



Martin, Justin, Rebel Souls: Walt Whitman and America's First Bohemians

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of the continent, and the narratives he tells in such poems as “Song of the Redwood Tree” can become disturbingly affirmative. Gerhardt works hard to read that poem sympathetically, but it remains a difficult poem to provide with a green reading. While the questions of labor and economic exploitation of natural resources are vital in both poets’ work, this part of Gerhardt’s argument concerning humility is less persuasive than Parts I and II. One reason seems to be that the Dickinson chapter does not resonate strongly in the Whitman chapter, perhaps because the two poets are most different from one another on the regional scale. Or could it be that, on the regional scale, Whitman is not humble?

In Part IV, “Envisioning the Earth,” Dickinson comes back in a powerful way. Gerhardt’s reading of “The Sun went down – no Man looked on—” elicits a set of overlapping ideas that make the place of humility both local and global, human and nonhuman, personal and personifying. Even though the chapter on Whitman’s global poems like “Passage to India” and “Salut au Monde” has to admit the limits of the cosmic imagination—even Humboldt’s—Whitman’s visionary poetry of the cosmos finds a peculiar resonance in Dickinson’s environmental humility.

Finally, Gerhardt’s readings of Dickinson and Whitman are at their strongest when she is focusing her sharp eye on the details of the poems themselves, just as her treatment of thinkers like Humboldt, Marsh, and Thoreau is grounded most solidly in the close reading of specific, salient passages. Always respectful of previous scholarship and criticism, Gerhardt brings an important new perspective to the two greatest poets of nineteenth-century America. Her view opens new possibilities of reading, renewing the vision of both the poets and their readers. Along the way, she suggests new paths for reading Dickinson and Whitman in concert with Humboldt, Darwin, Thoreau, Cooper, and many others.

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JUSTIN MARTIN. *Rebel Souls: Walt Whitman and America’s First Bohemians*. Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo Press, 2014. xi + 339 pp.

In *Rebel Souls: Walt Whitman and America’s First Bohemians*, Justin Martin aims to convey to his readers what he calls the “aliveness” of the “cast of long-lost artists” who formed the first self-proclaimed group of American bohemians in antebellum New York. In this group biography—based on Martin’s research and his interpretation of correspondence between and newspaper accounts about the American bohemians, among other primary sources—he reconstructs the lives of some of the most talented and eccentric American bohemians who gathered at Charles Pfaff’s restaurant and lager bier saloon, primarily between the years of 1859 and 1862, when the establishment was located at 647 Broadway. Martin devotes considerable time and space to narrating the stories of editor and King of Bohemia Henry Clapp, Jr.; actress and writer

Adah Isaacs Menken, whom Martin hails as “one of the great sex symbols of the nineteenth-century”; Fitz Hugh Ludlow, author of *The Hasheesh Eater*, a pioneering autobiographical account of his experiences with drug use; and, most significantly for Martin’s purposes, America’s poet Walt Whitman. After all, the overarching goal for the book, as Martin explains in his introduction, is “to provide fresh context for Whitman’s life and career” by following this bohemian cast of characters from before they met Whitman at Pfaff’s, to their nightly visits to the cellar, where they drank, talked, and held their own writing workshops with the poet often in attendance, and ultimately beyond their departure from Herr Pfaff’s place, as the men and women scattered across the country, entering new professional and social scenes.

Martin, the author of previous biographies on Frederick Law Olmstead, Alan Greenspan, and Ralph Nader, presents vivid portraits of the “rebel souls” of the men and women of American bohemia. Through Martin’s engaging style and his descriptions of the American bohemians—often delivered with carefully chosen quotes from the primary source material—these characters do, in fact, come alive. This is especially true when Martin is recounting their adventures: Henry Clapp, for example, overcame a Puritan boyhood to become a beer-drinking, pipe-smoking bohemian newspaper editor, while Adah Menken married the boxer John Heenan, who did not acknowledge the actress as his wife. Martin relates what is known about the end of the marriage between Fitz Hugh Ludlow and his wife Rosalie: she left Ludlow for the painter Albert Bierstadt, whom Ludlow had accompanied on a journey across the western United States. Martin goes on to end his chapter on the meeting between the American bohemian and comedian Artemus Ward and a young Mark Twain with the unforgettable image of the pair drinking French wine, climbing on top of the roof of a miner’s shack, and “as dawn broke over the Sierra Nevada, the pair just kept leaping. Ward and Twain, roof to roof.”

