Kenneth M. Price build considerably on Price’s earlier work on images of Whitman in the cinema: those who missed the poet’s debut in *O: The Oprah Magazine* or the 1998 single “Walt Whitman’s Niece” will surely appreciate how Jewell and Price sketch out the ways that Whitman serves as a changing cultural signifier, suggesting new avenues for scholars and readers considering how Whitman is deployed in contemporary settings.

One puzzling inclusion in the “Cultural Context” portion of the book is Sherry Ceniza’s essay on “Gender.” Ceniza literally wrote the book on Whitman and nineteenth-century women reformers, yet, perhaps in an effort to distance herself from her previous scholarship, here the subject of gender is strangely marginalized in the text: the word appears repeatedly in the header of the pages but is absent throughout most of the essay. Ceniza notes early in the piece,

A problem in placing the templates of gender theory or queer theory onto Whitman’s poetry is that it is almost impossible to speak of Whitman’s poetry and of the sense of identity that it inscribes without

speaking of the soul. And I don't read much in gender theory about the soul. Therefore, rather than take current theory and apply it to Whitman's poetry, in this essay I take Whitman at his word, looking for a theory of his own relating to the question of identity. (181)

Leaving aside Ceniza's rather brusque dismissal of contemporary gender theory, and even if one agrees with her later assertion that Whitman was "reading beyond the binaries of male/female, seeing identity as more accountable to a being's spirit than contemporary gender theorists posit"—an intriguing suggestion that successfully grounds the poet in current discussions of identity—there is still the question of gender as it was constructed in the society in which Whitman wrote (195). Why did women authors like Fanny Fern publicly defend the poet? How did Whitman's portrayals of men and women differ from those frequently found elsewhere—in advertising, in the theatre, in politics? The Summer 2006 issue of the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* featured a newly discovered daguerreotype of a woman holding the 1856 Edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the "women's rights" edition; an essay that fully sketched out the context for images like this one could prove useful for scholars and students attempting to make sense of such discoveries.

Parts III and IV, "The Literary Context" and "Texts," are considerably shorter than the previous section. The essays in the third section consider topics ranging from Whitman's language and style and the publishing history of *Leaves of Grass* to a study of the poet's contemporaries and the legacy of his writings. These essays do an admirable job not only of highlighting what is unique in Whitman's poetry, but also of locating it in the literary culture in which Whitman wrote. Amanda Gailey effectively traces the relationship between the various editions of *Leaves* and the burgeoning culture of magazines, describing how magazine publication forwarded his artistic project: "Periodicals gave *Leaves of Grass* legs. They moved the poet into the busy streets of the democracy he sought to articulate and celebrate" (417). Faced with the daunting task of tracing the poet's literary legacy, Andrew Higgins succinctly traces the many ways that Whitman spoke to the writers that followed him. As one might expect, his work draws a great deal on collections like Gay Wilson Allen's and Ed Folsom's *Walt Whitman and the World* (1995), yet Higgins also is careful to consider some authors in greater depth, including D.H. Lawrence, Hart Crane, and William Carlos Williams. While texts such as Jim Perlman's, Dan Champion's, and Folsom's *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song* (1998) cover similar material in more detail, Higgins's essay serves well as an overview of Whitman's impact on later writers.

The final section of the *Companion* focuses specifically on Whitman's writing itself, and, while the selection of texts may be predictable, it is clear that the choices were made with an eye toward identifying those works that might be most closely associated with "Walt Whitman," both the author and the poetic persona. Essays focus on "Song of Myself," "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," and other recognizably canonical works. It would have been intriguing to explore how less familiar poems might serve as "companions" to Walt Whitman, but there is no denying that those seeking an introduction to the poet and his work must consider these texts. The section begins with a discussion of the 1855 edition of *Leaves*: Edward Whitley focuses

on contemporaneous celebrations of the Fourth of July, drawing connections between *Leaves of Grass* and the numerous toasts and addresses that were published and circulated around the holiday. Like Whitman's poetry, Whitley argues, these speeches served both to celebrate and criticize the nation whose founding was being recognized. As with Gailey's piece detailing how Whitman's poems appeared in periodicals, this essay situates Whitman's work in the context of other forms of literary production and reminds us that the various editions of *Leaves of Grass* shaped and were shaped by the social and literary conventions that surrounded them.

Ted Genoways makes a similar move in his essay "Civil War Poems in 'Drum-Taps' and 'Memories of President Lincoln.'" He demonstrates the similarities between some of Whitman's war poetry and the newspaper accounts that appear to have served as both inspiration and source material, and he explains the way that Whitman reshaped both his sources and his own works, favoring a "personal, intuitive structure over a chronological narrative" (528). Genoways's essay is a good example of how close attention to the poetry can help us to better understand both Whitman's method and his experience of the Civil War.

