



Seery, John E., ed., *A Political Companion to Walt Whitman*

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REVIEWS

JOHN E. SEERY, ed. *A Political Companion to Walt Whitman*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011. x + 373 pp.

In a 1937 article entitled “Whitman—Nationalist or Proletarian?,” Gay Wilson Allen argued that Whitman’s real roots were not national but international and proletarian: “Instead of seeking for an interpretation of Whitman in terms of the American frontier, Jacksonianism, or the ideology of American democracy, he should be studied as a configuration of a world-proletarian movement.” Perhaps under the influence of F. O. Matthiessen who, in his major study *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, acknowledged the common “devotion to the possibilities of democracy” shared by Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Melville, at the same time that he banished politics to the margins in order to focus on the formalist and aesthetic qualities of “the writing itself,” the Whitman we inherited from the Cold War came to us curiously clipped of his political and working class roots, his homoeroticism, and his communal vision. At the time I began writing *Whitman the Political Poet* in the 1980s, Whitman was regarded as a primarily mystical and spiritual poet, writing under the influence of Emerson and Transcendentalism.

Over the past two decades, however, political theorists and philosophers—including George Kateb, Richard Rorty, Martha Nussbaum, and Cornel West—have turned with renewed interest to Whitman as a serious philosopher and theorist of democracy. This “literary turn” among political theorists is particularly evident in the series of “political companions” to classic American writers published by the University Press of Kentucky over the past five years, including most recently *A Political Companion to Walt Whitman*, edited by John E. Seery. The expressed goal of these editions is to illuminate the ways the “nation’s greatest authors” have shaped America’s democratic experiment.

Whereas in the past, Whitman’s politics would have been dismissed as irrelevant, hopelessly quaint, and even naïve, all of the theorists in Seery’s *Political Companion* approach Whitman as a poet actively engaged in the constitution of a democratic citizenry and community. Seery organizes his *Political Companion* into three “convenient clusters”—“Individuality and Connectedness,” “City Life and Bodily Place,” and “Death and Citizenship”—which aim finally for a Whitmanian “fluidity of interpretation.” The first cluster begins appropriately with George Kateb’s foundational essay “Walt Whitman and the Culture of Democracy,” which was originally published in *Political Theory* in 1990. Kateb’s essay pioneered in introducing Whitman as a political theorist in its opening sentence: “I think that Walt Whitman is a great philosopher of democracy. Indeed, he may be the greatest,” Kateb asserts (19). Reading Whitman’s “Song of Myself” as “a work in political theory,” Kateb focuses on “Democratic Individuality” in the tradition of Emerson and Thoreau as the

central meaning of democratic culture in Whitman's work. "Connectedness... emanates from democratic individuality, as Whitman perceives and perfects it," Kateb argues; the poet's concept of the individual as multiple, composite, and "strange" becomes the means through which individuals are connected to others in a democratic rights-based polity (20). In Kateb's view, this ideal of "connectedness" as a "receptivity and responsiveness" *within* the individual "is not well illustrated by Whitman's notion of adhesive love, or love of comrades" (37). "The comradesly side of Whitman," he avers provocatively, "is not his most attractive because it is not the genuinely democratic one" (38).

