



Blake, David Haven. Walt Whitman and the Culture of American Celebrity [review]

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Singer, or Stella's *Brooklyn Bridge*, in the same way, or think of Whitman as a poet who embraced photography at the expense of painting.

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DAVID HAVEN BLAKE. *Walt Whitman and the Culture of American Celebrity*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. xviii+251pp.

The famous opening lines of Walt Whitman's 1855 *Leaves of Grass*—"I celebrate myself, and what I shall assume you shall assume"—tell us something about celebrity in the United States, past and present, but what precisely they tell us is obscured by the fact that celebrity as we know it now did not yet exist when Whitman wrote them. Most of the elements that constitute our present-day culture of celebrity—a sensational press, a discourse of democratic individualism, a society of urban crowds, a popular entertainment industry, an expanding capitalist economy—were swirling in loose emergent formation in antebellum New York when Walt Whitman imagined a self capacious and generous enough to absorb a nation. Of course, this self was only imagined, and during his lifetime Whitman never became celebrated in the manner or to the extent he represented throughout the early editions of *Leaves*. Rather, and despite all his Barnumesque attempts at self promotion, his career followed the conventional literary arc from early neglect to late respect to posthumous fame. By the time Whitman died in 1892, a nationally integrated and technologically mediated culture industry was in place, and by the early twentieth century this industry would organize a full-blown system of celebrity, into which his image would be successfully absorbed in myriad ways, some quite close to his early visions, and some he surely could never have imagined. Thus the challenge of any study of Whitman and celebrity is to negotiate the frequently disjunctive and contradictory relations between his utopian imaginings and their real historical, and rapidly changing, contexts.

David Haven Blake's *Walt Whitman and the Culture of American Celebrity*, for the most part, effectively meets this challenge. Blake prefaces his study with an extensive discussion of the well-known 1877 photograph of Whitman gazing at a butterfly perched on his finger, which was revealed to be a hoax in 1936 when the butterfly was discovered to be cardboard. Blake sees this photograph "as a testament to Whitman's remarkable merger of poetry and publicity" (3), and it is this merger, clearly central to Whitman's revolutionary aesthetic though rarely appreciated in its scholarly analysis, that forms the fascinating focus of this highly original study. Blake's book is organized thematically, with an opening introductory chapter on "celebrity" followed by chapters on "personality," "publicity," "intimacy," and "campaigns." Blake both invites us to and discourages us from seeing a historical progression in these chapters, and it is indeed in its simultaneous desire for and resistance to chronological intelligibility that this otherwise quite brilliant book founders.

Blake is well aware of the methodological risks involved in his project. For

example, in his opening chapter he concedes that “determining the beginnings of celebrity culture is a difficult if not futile exercise, particularly since most scholars of the subject view it as roughly corresponding to the lives of the specific men and women they are studying” (27). Rather than locate a distinct origin for celebrity culture in the 1850s, Blake focuses on the competing versions of renown that circulated in the society of Whitman’s youth. Thus he affirms that a residual republican concept of posthumous fame based in a natural aristocracy of selfless statesmanship was, during these years, jostling against an emergent populist vision of contemporaneous popularity based in grassroots Jacksonian democracy. Blake traces the struggle between these competing versions of renown from the burgeoning lyceum system to the rise of photography and the penny press. There is, somewhat interestingly, less of Whitman in this chapter than there is of Emily Dickinson, as Blake concludes with extensive readings of a number of her poetic meditations on fame, including “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” and “Some—Work for Immortality.”

Rather, it is in Blake’s second chapter, on “personality,” that he begins to directly engage Whitman’s famous dictum from the preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* that “the proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it.” In this chapter, Blake analyzes Whitman’s need for, and his failure to achieve, public acclaim, less as proof of personal success—though Whitman certainly desired that—than as the ratification of a radical aesthetic and political program that would bind a nation increasingly divided by the controversies that would eventually result in civil war. It is also in this chapter that Blake performs what seems like a methodological sleight of hand, displacing Warren Susman’s now canonical emplotment of a shift from character to personality from the early twentieth century back to the antebellum era (see Susman’s *Culture as History* [1984]). In order to justify this half-century projection backward, Blake enlists Whitman’s own reminiscences from “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads,” in which the aged poet explains *Leaves of Grass* as an effort “to articulate and faithfully express in literary or poetic form, and uncompromisingly, my own physical, emotional, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic Personality.” It is, of course, entirely legitimate to see Whitman’s poetic “I” as an emergent form of the culture of personality that would become dominant in the early twentieth century, but Blake’s reliance on this quote from the elderly, and far more conservative, “Good, Gray Poet” reveals that there is also a risk of anachronistic reduction here. To a certain degree, the more radical extensions of Whitman’s project get domesticated when they are framed as anticipations of the modern performing self, normally seen as a subject formed by and for consumer capitalism.

