



Whitman, Walt. Song of Myself: With a Complete Commentary. Introduction and Commentary by Ed Folsom and Christopher Merrill [review]

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REVIEWS



Walt Whitman. *Song of Myself: With a Complete Commentary*. Introduction and Commentary by Ed Folsom and Christopher Merrill. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016. 193 pp.

“Novel?—Work of some sort / Play? . . . *Plot for a poem or other work. . . A spiritual novel?*” In Ed Folsom’s “Introduction” to *Song of Myself: With a Complete Commentary*, Whitman demonstrates his attention to form during the creation of what we now know as “Song of Myself.” Recent discoveries of Whitman’s writings dating around 1855—a novel published in 1852, a health manual appearing in 1858—serve as reminders of the singularity of his choice to shape “Song of Myself” as poetry. The labels of “free form” or “open form” that the work often receives can belie the deliberateness and significance of its structure.

Though the poem’s irregular stanzas appeared unnumbered and seemingly unorganized in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman originally conceived of it in five parts—as Folsom revealed in a study of a circa 1855 manuscript housed at the Harry Ransom Center (“Walt Whitman’s Working Notes for the First Edition of *Leaves of Grass*,” *WWQR* [Fall 1998]). No surprise, then, that Walt eventually began to organize the poem into sections, beginning with the numbering of 372 stanzas with the poem’s third publication in 1860. In the fourth edition of *Leaves of Grass*, he reconfigured the poem into 366 stanzas and also partitioned it into 52 sections. This numbering remained in place in *Leaves of Grass* 1871, though he finally dropped the stanza numbers and only retained the 52 sections in the sixth and final editions of the *Leaves*, when the poem gained the title “Song of Myself.” The constant rethinking of the poem’s organization suggests that the numbering was more than simply a way to create order, as it is often understood. And the breakdown of 52 sections in the final iteration of “Song of Myself”—the version Whitman asks his readers to favor—must have been the most significant of all.

“Song of Myself” has, of course, been interpreted in myriad ways, as is conveniently evident in the “Selected Bibliography of Readings of

Song of Myself” found in the final pages of this book. In his introduction, Folsom proposes that the “deep structure” of “*Song of Myself*” is a “half-submerged slave-escape narrative.” Transforming into an actual slave-escape narrative at key moments (such as Section 10’s runaway slave passage), the text is directed, Folsom says, towards “all readers of the poem, who need to liberate themselves from all the enslaving beliefs and possessions that prevent individual growth, need to put ‘Creeds and schools in abeyance’ and embark on a new, risky, and open road.” This message is underscored by both Folsom and Christopher Merrill, from their discussions of Section 1’s break from conventional expectations and understandings of our selves, to Section 52’s reminders that we readers are the creative force breathing life into Whitman’s pages. After decades of interpretations as a work focusing on the poem’s voice, persona, or psychology, or on the narrative patterns, autobiographical content, or historical context, Merrill and Folsom have made *us* the subject of “*Song of Myself*”—a refreshing change, and a challenging call to consciousness and action.

But the seismic shift this book brings to Whitman criticism is in its form. “The poem has never received a sustained, section-by-section, detailed reading,” notes Folsom in the introduction—which is followed by his and Merrill’s sustained and detailed commentaries on all 52 sections of “*Song of Myself*.” Considering each section as a separate entity, the writers honor Whitman’s efforts to convey meaning through the poem’s form: each and every section contributes significantly to the effect of the whole. This democratic approach to “*Song of Myself*” strikes me as so manifestly Whitmanic that it’s surprising no one has attempted it before. As Whitman seems to suggest dividing up our reading of “*Song of Myself*” into manageable weekly (i.e., 52) installments, Folsom and Merrill offer up commentaries on this long, daunting poem in accessible and user-friendly shares—thereby creating possibilities for a wider understanding and deeper appreciation of “*Song of Myself*” than the poem has hitherto enjoyed. *Song of Myself: With a Complete Commentary* is that rare work of literary criticism that has crossover appeal to the general public, a book I will recommend equally to graduate students and to readers at the “*Song of Myself*” Marathon I have been hosting for fourteen years. It is a

standout attempt to initiate Whitman's masses into the *activity* of reading and to help fulfill the poet's vision of "a nation of supple and athletic minds."

