

Marsh, John. In Walt We Trust: How a Queer Socialist Poet Can Save America From Itself [review]

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pagne; Whitman visited Pfaff later in their lives and remembered his time at Pfaff's fondly. One anecdote Blalock uncovered from an early book of recollections of the bohemian Pfaff years has the contrarian poet George Arnold calling for a toast to the success of the Confederacy, which riled Whitman so much that he took a swing at Arnold and started a bar brawl that Pfaff himself broke up.

Blalock's details and anecdotes are dense and fascinating. Readers who are not already interested in antebellum bohemianism or Whitman may wish for the book to make a stronger argument for why Pfaff's biography and the story of his beer hall are important to American literary history. Readers who come to the book with an interest in bohemianism, Whitman, or some of the other figures—such as the liberated actress Ada Clare, who shirked social norms and died a bizarre death by rabies—will find the book to be like reading page-turning details one never knew about old friends.

"*Go to Pfaff's*" is available to read for free online, thanks to a forward-thinking arrangement between Lehigh University Press and the digital project *The Vault at Pfaff's*, directed by Edward Whitley and Rob Weidman, which is hosted by Lehigh University. The book went through the standard peer review process at Lehigh University Press, but with the aim of being made available under a creative commons license at the place where it was most likely to be found by readers interested in the history of Pfaff and the bohemians who frequented his business.

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JOHN MARSH, *In Walt We Trust: How a Queer Socialist Poet Can Save America From Itself*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2015. 248 pp.

In the late pages of *In Walt We Trust*—a lively and incisive appeal to revisit our national (queer and socialist!) poet in light of the crises facing American democracy today—John Marsh poses the vital ques-

tion: “what kind of person would you be if you read Whitman’s poetry?” (203). The answer for Marsh is that any “careful reader of his poetry” could become “an ideal democratic citizen” (203). After all, it was Whitman who, while engaging the gravest threats to nineteenth century democracy (slavery, war, and monopoly), staked the future of the republic and *Leaves of Grass* on the cultivation of strong and inventive readers. Now, in 2015, confronted with the largest gap between wealthy and poor citizens since Whitman’s era, those future Americans have justifiably lost faith in a polity paralyzed by corporate influence, financial trusts, and the dogged culture wars. Weaving personal anecdotes with Whitman biography, literary analysis, and political philosophy, Marsh turns *Leaves of Grass* into a self-help guide for our New Gilded Age, complete with lessons on “how to die,” “how to have better sex, what to do about money,” and how to “survive our fetid democracy” by becoming better people and readers (16).

These themes, spanning Whitman’s thoughts on mortality, economy, love, and governance, structure the book’s four chapters. Marsh provides instructive context in each through first-person accounts of his pilgrimages, *Leaves of Grass* in hand, to a variety of Whitman-related sites. He hops the ferry from Brooklyn, seeking contact with the hereafter; he roams Occupy Wall Street, reflecting on work and money. In a Pennsylvania strip club, he questions America’s lingering shame about sexual desire. While in Washington, D.C., he visits former Civil War hospitals and recreates the scenes of communion Whitman forged with soldiers amid national fratricide. And Marsh’s conversion to Whitmanism is as personal as it is political. Once a young “fire-breathing socialist,” Marsh confesses to have fallen on the tenure track (22). A disaffected professor, self-medicating with alcohol and harboring doubts “about the meaning of life and the purpose of our country,” he weds personal crisis to national calamity, a testament to how the disciple has absorbed his master (11).

Indeed, Marsh is an insightful guide to Whitman’s poetry. At the outset, he masterfully parses the opening lines of “Song of Myself,” exhibiting the passage as the crux of Whitman’s poetics: from his sense of human divinity and scientific inspiration to his faith in deathlessness and direct address to readers. Whitman situates the abstract

ideas of life and death in the atomic matter redistributed eternally across time, space, and bodies. If “every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you,” Marsh claims, then our identities are likewise “equal” and “interchangeable” (79), and Whitman, affirming egalitarianism through natural law, proves that we inhabit “a socialist universe, not a capitalist one” (60). At this moment, I was reminded of Horace Traubel in Camden relentlessly prodding the elderly Whitman on the question of socialism. Traubel, who galvanized a generation of American radicals under the banner of the Walt Whitman Fellowship, also published dozens of articles in his *Conservator* that are in the vein of Marsh’s work—essays like “Whitman and Socialism,” “Whitman’s Significance to the Revolutionist,” and “The Whitman Propaganda is Whitman.” All could duly serve as subtitles to *In Walt We Trust*, which is steeped in Traubel’s inheritance. Marsh, like Traubel, finally consents to Whitman’s nimble evasions, deciding he was “with the socialists in the result” (107).