On the other hand, Whitman was a shameless self-promoter, and Blake’s next chapter on “publicity” reveals the degree to which he could exploit the most craven methods of self-advertisement towards his purportedly utopian ends. Here Blake discusses Whitman’s well-known practice of anonymously reviewing *Leaves of Grass*, and his presumptuous use of Emerson’s famous letter in the 1856 edition, both in the context of “the shifting, sometimes contradictory forces that marked antebellum advertising” (103). More strikingly, however, Blake here begins to reread Whitman’s work as a new “poetics of hype” that

“reflected the energy and expanse of democratic capitalism and yet resisted the surface amusements of commercial writing” (120). Positioning Whitman “between Barnum and Wordsworth, between . . . commercial and romantic populism,” Blake shows how Whitman developed forms of rhetorical self-promotion that would become central to later discourses of advertisement. Thus Blake concludes that “‘Song of Myself’ participates in a long historical process in which consumption would become a primary means of casually participating in public life” (133).

Blake’s next chapter, “Intimacies,” further details the degree to which Whitman anticipated modes of address and affiliation that would come to characterize modern culture industries. Here, Blake rereads the “Calamus” poems, now usually understood as closeted celebrations of homosexuality, as oscillating “between exposure and concealment, between public and private selves” in ways that directly anticipate our contemporary obsession with the private lives of celebrities (157). Thus he affirms that “the intimacy that many of the 1860 poems cultivate is part of the identification at the heart of celebrity” (163). It is in the context of this identification that Blake understands the “Whitmaniacs” as “precursors of our present day fans” (140). In particular, Blake returns to Whitman’s notorious “English admirer” Anne Gilchrist, who crossed the Atlantic anticipating, before ever meeting him, that she would bear Whitman’s children. With Gilchrist’s infatuation as leverage, Blake revises queer readings of Whitman’s “Calamus” sequence, arguing that “in filtering their revelations through the language of secrecy, the poems eroticize the poet’s relationship to any reader who regards the book affectionately” (169).

Blake’s final chapter on “Campaigns” focuses on how, in his later years, Whitman deployed what Leo Braudy in *Frenzy of Renown* (1986) has called “the sanction of neglect,” whereby contemporaneous unpopularity is understood to anticipate posthumous reputation. Central to this late career campaign, in which Whitman ironically exaggerated his neglect at precisely the moment when he was beginning to receive acclaim, was the poet’s series of lectures on Abraham Lincoln, which would serve to permanently stitch together the cultural status and significance of these two famous nineteenth-century figures who never actually met. Here Blake acknowledges that he is intervening in “a long tradition in Whitman studies of exploring the relationship between the poet and the president” (185). Rather than fundamentally revising this tradition, Blake argues more generally that “the assimilation of Lincoln into Whitman’s public identity is indicative of a broader shift in the culture of American celebrity.” According to Blake, this shift consisted in fame “becoming a category of social identity, one that granted its bearers access to other famous people” (194). Thus Blake concludes with an examination of the elderly Whitman as essentially a coterie figure who had abandoned his early hope for popular acclaim and replaced it with a critical reputation that gave him access to the nation’s new social elite.

To the degree that Blake’s study has a historical emplotment, then, it takes the familiar shape of a declining arc beginning in the utopian potentialities of a lost past and ending in the reified realities of the present. For Blake, this past is located in the antebellum era of “deep, horizontal comradeship” and “nearly utopian class mixing” (24, 25). Like David Reynolds, in his magiste-

rial *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*, Blake strives to locate the ever-mysterious origins of *Leaves of Grass* in a fetishized understanding of the antebellum public sphere as boisterously participatory, even as women were disenfranchised and most African-Americans were slaves.

Whether or not one fully embraces this version of antebellum culture, it is nevertheless certain that it rejected Walt Whitman. It therefore feels somehow insufficient to locate the meaning of his celebrity there. Although Whitman vigorously participated in the nascent urban culture of his youth, there is something stubbornly *sui generis* about the “I” he invented and the “you” he invited to celebrate it. Rather, the capacious audience that was only rhetorically present during his lifetime finally came into being after his death. As Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price affirm in *Rescripting Walt Whitman* (2005):

Over a century after his death, Whitman is a vital presence in American cultural memory. Television shows depict him. Schools and bridges bear his name. His name can also be found on truck stops, apartment complexes, parks, think tanks, summer camps, corporate centers, and shopping malls. And he has enjoyed an international renown that is as remarkable as his reception in American culture (129).

Prophet, mystic, statesman, genius, democratic champion, sexual outlaw—Whitman is now famous in all the ways he imagined, and more. The last book to analyze Whitman’s twentieth-century celebrity, Charles B. Willard’s *Whitman's American Fame: The Growth of his Reputation in America after 1892*, came out over fifty years ago. Surely it is time for an update.

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