



# Buinicki, Martin T. Walt Whitman's Reconstruction: Poetry and Publishing between Memory and History [review]

Jason Stacy

ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)

ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

Copyright © 2012 Jason Stacy

---

## Recommended Citation

Stacy, Jason. "Buinicki, Martin T. Walt Whitman's Reconstruction: Poetry and Publishing between Memory and History [review]." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 29 (2012), 171-173.

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.2033>

## REVIEWS

MARTIN T. BUINICKI. *Walt Whitman's Reconstruction: Poetry and Publishing between Memory and History*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011. xiv + 174 pp.

In his poem "To a Historian," published in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* but titled so pointedly only in 1867, Whitman chided his subject for treating "man as a creature of . . . aggregates." It is no mystery why historical writing proved so troubling for the poet who marked eternity through his self-celebrating book: historians, working in "aggregates" and seeing by epistemological necessity men and women as "dreams and dots," transformed people into creatures of externalities and contexts—subject to the world, rather than heroic agents who, by being themselves a kosmos, made it. The historian, a chronicler of "creatures," threatened Whitman's own melding of the nation and the individual, the Many in One. When John William Draper published his *History of the American Civil War* in 1867 and promised to "handle our species in masses," the war lay behind him, there to analyze. Whitman's war, conversely, resided within him, there for communion. His 1867 title "To a Historian" sounded the opening salvo against rival recorders of the past.

This struggle with history and the dilemmas posed by memory are the subjects of Martin Buinicki's welcome new book. As Buinicki notes, many scholars have argued that the American Civil War and Whitman's experience both during and after the conflict ruptured the life of *Leaves of Grass*. Luke Mancuso, in "*The Strange Sad War Revolving*": *Walt Whitman Reconstruction, and the Emergence of Black Citizenship, 1865-1876*, explores Whitman's evolving writings on black emancipation, while M. Wynn Thomas, in *The Lunar Light of Whitman's Poetry*, offers a "subtle reading" of the ways in which Whitman became "the prophet of the past." For Buinicki, however, these critics sometimes overlook the poet's struggle with the transience of living memory, especially when, for Whitman, viscerally charged recollections proved to be the real stuff of the war. To preserve and record this living history became the goal of the poet's "backward glances" and the defining feature of his revisions of *Leaves of Grass* after 1865.

Taking a cue from critics like Amanda Gailey, Buinicki notes that the growth in periodical subscriptions after the war gave Whitman a forum to transform his prose persona from the journalist, whose voice, though personified as an eye-witness to events, nevertheless spoke from the anonymity of the newspaper article, to the essayist, who appeared authoritatively under a byline. In this regard, Whitman's well-known work as a nurse in Washington D.C.'s hospitals, popularized by William Douglas O'Connor's "The Good Gray Poet" in 1866, made him something of a known character of the war years and offered him the opportunity to revise his poetic and prose personae in periodicals like *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, the *Atlantic*, and David G. Croly's *New York Daily*

*Graphic* where, as an author of works on “noncontroversial themes,” like his “Song of the Redwood-Tree” and “Prayer of Columbus,” Whitman appealed to the growing population of middlebrow consumers of print. During this same period, the *Graphic* published Whitman’s “A Biographical Sketch—An American Poet Graduating from a Printer’s Case” and some portions of what became *Memoranda During the War*. Other postwar writings also reflected this self-domestication. Buinicki reminds us of the disappearance of the enraged slave of the “Lucifer” poem in the 1881 edition of *Leaves*, a change first explored, as Buinicki notes, by Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, as well as the deletion of a passage against the protective tariff from *Democratic Vistas* when reproduced in *Specimen Days and Collect*. But the postwar additions to *Leaves* proved more profound than the deletions. In tandem with his growing acceptance as a popular American poet whose recollections of the war proved compelling to a readership contending with the war’s memory, Whitman sought to incorporate the conflict into his revisions of *Leaves of Grass* in ways that preserved the immediacy of the conflict and the integrity of the book. Buinicki offers a useful reading of this process by drawing upon Whitman’s own justification of his many editions that, “like the latest extra of the newspapers,” provided up-to-the-moment disquisitions on the poet’s evolving memory of the war.