Kateb's exclusive focus on "Democratic Individuality" as Whitman's major contribution as a political theorist is contested and revised not only in subsequent essays within the opening cluster, but by other theorists throughout the volume. Responding to Kateb in "Strange Attractors: How Individuals Connect to Form Democratic Unity," an essay originally published in the same issue of *Political Theory* in 1990, Nancy L. Rosenblum challenges his notion that individualism and the self's receptivity and contingency, whether Whitmanian or otherwise, can become the foundation for a political philosophy of democratic unity. More important to political theory, she contends, is the aesthetic role that Whitman's visionary poems play in creating a sublime spectacle of diversity that attaches people to democracy. "In place of an account of democratic unity in which contingent selves are drawn to one another," Rosenblum argues that "the adhesive power that Whitman sets at work in readers of his poetry and in American thought is distinctively aesthetic, and the object of attraction is a peculiarly poetic vision of democracy" (55). However, because Whitman's spectacle of democracy is "aesthetic" and "sublime," it plays no direct role in "political belief" or particular forms of "civic" life such as parties and voting. In "Mestiza Politics: Walt Whitman, Barack Obama, and the Question of Union," Cristina Beltrán draws on Rosenblum's claim that political theorists have given insufficient attention to the "binding power of aesthetics" (60). She brilliantly reads the mass gatherings during Obama's election campaign as "Whitmanesque spectacles of diversity" in which participants experienced their very real conflicts and difference as "a form of democratic enchantment" (61). Rather than activating "strong feelings of attraction to democracy," however, Obama's political rallies, like Whitman's "spectacles of democracy," enact a politics of equivalence that privileges union over justice and neutralizes real problems of racial violence and hierarchy in America (60). "As a practice of democratic theory," Beltrán asks, "what are the risks of choosing absorption over agonism?" (74).

Although Martha Nussbaum's essay, "Democratic Desire: Walt Whitman," was originally published in *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of the Emotions* in 2001, her essay appears to respond to the questions of injustice, race violence, and hierarchy in Whitman's poems raised by Beltrán. The first in the volume to emphasize the role of erotic love and a new attitude toward the body and sexuality in Whitman's democratic poetics, Nussbaum argues that far from neglecting problems of race, slavery, gender, and sexuality, Whitman's poetic celebration of the "ethical" values of the body, sexuality, and love becomes the means of solving "the problems of hate and hierarchy." "Over against this flawed America" of racial and sexual oppression, Nussbaum affirms, "Whit-

man sets the America of the poet's imagination, healed of self-avoidance, fear, and cruelty, and therefore able truly to pursue liberty and equality" (119). Moving away from the humanist perspective of previous essays to a posthumanist perspective in "The Solar Judgment of Walt Whitman," Jane Bennett offers a refreshing antidote to the more judgmental and moralistic approaches offered by Beltrán and Nussbaum. She reads Whitman's passage, "He judges not as the judge judges but as the sun falling around a helpless thing" as a critique of the unethical aspects of moral judgment and "judgmentalism," which applies to life a "falsifying logic of either/or, good/evil, friend/enemy" and takes "a certain pleasure in exposing and punishing the sins of others" (132). In Bennett's illuminating view, "Solarity" or solar judgment in Whitman's poems enables "a special kind of perception, the capacity to discern the voices of (so-called) inanimate things" (132). Suspending the identity-frame and conventional legal and moral categories, Whitman speaks in what she calls a "middle voice" that neither passively receives nor actively embraces in order to enact in his poems and induce in his readers a new kind of solar judgment that does not judge but is judgment (139).

Whereas the opening cluster effectively foregrounds the relation between the individual and the aggregate in Whitman's democratic poetics and in democratic theory, in the second section political philosophers turn to Whitman's poems of the modern city as a particular site of democratic liberation and enchantment. Against an antidemocratic terror of the urban crowd, or what Edmund Burke called "the swinish multitude" in his attack on the French Revolution, Marshall Berman, in "Mass Merger: Whitman and Baudelaire, the Modern Street, and Democratic Culture," compares Whitman and Baudelaire as poets who seek to make people feel at home in the city by turning modern cities like New York and Paris into sites of erotic exchange between strangers and sites for "the liberation of sexual *fantasy*" (151). In "Promiscuous Citizenship," Jason Frank departs from those like Kateb who "overemphasize the Emersonian dimensions of Whitman's political thought" (161). Returning to the problem of "connection" and the binding power of aesthetics addressed by Rosenblum and Beltrán, Frank argues that it is in "the promiscuity of urban encounter among anonymous strangers" that Whitman found the experiential and aesthetic base for political attachment and a new vision of democratic citizenship (157). More so than other contributors, Frank recognizes that the political crisis of the union to which Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* responded was more than a crisis of citizens experiencing a solely formal attachment to law, party, or state. Through his experimental poetics, Whitman sought to embody and enact forms of democratic citizenship and attachment that, as he wrote in his later prose meditation on the future of democracy, *Democratic Vistas* (1871), link people beneath the level of "legislation, police, treaties, and the dread of punishment."