There are three selections dedicated to Whitman's prose: Robert Leigh Davis's essay on *Democratic Vistas*, Martin G. Murray's on *Specimen Days*, and Donald D. Kummings' bibliography, "The Prose Writings: Selected Secondary Sources." Davis offers a fascinating reading of Whitman's "political" essays, noting how they demonstrate Whitman's belief that "modern literature emerges from and answers the 'din of disputation' raging at the scene of writing" (547). He highlights the poet's emphasis on the role that writers must play in both helping the nation to re-imagine itself following the events of the Civil War and in creating readers and citizens who can think and act independently. To cite Davis's elegant formulation: "*Democratic Vistas* begins with a view of authors as legislating gods hardwiring the political unconscious of the nation. It ends with a view of readers challenging those gods, wrestling with them, and in that democratic gymnasium finding the true measure of their strength" (551). Davis's linkage of the essays with critical notions of authors' historic locatedness is insightful and compelling.

Martin G. Murray's essay on *Specimen Days* effectively traces the varied sources of material that went into this unique autobiography, and his analysis of the text itself reveals a great deal about Whitman through analyzing both the structure of the piece and what is left out. Murray discusses how, in the recollections of the war, for example, the poet's biases and preoccupations are reflected in the scarcity of Southern soldiers described and the absence of African Americans. Similarly, the poet's decision to say almost nothing about his experiences as a poet is described as an attempt to build an identification with his audience: "Such highfalutin accomplishments were not in keeping with Whitman's attempt to present a more approachable character, with whom a reader might identify and who might emulate the essential verities that Whitman's autobiography seeks to promote" (561). Murray's essay serves as an excellent introduction to and commentary on this complex work, while Kummings' extensive bibliography concluding the volume provides an ideal roadmap for those wishing to continue their study of the poet's prose.

Taken as a whole, *A Companion to Walt Whitman* is both thorough and extensive. The essays speak to each other in a number of ways, and, in future editions, it would be nice if some method of cross-referencing were included for those who are new to Whitman scholarship. Those reading James Perrin Warren's piece on "Style," for example, will really miss out if they do not also peruse J. R. Le Master's work on "Oratory" or Kathy Rugoff's essay "Opera and Other Kinds of Music"; similarly, Folsom's piece on Whitman's visual culture provides an effective grounding for Jewell's and Price's essay on contemporary representations of the poet. Many anthologies do not provide this type of referencing, of course, but given the scope of this volume and the richly interwoven nature of the contributions, such signposts would be welcome for those who come to the text pursuing a particular subject. And come to it they will: this book undoubtedly will be referred to often by those who study Whitman, and it will surely become an essential part of any comprehensive collection. It is a significant achievement, constituting a companion not only to the poet, but to the entire field of Whitman studies as well.

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RUTH L. BOHAN. *Looking into Walt Whitman: American Art, 1850-1920*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006. xiv+261 pages.

Ruth Bohan's *Looking into Walt Whitman* is a deeply researched, well-written, and beautifully illustrated book, including more than 100 color and black-and-white images, some of which have never been published before. An Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, Bohan has divided her study into two parts. The first, "Imaging Whitman: The Nineteenth Century," has five chapters and covers Whitman's interest in the visual arts and, in particular, his relationship with Thomas Eakins. The second part of the book, "Whitman and the Modernists: The Twentieth Century," has three chapters and examines Whitman's influence on several modernist artists, most notably Marsden Hartley, Robert Coody, and Joseph Stella. Earlier versions of some of these chapters have been published in books and journals, but *Looking into Walt Whitman* adds a lot of new material and weaves it all into a whole that is more than the sum of its parts.

There have been several book-length studies of Whitman and the visual arts going back at least as far as Henry S. Saunders' privately-published gathering of Whitman portraits in 1922. This subfield has grown since then, and it now includes *The Artistic Legacy of Walt Whitman*, edited by Edwin Haviland Miller (1970); *Walt Whitman and the Visual Arts* (1992), edited by Geoffrey M. Sill and Roberta K. Tarbell; and James Dougherty's *Walt Whitman and the Citizen's Eye* (1993), along with many essays in journals and books, including, most notably, the extensive and ongoing work of Ed Folsom. Nevertheless, most of the attention given to Whitman and the visual arts has focused on photography. This makes sense; Whitman was, after all, one of the most photographed of