This book first took form in 2012, when the *Walt Whitman Archive* and the University of Iowa's International Writing Program jointly launched the *WhitmanWeb* (iwp.uiowa.edu/whitmanweb/en). Beginning on the autumnal equinox of 2012, Folsom (co-director of the *Archive*) and Merrill (director of the IWP) presented the poem's 52 sections over 52 weeks in nine languages (six more languages have since been added). Each of the English sections is complemented by a "Foreword" by Folsom, an "Afterword" by Merrill, and questions that readers continue to respond to on the *WhitmanWeb* and its social media pages. "Think of this project as a year under the tutelage of the father of American poetry": so Merrill and Folsom compel their readers to use the internet to engage in "a conversation, across languages, borders, and time zones, about the multiple meanings of this foundational text."

In February 2014, Folsom and Merrill further enlivened this conversation with a Massive Online Open Course (MOOC) called "Every Atom: Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself.'" Though the course has since closed, the core content is still available as a MOOC-Pack and can also be found on YouTube, with a helpful "Welcome Class" not found on the IWP website. Folsom and Merrill look as if they're having a great time working together, and apparently they were: after publishing another *WhitmanWeb* project entitled "Whitman and the Civil War" in November 2015, the pair launched their second MOOC, "Whitman's Civil War: Writing and Imagining Loss, Death, and Disaster," in July 2016.

All of this study, collegiality, and positive feedback has contributed to this *Song of Myself* book. The content of the book is essentially a more portable, personalizable version of the *WhitmanWeb* "Song of Myself" project with two small but suggestive changes: the text of the section under discussion is printed first in the book, instead of sandwiched between the two commentaries as on the website; and Folsom's discussion is renamed "Critical Commentary" instead of "Foreword." The obvious implication is that the published version wishes to give

Walt the first word, and to suggest that Folsom and Merrill are as much in dialogue with each other as with the poet—an after-effect, most probably, of years of successful collaboration. Folsom himself explains in the book’s “Introduction” that “my commentaries tend to closely examine the language of each section, while Merrill’s often radiate out from the section to view it in an international context or to examine it in relation to other poets who have in some way responded to Whitman’s language.”

The global scope of their work, their engaged interest in collaborations and in the public humanities, make them likely partners even if they weren’t already Iowa City neighbors. Merrill is an internationally honored poet, translator, essayist and journalist, a member of the National Council on the Humanities and the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO. As Director of Iowa’s International Writing Program since 2000, he has undertaken cultural diplomacy missions in more than 50 countries. While Merrill has made a career of writing with and about impressively diverse literary talent, Folsom has devoted his career to understanding Whitman’s work. He has authored or edited ten books on Whitman; co-edits the *Whitman Archive*; helped create and has frequently taught the annual Transatlantic Walt Whitman Association’s international Whitman seminar; edits the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* and the Whitman Series for the University of Iowa Press; and is probably Whitman’s greatest living interpreter. You need only hear him recite and comment on lines from *Leaves of Grass* on PBS’s “American Experience: Walt Whitman” to realize that. I have been lucky enough to sit in on several of his seminars during the international Whitman Week and have been inspired (even moved) by his seemingly instinctive understanding of the poet and the care, grace, and force with which he offers his compelling interpretations.