In addition to these insights into the sometimes sordid lives of the American bohemians, Martin offers a detailed but very readable account of Pfaff’s beer cellar as the site where these fascinating and disparate nineteenth-century personalities came together, such that the cellar earned a reputation as the “trysting-place of the most careless, witty, and jovial spirits of New York.” Martin’s research is particularly evident in the information that he includes in his second chapter, “A Long Table in a Vaulted Room,” which details the sparse furnishing of the cellar and notes Pfaff’s talents for keeping and serving lager beer. Even more importantly, Martin acknowledges the multiple locations and addresses of Pfaff’s, pointing out that before becoming the birthplace of bohemia at 647 Broadway, Pfaff’s was likely located elsewhere on the same street, and that later, Pfaff’s would move at least two times—first to 653 Broadway, where Pfaff kept a summer garden and a pet eagle behind the restaurant, and finally, to 9 W. 24th street, where Whitman would reunite with his old friend Charles Pfaff in 1881. There are times when additional sources and more detailed notes would certainly be helpful for scholars, who, although not Martin’s intended audience, might want to refer to his sources for further information on, for example, the physical appearance of Charles Pfaff, the menu offerings at the beer cellar, and/or for evidence about whether Pfaff

was born in Baden, Switzerland, as Martin contends, as opposed to Baden, Germany, as at least one of Pfaff's obituaries seems to indicate (see the entry on Pfaff in *Appleton's Annual Cyclopaedia and Register of Important Events for the year 1890* [1891], n. s. 15:660).

Another of the strengths of Martin's book is that he recognizes both the presence of the American bohemians and the formation of other relationships and associations in Pfaff's cellar, especially with regard to Whitman. According to Martin's reading, the full members of Henry Clapp's social circle, those who could hold their own in the face of Clapp's incisive wit and scathing critiques, earned a seat at the table in the vault. The main room, as Martin puts it, became "a gathering place for other types and stripes of bohemian . . . patrons [who] were not members of Clapp's official and vigorously curated Bohemian circle." Martin offers Whitman's interactions at Pfaff's as proof of the various social networks. Whitman, after all, had his lager with the American bohemians in the vault and his hot rum with his "darling dearest boys," including Fred Gray and the young man's associates in the main room at Pfaff's. At the same time, Martin dubs Pfaff's a "semi-adhesive bar," implying that Whitman along with other men and women—whether American bohemians or not—met at the cellar because they could establish same-sex friendships there. Martin's suggestion that Whitman was able to move easily between these social circles and their corresponding physical spaces at Pfaff's merits further investigation. The more we can ascertain about the clientele who frequented Pfaff's, the more fully it will be possible to understand how these individuals—bohemian and non-bohemian alike—and their meeting times and spaces might provide "fresh context for Whitman's life and career."

Martin's narrative of Whitman's Pfaffian years does, however, raise questions about the role of Pfaff's and the social network of American bohemians in the lives of Menken, Ludlow, Ward, and, especially, the poet himself. Martin begins the work of connecting Pfaff's and the Pfaffians to Whitman's writings by briefly mentioning both the barroom in "Calamus #29," which could be Pfaff's, and the "Two Vaults," Whitman's unfinished poem that compares the basement vault to a grave, but this is where Martin's analyses of these pieces end. Given that Whitman's name is in the subtitle and his picture is on the cover of the book, the reader is left wanting more of Martin's thoughts on the connections between Whitman's experiences at the cellar and these poems. Later, as Whitman moves on to the Civil War hospitals and the other American bohemians embark on journeys across the United States or move on to other stages, both literal and figurative, they come to seem disconnected from Pfaff's as well as from each other. While Whitman is at Pfaff's, the significance of the bohemians and the beer cellar is more immediate, more evident than it is once the group members have gone their separate ways and the poet finds himself in the hospitals, an environment that seems incredibly far removed from the carefree nights of witty banter the American bohemians engaged in at Pfaff's. In other words, what seems less clear in Martin's book is how these talented, lively figures remain significant for one another and how the beer cellar itself retains meaning for them after it, like them, moves beyond the walls of 647 Broadway.

Martin's claims to establish new contexts for Whitman's life and career may certainly ring true for those who, much like Martin himself before beginning this book, have not heard of Pfaff's. However, the experience of reading *Rebel Souls* is likely to be somewhat different for Whitman scholars and cultural historians familiar with the recent turn to American bohemian studies. Whitman scholars are likely to be well acquainted with the narrative of Whitman that Martin provides, which is similar to and overlaps in time period coverage with that found in Ted Genoways's *Walt Whitman and the Civil War: America's Poet during the Lost Years of 1860-1862* (2009). Martin narrates the story of the Walt Whitman who, disappointed in the sales of the first two editions of *Leaves of Grass*, goes to Pfaff's while editing and preparing new poems for the third edition, and who receives much publicity from Clapp and his *New York Saturday Press* while he looks on, talking little, absorbing the Pfaffian scene. The American bohemians Whitman encounters and socializes with at Pfaff's shape his writing and life during the period before he becomes a volunteer in the hospitals of Civil War Washington, where he comforts the wounded soldiers. Whitman scholars, therefore, may find the "new context" for the poet's career less new than Martin claims.