The book’s most rewarding section, to my mind, begins with Marsh trailing Whitman’s presence around Zuccotti Park, the site of the 2011 Occupy Wall Street protests. Whitman certainly left his mark on Zuccotti’s poets, and Marsh notes that *Leaves of Grass* was among the first entries in the Occupy Wall Street library catalog. To be sure, the unfettered capitalism that has become the refrain of our corporate-friendly politicians is not unlike the depravity Whitman perceived in the business classes of his own era. So Marsh finds in Whitman a shrewd critic of his country’s drive to worship, hoard, and ultimately owe money. As M. Wynn Thomas has shown, Whitman’s ambivalent class positions—ranging from carpenter to real estate speculator to poet—shaped a verse that capitalized on the imagery of labor and business. Whitman celebrated worker solidarity and the dynamism of the market, but he never glorified money, instead promoting “fairness, equality, solidarity, care” in the economic sphere (69). In *Democratic Vistas*, he states that commercial activity is properly viewed as the “substrata” upon which the “edifice” of democracy is raised (85). Money is a means to guarantee the needs of citizens, and any nation that—as Marsh puts it—values “things” before “people” violates the core tenet of a democracy (90). As Whitman knew, in a

genuine democracy, individuals must be free to pursue creative projects and tend to matters of the soul, rather than forced to spend lifetimes scrambling for the money to live. While governments today offer only fiscal austerity and self-blame, Marsh's Whitman courageously advocates for a "robust welfare state" to provide the substrata on which to build towards those "less tangible things: fraternity, love, belonging, dignity, and respect" (221-222).

Marsh gestures towards constructing this social fabric, as Whitman did, by giving voice to new forms of affection. "Desire is a blessing" (140), he reminds us, and in good Whitmanian fashion, sex fulfills our desires on the way to becoming fuller selves and stronger comrades. For that reason, when Marsh turns to the "Calamus" poems, he is less interested in answering "Was Whitman gay?"—he settles on the designation "queer"—and responds instead to what Whitman intended to accomplish with his poems of male-male affection (177). Whitman truly believed that the "institution of the dear love of comrades" broached in "Calamus" could suture the ideological rift then readying to spill onto the battlefields (159). He knew democracy could never be "held together" by "an agreement on a paper," and certainly not "by arms" (169). So the Civil War put Whitman's views on death, affection, and unity to the ultimate test. A glimpse at modern Election Day maps, red and blue in sharp contrast, reinforces Marsh's worry that the nation's commitment to democracy still exists in name only, bound tenuously by the markets for consumption and competition. In Whitman's Civil War poetry and prose, the soldiers, as Marsh explains, "displayed the character and the virtues that Whitman thought necessary to a democracy"; they were common Americans willing to "sacrifice their lives for an abstraction like freedom" above and beyond material interest (216-217).

Democracy is, finally, all about character for Whitman; it is a "way of being" that has little to do with how you vote and everything to do with how you treat others (223). It is safe to say that, in lesser hands, Whitman's observations might register as so many empty platitudes ("people before profits"; "it's who you are on the inside"). Marsh's Whitman, however, summons clichés about people power and love "back from the dead" (94). Accordingly, *In Walt We Trust*

joins a rich tradition of political philosophy that, like Richard Rorty's landmark *Achieving the Country* (1997), calls on Whitman's poetics to reinvigorate democratic theory. One can sense concepts like democratic hope (Cornel West), culture (George Kateb), and desire (Martha Nussbaum) at the back of Marsh's effort. Though poetry might not directly repair the fractures of American democracy, it might help build the character of its people. Attitudes change at a snail's pace, "over the course of a generation," Marsh estimates (203). Perhaps the revival of *Leaves of Grass* across all serious social movements of the twentieth century is a testament to Whitman's patient faith that love and solidarity can be fostered by reading poetry. *In Walt We Trust* finds kinship, then, with literary histories like Bryan Garman's *A Race of Singers* (2000) and Michael Robertson's *Worshipping Walt* (2008), studies of Whitman's influence on socialist rhetoric and of the ways that America's rebels continue to reread his legacy.

If Whitman is "the cure for what ails us," he must be the medicine for *all* of us (16). Fortunately, Marsh excels at amplifying those features unique to Whitman's poetry, in form and content, and clarifying them for a general audience. Furthermore, his prose is lucid, his interpretations illuminating, and his research far-reaching. *In Walt We Trust* would make a nifty primer to Whitman's life and poetry, and it arrives just as literary studies is warming again to the "use" value of literature. The book ends with a disappointing trip to Whitman's tomb in Camden, NJ, a stationary memorial that—as a "hedge against time and decay"—feels wholly opposed to the ideas of the man (228). Whitman's monument to death is his poetry, and his immortality is attained at the lips of readers making sense of life's big questions through the words he left behind. *In Walt We Trust* resurrects the socialist Whitman, and my hope is that it might convert more readers into twenty-first-century disciples like Marsh.

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