By 1874, Whitman had fretted the loss of “direct personal impression[s]” to the “cold and bloodless electrotype plates of History” for some ten years. This fear had haunted the poet as early as 1863 when he approached James Redpath with an idea to publish a book called *Memoranda of a Year* to surpass what he called Louisa May Alcott’s “mere hospital sketches” that did not “truly measure up to the magnitude of the times.” When finally published over ten years later as *Memoranda During the War*, Whitman lent credence to the visceral nature of his recollections by transporting living relics from his notebooks to the printed page, “impromptu jottings in pencil . . . blotch’d here and there with more than one blood-stain . . . out of them arise active and breathing forms.” Drawing upon Pierre Nora’s theory of *lieux de mémoire*, or “sites of memory,” Buinicki argues that Whitman’s recollection of the war rails “against its own textuality in its effort to transcend it” by “embodying . . . experience and then by embodying . . . responses to those texts in a later more comprehensive text.” The postwar *Leaves of Grass* represents this contradictory quest to embody living memory on the printed page.

In his analysis of the cluster “By the Roadside,” Buinicki offers a fruitful explication of Whitman’s attempt to embody his responses to the war. Buinicki traces the scattered origins of the cluster to the earliest editions of *Leaves* and reviews interpretations of the cluster’s final form in the 1881 edition, from a “miscellaneous collection” of “experiences and poetic inspirations,” according to Gay Wilson Allen, to a “carefully composed unity,” according to James E. Miller, to “a kind of gloss on . . . what the good life entailed,” according to Folsom and Price. Buinicki, however, convincingly argues for a “reverse Rip Van Winkle” reading of the cluster where, over the course of a “sequential progression,” the poet positions the Civil War as the inevitable event at the center of *Leaves of Grass*. When Whitman resigns himself in the last poem of the cluster to “sleep awhile yet,” he does so after incorporating previous attempts

to negotiate the crisis of the 1850s, like “A Boston Ballad” and “Europe, the 72d and 73d Years of These States,” and reworking these older poems into a narrative structure that remakes caustic social commentaries into milestones on the road to irrepressible conflict. In the 1881 edition, then, the war becomes the vortex around which the intertwined histories of the poet and the nation revolve until a cleansing of “both the body and the body-politic” comes. In this regard, Buinicki argues that “By the Roadside” critiques the prewar Whitman and antebellum United States for “reclining . . . drowsing” like Rip Van Winkle before the Revolutionary War, but instead of sleeping through the conflict like Van Winkle, Whitman’s poetic persona and nation resolve to sleep *until* the war, “for I see that these states sleep, for reasons.” The poet thereby redefines the pre-war crisis and his own helpless rage into a kind of soporific dumbfoundedness. “Drum-Taps,” then, becomes the mark of the poet’s and the nation’s reawakening.

And it is here that some minor critique can be made of Buinicki’s analysis, which is, ironically, mute on the historical origins of Whitman’s sentimental portrayal of the past. Full disclosure: I recently wrote on this topic in these pages. While Buinicki offers a convincing argument for the way in which Whitman introduced the war’s historical record into his bard’s singular-universal project in “By the Roadside,” he misses the opportunity to provide a historical context for the poet’s prewar antipathy toward “bloodless” history. In his 1855 edition, and earlier in his journalism, Whitman drew upon contemporary popular historians who resurrected, for example, Washington’s pathos at the Battle of Long Island with impassioned descriptions of his “anguish” and “tears,” while authors of historical fiction like George Lippard, told “legends” of the “living, throbbing, flesh and blood” Washington, which, Lippard argued, proved more truthful than mere histories (see Jason Stacy, “Washington’s Tears: Sentimental Anecdote and Walt Whitman’s Battle of Long Island,” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, 27 [Spring 2010], 213-226). Whitman’s poetic portrayals of historical moments took this sentimental historiography and melded it with his eyewitness voice so as to mediate the dead’s actions and readers’ reactions. In this way, Whitman’s “first-person” accounts encouraged the reader to literally embody the pathos of, for example, Washington’s defeat at the Battle of Long Island through their sentimental reaction to the poems. Buinicki is aware of this strategy in the earliest editions and cites Whitman’s inhabiting of a sailor at the Battle of Flamborough Head, but does so without mention of the historiographical context from which the poet drew inspiration, though he insightfully points out that the scene represents an early example of Whitman’s use of *lieux de mémoire* in his verse. Nevertheless, some greater historiographical context might have further illuminated the origins of Whitman’s counter-strategies against the electrotyped histories of the 1870s and 1880s.

But this is perhaps asking too much of a very good book that disproves Whitman’s own claim that the real war would never make it into books. Martin Buinicki offers an invaluable analysis of Whitman’s postwar *Leaves of Grass* and reminds us that, as for the nation, the war proved not, as some would have it, an end to the poet’s democratic muse, but a new beginning.