Reading Whitman through the lens of continental philosophy in "Walt Whitman and the Ethnopoetics of New York," Michael Shapiro calls attention to the monologic whiteness of Whitman's "I" and his failure to engage more dialogically with the ethnic difference of New York City in comparison with modern and contemporary "realist" writers. Unlike Whitman who "must

compress or conjure away finite historical time” to achieve “a universalism of democratic life,” Shapiro argues, contemporary novels such as Harrison’s *Bodies Electric* (1993) provide “a realism about the micropolitics of the city that is passed over in the mythopoesis of Walt Whitman” (201, 210). Like Shapiro and Beltrán, Terrell Carver’s essay, “Democratic Manliness,” also writes against both Whitman as icon and democracy as icon, because Whitman’s male-centered vision, like the male-dominated theory of American democracy, is full of racial, sexual, and class exclusions that are undemocratic. Rather than iconizing either Whitman or democracy, Carver proposes that “Whitman’s agonism”—his own poetic struggle “over what counts as democratic principles and practices”—offers the best means of pursuing current contestations over democracy (239).

The political theorists in the final cluster, “Death and Citizenship,” all reflect on the ways human mortality inflects Whitman’s vision of the theory and practice of democracy. In “Whitman as a Political Thinker,” Peter Augustine Lawler reads *Democratic Vistas* through the lens of Alexis De Tocqueville’s aristocratic critique of democracy in *Democracy in America*. Lawler’s against-the-grain assessment concludes that *Democratic Vistas* is, in effect, a “Noble Failure” because Whitman never reconciles Hegel and Darwin with religion and what he called the “free entrance” of the person “into the spiritual world” (269). But as Bennett and other contributors to this volume elucidate, Whitman was not—as is usually assumed—a poet of “personal” immortality. In fact, as Jack Turner stresses in “Whitman, Death, and Democracy,” Whitman was at best agnostic about death, and, like a long line of classical philosophers, from Plato, to Epicurus, to Seneca, “this coolness in the face of death” reveals affinities with “the character dispositions and sensibilities most conducive to democracy” (272). Through an analysis of Whitman’s “tripartite poetics of death,” a poetics that combines an affirmation of the material continuity of the self through time with an agnosticism about God, Turner enhances our understanding of Whitman’s radicalism as a democratic theorist by underscoring the fact that his theory “not only acknowledges but also celebrates human finitude” (273). Contrary to Tocqueville and Lawler, Turner perceptively avers, “agnosticism about death enhances democratic citizenship” (290).

In “Morbid Democracies: The Bodies Politic of Walt Whitman and Richard Rorty,” Kennan Ferguson also grounds his contrast between the “embodied democracies” of Rorty and Whitman in the different relationship each had to death (297). Unlike Rorty, who envisions Whitman as the poet of “a future democratic condition,” Ferguson reads Whitman as a poet of the present, “of the United States as they are, not as they have been or will be,” for whom death is not to be feared but celebrated as an intrinsic aspect of life (300). Actually, however, the drama of the “body politic” in Whitman’s poems lies somewhere between Rorty’s futurist and Ferguson’s presentist perspective. Whitman envisioned the *present* as continually linked with both the *past* and the *future*, a metaphysics, a politics, and a poetics he embodied grammatically in the present participial form of the closing lines of “Song of Myself,” which move from the *I* of the poet to the *you* of the reader in a perpetual present that links past and future, poet and reader: “I stop somewhere waiting for you.”