Along these same lines, for most literary scholars the fact that *Rebel Souls* is billed as "the first book ever written about these original American Bohemians" will likely seem an exaggeration. There have in fact been several scholarly articles and books that deal with various aspects of the lives and writings of the American bohemians and their influence on Whitman. Although Edward Whitley and Joanna Levin's *Whitman among the Bohemians*, an edited collection of essays that explores the impact of the beer cellar and the American bohemians on his poetry and career, appeared a few weeks after Martin's book, there have been other recent explorations of the historical and political contexts of the first American bohemians and the history and geography of American bohemias, including Mark Lause's *The Antebellum Crisis & America's First Bohemians* (2009) and Joanna Levin's *Bohemia in America, 1858-1920* (2010). Whitman scholars might also be familiar with Karen Karbiener's essay "Whitman at Pfaff's: Personal Space, A Public Place, and the Boundary-Breaking Poems of *Leaves of Grass*" (1860) in *Literature of New York*, ed. Sabrina Fuchs-Abrams (2009), Amanda Gailey's "Walt Whitman and the King of Bohemia: The Poet in the *Saturday Press*" (reprinted in *Whitman among the Bohemians* from the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* [2008]), as well as Christine Stansell's groundbreaking article "Whitman at Pfaff's: Commercial Culture, Literary Life, and New York Bohemia at Mid-Century," published in the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* in 1993. To be fair, Martin does include at least one reference to Lause, Levin, and Karbiener in his endnotes. But without turning *Rebel Souls* into an academic book and without burdening the narrative with too many endnotes, Martin could have offered further acknowledgement of these previous studies in American bohemia—even if only for their analyses of the bohemians' writings or as access points for additional primary sources—that would have buttressed his portrayal of Pfaff's social networks as vital to individual bohemians. Such references would have also supported his suggestion that Pfaff's was important to the new poems in the

1860 *Leaves of Grass* and his brief assessment of Pfaff's status as a semi-gay or "semi-adhesive" bar. Notably, however, Martin does recommend both *The Walt Whitman Archive* and *The Vault at Pfaff's: An Archive of Art and Literature by the Bohemians of Antebellum New York* as significant digital archives for further research about Whitman's writings and about Pfaff's and the American bohemians, respectively. Whitman scholars and those interested in Pfaff's and the first American bohemians would do well to read Martin's book and, at the same time, to follow his advice about exploring these digital resources.

Where Martin's book could be especially useful for scholars and teachers of Whitman is in the classroom when they are covering Whitman's 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, his Pfaffian years, and/or, more broadly, the origins of American bohemia. *Rebel Souls* could serve as a captivating and generally reliable introduction for undergraduate or graduate students learning about Whitman's time at Pfaff's and the major and most interesting characters among the bohemian group. Martin's reconstruction of the Pfaffian scene, where Whitman was sometimes starring onstage and sometimes in the audience absorbing wit and wisdom from the other bohemians, is readable and engaging. One of Martin's strengths is likening the past to the present, such as when he declares Adah Menken a "sepia-tone Marilyn Monroe" or informs readers that Collins and Mimi, two of the most beloved characters in the musical *Rent*, have the same names as characters in *La vie de Bohème*, the play that was part of the same Bohemianism that was sweeping Paris when Henry Clapp, Jr., lived in the city during the early 1850s. Such analogies provide students and, indeed, any modern audience important connections to the past, points of reference from which to engage with the history of the more obscure, less understood American bohemians. Martin's book is also a testament to the kind of compelling historical tale one can weave with primary sources, including descriptions and anecdotes from nineteenth-century newspapers and magazines, and such a model can motivate students to employ this methodology in their own work.

Rebel Souls raises significant unanswered questions and challenges for Whitman scholars and nineteenth-century literary historians: How did Whitman navigate the separate and seemingly compartmentalized social spaces and networks at Pfaff's? What extant literature about Pfaff's did the American bohemians author? Martin relates the untimely ends of many of the American bohemians here, but what about Charles Pfaff, and what about the various locations of Pfaff's? For example, what happened to the cellar at 647 Broadway once the restaurant had gone but before it became the shoe store that Martin mentions in his introduction? What Pfaff's and the American bohemian circle meant for Whitman and, indeed, for all of the current and former American bohemians in the post-Civil War era also merits further exploration. For Whitman scholars and their students, then, Martin's book can ultimately serve as a jumping off point and as a source of motivation for their own scholarly work.