



Walt Whitman's Selected Journalism. Ed. Douglas A. Noverr and Jason Stacy [review]

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REVIEW



Walt Whitman's Selected Journalism. Ed. Douglas A. Noverr and Jason Stacy. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2014. xxxvi + 281 pp.

Looking back on the numerous editions of *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman exclaimed to his friend Horace Traubel in 1889, "Editions! Editions! Editions! Like the last extra of a newspaper: an extra after an extra: one issue after another." The poet's analogy effectively captures not only the iterative nature of the book's publication—his on-going attempt to fit his body of work to his particular historical moment—but it also points to the considerable influence Whitman's early experience writing for the antebellum press had on his life and writing. As Douglas A. Noverr and Jason Stacy's welcome new volume *Walt Whitman's Selected Journalism* reminds us, Whitman was a prolific writer well before the publication of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. This outstanding collection, covering writing from 1839 to 1865, demonstrates that far from representing a radical departure from his early journalism, Whitman's poetry in many ways expands on ideas and issues that had interested him for many years, offering him another way of expressing his sentiments and forging connections with his readers. The editors have organized the material thematically into four sections: "Democracy and Politics," "Moral Suasion," "The Arts," and "Come Closer to Me." Each features selections ordered chronologically, and, as the headings indicate, treat both the subject matter or, in the case of the final section, the style of the poet's journalism. In their introduction to the volume, Noverr and Stacy not only trace the ups and downs of Whitman's early career as a writer and editor, but they also provide an overview of the twentieth-century publication history of and scholarship on Whitman's journalism, providing helpful context for this latest collection.

The selections in the first section present a picture of the rough-and-tumble political world the young Whitman inhabited, the local and national controversies that fueled his journalism and that in some cases, as with the Wilmot Proviso, presaged the Civil War to

come. Noverr and Stacy provide important context and thoughtful analysis for these pieces, particularly those responding to people and disputes that may now be long forgotten. In doing so, the editors also effectively address the disturbing nativist rhetoric of some of the poet's earliest journalism, without dismissing it. In their discussion of Whitman's editorials criticizing a push to fund Catholic schools in the early 1840s, for example, the editors note, "though Whitman claimed to be a universalist against religious bigotry, he was also a proponent of cultural assimilation," and that in some of his early editorials, Whitman used "terms that make us cringe today." The portrait of Whitman that emerges from these early works is complex and at times troubling; however, later selections demonstrate the emergence of the poet's more inclusive democratic vision as the years passed.

Indeed, one of the primary strengths of this collection is the opportunity it provides for exploring the relationship between the more familiar "Walt Whitman" of *Leaves of Grass* and the "Walter Whitman" of such papers as the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* or the *New York Aurora*. Whitman's enthusiasm regarding the laying of the first trans-Atlantic telegraph cable, for example, expressed in a series of editorials in August 1858 and collected in the "Moral Suasion" section, reflects the poet's fascination with technology and its ability to connect people, and the series foreshadows his celebration of these topics in numerous poems. In "The Cable Laid!" from August 6, 1858, for instance, written for the *Brooklyn Daily Times*, Whitman exclaimed, "Not only will the Atlantic Cable be a means of communicating intelligence as to the rise or downfall of stocks, not only will it be a material agent for the transmission of late news for the press, but it will have a vast moral effect;—it will be a civilizer and a peace maker—it will be like the dawn of a Millenium day to the troubled nations—it will usher in a Golden Age of peace on earth and good will to man." And in "Salut Au Monde," published in 1871, the poet writes, "I see the electric telegraphs of the earth; / I see the filaments of the news of the wars, deaths, losses, gains, passions, of my race." And again in "Passage to India," Whitman celebrates "The seas inlaid with eloquent gentle wires," and "The earth to be spann'd, connected by network, / The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage, / The oceans to

be cross'd, the distant brought near, / The lands to be welded together." Both the sentiments and the diction in these lines closely echo the editorial and suggest how Whitman's prose work informs his poetry. There are many such parallels to be drawn between the journalism reprinted here and Whitman's verse, and this collection will not only serve as a valuable resource for scholars, but it will work extremely well in the classroom for instructors hoping to expand their students' understanding of Whitman as a writer and to provide further context for his poetry.

One of the primary questions one might ask after reading these selections is how much we might ask of the editors in drawing parallels like these. Pedagogically, one could argue that leaving out such connections provides students room to make them on their own. If, however, this book is intended for general readers, then guidance in drawing attention to the resonances between the prose and the poetry might be more helpful. As it stands, this volume splits the difference. Particularly in the last two sections, the editors provide endnotes for many of the selections with quotations from various poems in *Leaves of Grass* and other Whitman texts, but such references are rare in the first two sections. More consistency in these references, or an explanation for the difference in treatment, would be welcome, so as not to give the impression that some texts correspond more directly with the poet's verse than others. The strength of these selections is not only in their intrinsic interest as a window into Whitman's life as a newspaperman, but also in how much potential light they all can shed on his poetry, and vice-versa.

The presence or absence of editorial commentary on possible resonances with Whitman's poetry, however, has no effect on the quality of the selections themselves, nor on the strength of the editorial notes providing necessary background on the people, places, and events that Whitman addresses in these writings. Indeed, the question of how this text treats the poetry in its apparatus is simply something to keep in mind for those of us who look forward to incorporating this strong collection into our classes. For there is no question that *Walt Whitman's Selected Journalism* will likely become a standard text in many a future course on the poet. Noverr and Stacy have done an

exemplary job of choosing articles that will open up new pathways for research and discussion of the poet's poetry and prose, and they have produced a volume that provides new insight into the ways that Whitman saw the city and the nation he spent his life singing and celebrating.

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