

REVIEWS

George B. Hutchinson, *The Ecstatic Whitman: Literary Shamanism and the Crisis of the Union*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986. 222 pp., \$25.00

When Walt Whitman placed opposite the authorless title page of the first *Leaves of Grass* the portrait of himself in common clothes and informal posture, it was a gesture of his desire to create a living presence rather than settling for words on a page in their more customary capabilities. The intense gaze we meet there is not just that of a working man, a working class orator, a transcendental egoist, or an aspiring epic lyric poet, nor a prophet of democracy, nor Walt Whitman, citizen of Brooklyn. There is something of all of these, of course, in that image, and in the voice and person in the poems themselves. But in addition to all these facets of identity, the one whose gaze we meet and who announces himself in "Song of Myself" is a 19th Century American shaman.

George B. Hutchinson, in his book *The Ecstatic Whitman: Literary Shamanism and the Crisis of the Union*, makes the case that thinking of Whitman in terms of shamanism is both appropriate and useful. Useful in reading individual poems; in understanding the fundamental terms and intentions of Whitman's approach to poetry; in understanding his relationship to the times in which he lived.

Whitman has been linked on occasion to shamanism before, but Hutchinson's aim is to examine the connection in a more extended and methodical way than has been attempted previously. Recognizing the essential riskiness of applying to an American writer a role and process largely lost or blurred in our culture, and asserting that "previous applications of the concept [of shamanism] to literature have been particularly sloppy," Hutchinson proceeds carefully, developing correspondences both broad and specific. He tries to keep his argument taut with numerous qualifications, restatements, and references to scholars of both Whitman and the anthropology of religion. I don't think anyone will accuse him of sloppiness. On the other hand, the prose style is at times convoluted, impeded by its references, studded with "isms" and "ists," stiff words like "ec-

staticism” and “organismal.” In spite of this resistance, however, the more I read Hutchinson’s book the more I admired it, and the more compelling its thesis seemed.

Hutchinson finds many reasons for thinking of much of Whitman’s poetry in terms of shamanism, many points of contact. He suggests, for instance, that “Out of the Cradle . . .” (or “A Word Out of the Sea”; Hutchinson sometimes prefers earlier titles to final ones) provides “a clear analogue of the shamanic call.” He sees in sections 26-38 of “Song of Myself” “the pattern of a classic shamanic ecstasy.” He makes a telling analogy between the sensory bombardment of ritual ecstasy—drumming, chanting, dancing—and Whitman’s catalogues—polyrhythmic, kaleidoscopic: “By the time we get through one of Whitman’s magnificent catalogues . . . the “whirling and whirling” is not only elemental in him; it has us in a dizzying gyre, as well.” This is just a sampling of stitches in the seam of Hutchinson’s argument. He is not concerned only with such specific links, however, but also with “the basic functions of ecstaticism in human societies.” For example, for both Whitman and the traditional shaman the ecstasy was connected with healing powers.

Whitman has often been called a mystic, but Hutchinson argues that shamanism is a more appropriate term than mysticism since the mystic’s ecstasy tends to be solitary in experience and significance, while the shaman’s is very much related to community and, more particularly, to audience: “The poet’s awareness of audience is one of the factors that makes the poem more than what, for instance, James E. Miller, Jr., and Malcolm Cowley have found it to be. Mystics of the Vedantic and Western traditions do not concern themselves with live performances and audience support.” This whole conception of performance and audience is an overarching correspondence between shamanism and Whitman’s art. The great, fluid poems such as “Song of Myself” and “The Sleepers” do seem more like “ecstatic performances” than literary artifacts. Whitman’s poems are written texts, but key to the effectiveness of many of the best of them is the placing before us of, not just a speaker, but a performer, a personal presence and spiritual magician, who will not merely talk to us but take us on journeys—wan-

derings through city streets, exhilarations riding a stallion or the sound of an orchestra, flights across an entire continent—and through transformations; who speaks in the warmest, most encouraging tones even as he dematerializes before our eyes. Hutchinson says,

In the shamanic seance, although participants are not all expected to fall into trances, the driving rhythms and singing accompanied by verbal and symbolic forms elevate them from the profane state and change their awareness so that they can both support the shaman’s performance and believe in it.

This passage is penetrating and a little poignant in relation to Whitman’s poetry. Those who are willing and able to participate in the performance feel elevated, carried, for a while at least, to a new plane of consciousness. On his side (this is the poignancy), it is clear that Whitman felt, and needed, the support of the reader he imagined to be with him: “Listener up there!” “I might not tell everybody, but I will tell you.” “Whoever you are holding me now in hand. . . .” The powerful spirit that speaks and guides us is also lonely and, in a real way, dependent. There is a moving vulnerability in Whitman, and it is related to this sense of performance and the relationship between the performer and his audience. Hutchinson’s ideas about shamanism do not exhaust the question of the performance and the relationship, but they do shed light upon it from a very important angle.