More than other theorists in this collection, Morton Schoolman's "Democratic Enlightenment: Whitman and Aesthetic Education" illuminates the structural relationship between "political liberty and equality" and "individualism," or what he calls "identity and difference," in Whitman's democratic poetics and political theory (320). Focusing on the contradiction between "the individual" and "the mass" that animates *Democratic Vistas*, Schoolman examines Whitman's attempt "to realize the principle of *all-inclusiveness*" and "democratic enlightenment" through the aesthetic education of his poetry (315). "Moving identity and difference beyond contradiction," he writes, "Whitman achieves reconciliation—between North and South, the People and the people, the individual and the mass" (320). For Schoolman, it is through Whitman's aesthetic orientation to the world as appearance and thus intrinsically unknowable, and especially through his poetry of the "unknown" and "death," that Whitman seeks "to create and maintain the all-inclusiveness and openness to difference" that make American democracy unique (324). In Schoolman's view, Whitman's aesthetic model of democracy, in which difference can exist free of the violence associated with "the construction of Otherness," makes it "perhaps the most radical in modern democratic theory" (327).

In addition to his enlightening and elegantly detailed reading of *Democratic Vistas*, Schoolman also illuminates the implications of Whitman's aesthetic vision of democracy for modern democratic theory. Whereas other theorists in the volume align themselves with either the individualist Whitman or the more adhesive Whitman of connectedness, Schoolman is the only theorist who calls attention to the conflict and potential contradiction between individualism, or what Whitman calls *personalism*, and the collectivity, or what Whitman calls "the mass, or lump character," as the underlying dynamic not only of *Democratic Vistas* but of his theory of democracy as it is embodied in the poems of *Leaves of Grass*.

However, in emphasizing "reconciliation," and especially Whitman's "achievement" of reconciliation in his poems, Schoolman, like others in the volume, gives insufficient attention to the fundamental *agon*—the dynamic tension between self and other, *I* and *you*—that shapes the drama of democratic identity in *Leaves of Grass*. This tension between *I* and *You*, poet and reader, present and future, is evident in the long poem, later entitled "Song of Myself," that opens the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*:

I celebrate myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

This same *agon* between individual and *en-masse*, or what the Constitutional founders viewed as the conflict between liberty and social union, frames the opening poem of the final edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1881):

One's-Self I sing, a simple separate person,
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.

Unlike Schoolman, who claims that “Whitman achieves reconciliation,” Whitman seeks not so much to reconcile as to balance the tensions between self and other, body and soul, pride and sympathy, liberty and community in body and body politic. But in the poems of *Leaves of Grass* as in *Democratic Vistas*, this drama of democratic identity remains more agonistic and open-ended: a *democratic vista* that may—or may not—be achieved in history. Or, as Whitman put it in “Poets to Come”: “I myself but write one or two indicative words for the future, / I but advance a moment only to wheel and hurry back in the darkness . . . / Leaving it to you to prove and define it, / Expecting the main things from you.”

At a time when the United States is still locked in a political struggle about whether men who love men or women who love women have the same civil and legal rights as all Americans, it is odd that Schoolman, like others in the volume, does not discuss the centrality of Whitman’s vision of manly passion and same-sex love as the affective foundation of both American union and the future of democracy in the United States and worldwide. In fact, in the “Calamus” sequence, which was first published on the eve of the Civil War in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman sought to resolve the political crisis of the Union on the level of the body, sex, and homoerotic love: “The dependence of Liberty shall be lovers, / The continuance of Equality shall be comrades. / These shall tie and band stronger than hoops of iron.”

