WALT WHITMAN
QUARTERLY REVIEW

Volume 27 | Number 4 (2010) *Special Focus: Whitman and George Washington*

pps. 234-236

Genoways, Ted, Walt Whitman and the Civil War: America's Poet during the Lost Years of 1860-1862 [review]

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ISSN 0737-0679

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Recommended Citation
Robertson, Michael. "Genoways, Ted, Walt Whitman and the Civil War: America's Poet during the Lost Years of 1860-1862 [review]." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 27 (2010), 234-236.

Available at: http://ir.uiowa.edu/wwqr/vol27/iss4/5

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REVIEWS

TED GENOWAYS. *Walt Whitman and the Civil War: America's Poet during the Lost Years of 1860-1862*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. vii + 210 pp.

The past decade saw the publication of three books about Whitman and the Civil War: Roy Morris's *The Better Angel: Walt Whitman in the Civil War* (2000), Daniel Mark Epstein's *Lincoln and Whitman: Parallel Lives in Civil War Washington* (2004), and Robert Roper's *Now the Drum of War: Walt Whitman and His Brothers in the Civil War* (2008). Ted Genoways's *Walt Whitman and the Civil War* might seem an addition to this triad, but in fact it is a radically different project. Morris, Epstein, and Roper are all non-academic writers and newcomers to Whitman studies, who aimed their books at the general reader. All three books are beautifully written narratives—if scant on original research—that give most of their attention to the years 1863-1865, when Whitman lived in Washington, D.C., and devoted himself to visiting the wounded soldiers pouring by the thousands into the city's hospitals.

Genoways, by contrast, is a Whitman authority—editor of the latest volume of the *Correspondence* and of the correspondence gathered online in the *Walt Whitman Archive*—who set out not to retell the narrative traced by Morris *et al*. but to explore the "lost years" of 1860-1862. In *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself*, Jerome Loving wrote that "Whitman fairly disappears from all biographies between May 24, 1860, when he took the new Shore Line Railroad back from Boston after seeing the third edition of *Leaves of Grass* through the press, to December 16, 1862, when the Whitman household . . . got its first indication that brother George has been wounded at the Battle of Fredericksburg." Only ten letters by Whitman survive from this period, and Genoways unearthed four of those in the course of his research. Faced with a dearth of personal information about Whitman, Genoways plunged into the periodical literature of these years; he seems to have examined virtually every issue of every newspaper and magazine read by Whitman and his circle during this era. The result is a slim, tightly focused volume with some interesting new finds and one spectacular revelation.

The book's early chapters are particularly valuable for their detailed account of the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* and its two youthful Bostonian publishers, William Wilde Thayer and Charles Eldridge. Thayer and Eldridge were committed antislavery activists; aside from Whitman their list was made up largely of abolitionist literature. The most dramatic portions of Genoways's book involve the activities of the Black Strings, a secret group that met in a back room at Thayer & Eldridge's offices. The Black Strings were a successor to the Secret Six, the group of radical Boston abolitionists who funded John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry. In April 1860 the Black Strings attended a hearing held to determine whether Franklin Sanborn, one of the Secret Six, could be seized by federal marshals. The members of the group—including

both Thayer and Eldridge—slipped into the courtroom armed, determined to free Sanborn if the judge ruled against him. The group's zeal was unquestionable, if not their judgment, since they posted the pacific Walt Whitman, in Boston to oversee the printing of *Leaves of Grass*, near the courtroom door as lookout. Fortunately for American literature, the judge in the case—Lemuel Shaw, Herman Melville's father-in-law—ruled in Sanborn's favor, and Whitman returned to reading proof for his new edition.

Genoways includes a wide range of responses to the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*; collectively they demonstrate that the intense controversy engendered by the volume centered on the "amative" "Children of Adam" poems, not the "Calamus" poems of love between men—a point that continues to need reinforcing among twenty-first-century readers of Whitman. Genoways reprints a passage from a particularly colorful parody that accompanied one of the negative reviews:

> I luxuriate in Women.
> They look at me, and my eyes start out of my head; they speak to me, and I yell with delight; they touch me, and the flesh crawls off my bones.
> Women lay in wait for me, they do. Yes, Sir.