Though advertisements and blurbs for *Song of Myself* claim that Merrill and Folsom are in dialog with each other in the book, that connection is less evident than their articulated relationships with Whitman and the reader. Folsom and Merrill do not overtly acknowledge or quote one another; in fact, Merrill’s “Afterwords” sometimes seem to lift readers intentionally out of Folsom’s deep dive into the poetry to faraway places—from Samarkand to Walden, from Baghdad,

Merv, and Shenyang to the Central Park Zoo. The interpreters' independence is precisely what makes moments of confluence and extension so interesting. In his commentary on Section 1, Folsom makes a quick note of how Whitman uses then drops the use of iambic pentameter; without alluding to Folsom's remark, Merrill explains that this decision "signals [Whitman's] departure from traditional English versification" and "propel[s] him from the known into the unknown." The "upright lines" and "curves, angles, dots" of Whitman's printed words in Section 52's "Critical Commentary" quietly melt into the "domes" and "long straight lines" of Merrill's description of Effigy Mounds National Monument, reminding us of the "web of connections" between the text and the world as well as between Folsom and Merrill. In such examples, the two hear each other without speaking in a subtle exchange that is a pleasure for readers to discover; at other times, however, the lack of communication between them results in needless overlaps of information.

The greatest rewards of this book are in the special strengths that these readers share with us: Folsom brings us inside Whitman's words to the "cultural origins of his voice" (to use Folsom's own language from his *Walt Whitman's Native Representations* [1997]), and Merrill likes to take us beyond them. "I wish to be free of words," Merrill pronounces in his "Afterword" to 32, the beloved "I think I could turn and live with animals" section. He, like the Whitmanic narrator and his "gigantic beauty of a stallion," is running—away from so-called civilization and into the unruly natural world. Heart racing, he comes upon two yearling moose: "when they lope down the road, veering from side to side, bumping into each other, carefree, it seems to me, I follow them without a second thought until they scamper up into the aspens, and disappear." Though Merrill is not free of words entirely, he has beautifully translated thought into action. Merrill invites us to leave off reading and interpreting to experience Whitman with him; Folsom alights on language we have grazed over (such as "sluff" in Section 8) or quoted without really considering ("I am afoot with my vision," Section 33) and takes these words to their roots, clarifying and then transfiguring them. He opens our minds to the meanings and implications of the poem's core ideas. Sound simple? "To prove and

define it” is the work of the answerer Whitman anticipates in “Poets to Come.” And so the last words go to Folsom and his extraordinary gift with them, as demonstrated in his explanation of several key phrases in section 15: “So it is always what Whitman calls an ‘influx’ and an ‘efflux,’ the world incessantly whirling toward our senses, and our senses reaching out to absorb that world. And that, more or less, is what we are: we are the things we have seen, heard, touched, tasted, smelled: ‘such as it is to be of these more or less I am.’ No idea we have, no word we use, no love we feel did not originate ‘out there.’ They all entered in through our open senses, our senses which extended out to embrace them and then tended to them as we absorbed them, and out of all those endless stimuli, we each weave the unique song of our self.”

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Karen Karbiener, ed. *Poetry for Kids: Walt Whitman*. Illustrated by Kate Evans. Lake Forest, CA: MoonDance, 2017. 48 pp.

The last quarter century has seen numerous illustrated Walt Whitman books for children, ranging from Robert Sabuda’s folksy linocut version of “I Hear America Singing” (1991) to Barbara Kerley’s hagiographic biography, *Walt Whitman: Words for America* (2004; with art by the Caldecott-winning Brian Selznick). The most recent arrival is Karen Karbiener’s 2017 anthology, *Poetry for Kids: Walt Whitman*, with line-drawing and watercolor illustrations by Kate Evans.

Karbiener’s edition offers a healthy selection of verse: twenty-eight Whitman poems, ten of which are excerpts from his longer works. Along with the usual suspects (“A Noiseless Patient Spider,” “O Captain! My Captain!” and “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer”), Karbiener also includes less frequently anthologized poems such as the wonderful “A Font of Type,” along with intimate lyrics like “Calamus 9,” and “Thanks in Old Age.” The collection includes a short introduction describing Whitman’s revolutionary contribution to poetry and high-