While Berman and Frank both emphasize the “sexiness” of Whitman’s city as a site of erotic exchange among strangers, and Frank powerfully elucidates the ways “the promiscuity of urban encounter among anonymous strangers” becomes the affective base for Whitman’s new vision of “political attachment” and what he evocatively calls “promiscuous citizenship,” the forms of erotic attachment in Whitman’s “Calamus” sequence and elsewhere in his poems were not limited to “anonymous” encounters between strangers in the city: they were also intimate, passionate, bodily, wounded, and almost uniquely among men (157). As in “When I Heard at the Close of the Day,” the forms of erotic love between men that Whitman imagined as the base of a fully realized democracy were also often set, not in the city, but in relation to the rhythms of nature or the sea: “For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in the cool night, / In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams his face was inclined toward me, / And his arm lay lightly around my breast—and that night I was happy.”

In *At the Edge: The Future of Political Theory*, Wendy Brown compares political theory and literature as forms of presenting the world “working to one side of direct referents.” Perhaps because of this, the theoretical analyses in this volume often seem abstracted from the political crisis of the union—and the linked issues of labor, slavery, race, class, gender, capital, technology, territorial expansion, and war—to which Whitman’s nine editions of *Leaves of Grass* responded between 1855 and 1891-92. But while the theorists give little sense of the situatedness of Whitman’s writing within a particular—and particularly distressed—moment in democratic history and the ways *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman’s individual poems and prose writings, and his democratic vision changed over time, as the first volume to bring together political theo-

rists to reflect on Whitman as a political writer, *A Political Companion to Walt Whitman* provides a rich and compelling view of Whitman's political insight and teaching, his shortcomings in relation to race, slavery, and women, and his enduring radicalism as a democratic visionary who shared many of the concerns of contemporary political theory. As Seery rightly observes in his superb introduction: "it is, in fact, a great time for political theorists and their students to read in and around Whitman. Many of our contemporary concerns seem to be echoic of Whitman's stirrings: democracy's discontents and aspirations, America's boundaries; nationalism, transnationalism, post-colonialism, and globalization; individualism versus aggregation; identity versus difference; gender, sexuality, race, and class concerns; civic religion; war; postmetaphysics; the pluralized subject; cultural politics. In many ways, political theorists in America have already been working for quite some time on manifold Whitmanesque themes, and it may be time to draw explicit attention to that unrhymed legacy" (4).

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IVY G. WILSON, ed. *Whitman Noir: Black America and the Good Gray Poet*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014. xx + 210 pp.

Halfway through Ivy G. Wilson's *Whitman Noir: Black America and the Good Gray Poet*, Christopher Freeburg writes: "Whitman was a racist, and he did subscribe to white supremacist ideas and attitudes" (90). Freeburg's assessment here intuits, I think, the contradiction that sometimes complicates this necessary and often thrilling collection of essays. For many, Whitman remains *the* democratic poet of America, and so confusion easily abounds when Whitman's racist politics are unearthed. This is a pertinent issue that cropped up last year at Northwestern University—where Wilson works—when M.A. music student Timothy McNair protested the vaunting of Whitman as a democrat by refusing to perform a musical setting of his poetry, which led to a failing course grade. Instead of definitively sorting out Whitman's attitudes toward Afro Americans, *Whitman Noir* productively engages his conflicted inheritance, paying homage to an underappreciated and longstanding tradition of black authors embracing rather than rejecting Whitman's poetry. Natasha Trethewey exemplifies this collection's wide-ranging engagement with Whitman on race when she writes, "From where I stand, it's easy to feel the kinds of contradictions evident in Whitman's work, those things he revealed both intentionally and inadvertently" (171). Indeed, Whitman's specters of blackness, and our own haunting by his white supremacy, offer another valence to the *noir* of this collection's title, all the more striking for its understatement.

Whitman Noir is divided into two parts, the first comprised of scholarly essays on the relation of Whitman to blackness and of subsequent black writers to Whitman by—aside from Wilson and Freeburg—Ed Folsom, Amina Gautier, Matt Sandler, and Jacob Wilkenfeld. The second part of the book reprints previously published personal and political reflections on Whitman