The second part of Hutchinson’s thesis, “the crisis of the union,” sees national events as the catalyst for Whitman’s own crisis, which led in turn to his poetic breakthrough. He feels that scholars have underestimated, in their searches for autobiographical impulses behind the persona’s voice, the degree to which Whitman’s “entire system of belief stood radically challenged” by the cracking of the union, and the emotional effect this challenge had upon him. It was largely these stresses, Hutchinson argues, that led to Whitman’s transformation into the poet of 1855: he “waxed ecstatic as his pessimism about the state of the union grew.”

Hutchinson does not claim that Whitman thought of himself in relation to shamanism specifically, but he shows that Whitman looked back to ancient models and worked "to train himself as a charismatic." "Impelled by inner necessity," Hutchinson says, Whitman "taught himself the secrets normally passed from master to initiate." One can easily imagine Whitman being asked if he had ever studied shamans and replying, as he did when Thoreau asked him if he'd read the Orientals whom he was "wonderfully like," "No: tell me about them." Hutchinson calls the chapter in which he details Whitman's transformation or self-initiation "Sorcerors' Apprentice," and it is a strong chapter.

It was while reading *The Ecstatic Whitman* that I noticed an odd but startling resemblance between the Whitman portrait of the first *Leaves of Grass* and the Antlered Dancer of the paintings on the walls of the cave of Trois Frères, thought by most to be a representation of a Paleolithic shaman: Whitman's crooked elbow extending to the left like the dancer's paws, the penetrating eyes, the gaze more fierce than friendly, the beard, the broad-brimmed hat at an angle like that of the antlers. Just an odd resemblance, an intuition, the power of suggestion maybe. The firmer pinnings of intellect and scholarship for Whitman as shaman are found in George B. Hutchinson's interesting, illuminating, densely worked book.

—Howard Nelson

Charley Shively, ed. *Calamus Lovers: Walt Whitman's Working-Class Camerados*. San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1987. 223 pp. paper, \$10.00.

Charley Shively's *Calamus Lovers: Walt Whitman's Working-Class Camerados* seeks to provide a new perspective on the poet by presenting selected letters written to him by his laborer and soldier friends. Shively contributes a lively general introduction, and he intersperses additional commentary throughout the book. What guides Shively's work is the belief that Whitman was an active homosexual with a series of lovers from the 1830s to the 1880s, perhaps even the 1890s. Shively argues that "the first question must not

be whether but when and how did Whitman begin loving men so intensely?"

Shively is frustrated with literary scholars who, he contends, have consistently denied Whitman's homosexuality. He objects, for example, that, in discussing the Harry Stafford-Whitman friendship, Justin Kaplan and Edwin Miller "suggest that the relationship was not physical (perhaps not even homosexual). Had they one-tenth as much evidence for a young woman, their Lolita imaginations would have run wild." But Shively himself is given to running wild, and in his treatment of other Whitman critics, here and elsewhere, is decidedly unfair. Certainly he has distorted the overall look of Whitman criticism, for in the last dozen years there has been no shortage of critics reading Whitman's poetry as homosexual in orientation (one thinks immediately of the work of Robert K. Martin, Michael Lynch, Myrth Jimmie Killingsworth, Joseph Cady, and many others). Major scholarly questions now are to what degree was the poet either comfortable or tormented by his sexuality, did he repress or act on his clearly homoerotic desires, and—above all—how did his psychosexual outlook affect his poetry? If some early Whitman critics—people working before Kaplan and Miller—were prone to discount the sexual aura surrounding Whitman's male friendships, Shively, on the other hand, seems to believe Whitman was engaged in as many love affairs as he can find names in the poet's notebooks.

Shively holds that, along with denying Whitman's homosexuality, critics have refused to acknowledge the poet's "working-class background and consciousness; thus they invent intellectual genealogies on the most dubious evidence in order to offset Whitman's not being a university graduate." But critics did not "invent" these genealogies; Whitman and his cronies labored mightily to establish the link with Emerson, a connection that still figures largely in critical debates. Although Whitman's indebtedness to Emerson is often overstated, I find the evidence employed in influence studies to be more persuasive than what Shively produces in support of his claims for innumerable sexual encounters. Understandably, Shively has little material to work with: it is often difficult to tell how much sexual activity an author has engaged in because of the private, fre-