If this is inept as parody, it nevertheless confirms that hostility to Whitman sprang from such supposedly lascivious poems as "A Woman Waits for Me" (to use its 1867 title), not from the "Calamus" poems, which were easily assimilated into the tradition of male friendship poetry.

Engaging in what has been termed the "new textuality" in Whitman studies, Genoways gives close attention to Whitman's manuscripts and the periodical versions of his poems, in the process enlarging the corpus of his Civil War poetry. For example, Genoways analyzes the revisions to the poems now known as "I Heard You Solemn-Sweet Pipes of the Organ" and "Old Ireland," showing how the original published versions were bound up in Whitman's responses to the outbreak of war.

Genoways's careful scholarship yields consistently valuable results, but one of his findings is, as mentioned above, spectacular. For years scholars have speculated about the identity of "Ellen Eyre," a pseudonymous correspondent who wrote Whitman a remarkable 1862 letter delivered to him at Pfaff's, the saloon on lower Broadway where the poet often gathered with friends. "I fear you took me last night for a female privateer," Eyre begins. "It is true that I was under *false colors*—but this flag I assure you covered nothing piratical although I would joyfully have made your heart a captive." The letter goes on in this coyly provocative manner for another two paragraphs, then concludes, "I trust you will think well enough of me soon to renew the pleasure you afforded me last P.M. . . . You have already my whereabout & my home [hours?]—It shall only depend upon you to make them yours and me the happiest of women."

This letter has been widely read as evidence that Whitman had a brief romantic relationship with a woman, although the nature of that relationship was unclear: a flirtation? a one-night stand? an extended affair? Genoways is unable to say, but in a remarkable demonstration of scholarly detective work,

he has uncovered Ellen Eyre's identity. Eyre was, in fact, William Kinney, a female impersonator and a con man who lured men to his rooms, performed sexual favors, and then blackmailed them. There is nothing to suggest that Whitman was blackmailed, but the knowledge that "Ellen Eyre" was a cross-dressing man suggests alternative readings of the often-quoted letter. Did Whitman actually take Eyre for a "female privateer"? Or did he realize that her "false colors" included her gender? As Genoways shrewdly puts it, "Was Whitman's interest . . . in the young woman 'Ellen Eyre' or the young man who arrived at Pfaff's under the shadowy light of the cellar's torches in the garb of a woman?"

As the Ellen Eyre story indicates, Genoways's title is a bit of a red herring; his real subject is not Whitman and the Civil War but the full range of the poet's life from 1860 to 1862. Some months after his encounter with Ellen Eyre, Whitman found his brother George's name in a newspaper listing of Union soldiers wounded at the Battle of Fredericksburg; within hours he was on a train headed south. With his arrival in northern Virginia, the familiar story of Walt Whitman and the Civil War—recounted by Morris, Epstein, Roper, and many other biographers—begins.

As Genoways notes in his introduction, the early Civil War period is only one of the gaps in Whitman biography. The most famous is 1850 to 1855, when Whitman transformed himself from a conventional journalist, poet, and story writer into a revolutionary poet, turning Walter Whitman of Brooklyn into the half-mythic colossus Walt. Genoways has performed a valuable service in filling out the story of the years from 1860 to 1862. If his book inspires someone to undertake a similar effort to cover the years preceding the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, it will have accomplished multitudes.

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GÜNTER LEYPOLDT. *Cultural Authority in the Age of Whitman: A Transatlantic Perspective*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009. viii + 302 pp.

Whitman's representative status as democracy's poet owes much to F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* and its grounding of cultural nationalism in literary form. Günter Leypoldt introduces his absorptive study, *Cultural Authority in the Age of Whitman: A Transatlantic Perspective*, with this critical commonplace of "the democratic-style theory of Leaves of Grass" (1). Though Leypoldt's title partially echoes Matthiessen's ("Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman"), his rigorous transatlantic reading of the cultural authority of Whitman opens onto a field of vision that reaches beyond Matthiessen's influential "American-Renaissance construction" of Whitman. For Leypoldt, the "cultural authority" of what he terms the "Whitmanian moment" doesn't begin with Matthiessen in 1941, nor Burroughs in the later nineteenth century, nor even with Whitman himself in 1855. The authority of the "Whitmanian," rather, is more complicated than such singular locations would presume. Building squarely upon Pierre Bourdieu's theory of literary