

Edwin H. Cady and Louis J. Budd, Editors.

On Whitman: The Best From American Literature. Durham: N.C.:
Duke University Press, 1987.

I pass so poorly with paper and types I must pass with the
contact of bodies and souls.

—*Leaves of Grass* 1855, ["A Song for Occupations"]

How poorly Walt himself would pass with so much of what is
published on him in the twentieth century. Why do we read him? To
feel the exhilaration of living. Too many people writing on Whitman in
the past few decades seem to have forgotten this, and their articles tend
to be only slightly less deadly than a real estate contract.

If you want to have your interest in Whitman absolutely deadened,
take a look at this anthology of essays published on Whitman in
American Literature from 1932 to 1984. Two of the distinguished
editors of the nearly sixty-year-old journal, Edwin H. Cady and Louis
J. Budd, have selected sixteen articles out of the scores that have
appeared on Whitman in their journal over the years and simply
reprinted them.

Yes, except for the change in page numbers, running heads, and title
and author information on each first page, each page remains identical
to its original appearance in the journal, with every typo or other error
intact. You'd think they were publishing a facsimile first edition of
Cather or Hawthorne! One wonders if the editors even read these
articles before the book was printed. (Think how minimal the editing
and proofreading process becomes if you're simply reprinting fac-
similes.) Would it have been so disloyal to the authors if typos
("pramids" in Stephen J. Tapscott's 1978 essay on Whitman's use of
Egypt) and errors in spelling names of references were corrected
("Shephard" and "Shepherd" in Tapscott; "Alice Stockman" and
"Stockham" in Harold Aspiz's "The Spermatic Imagination," 1984)?
There is no excuse for perpetuating such scholarly sloppiness—and it
certainly does not reflect well on such an important journal's accuracy.

The failure to edit this material appropriately is also regrettably
evident in the many styles of documentation used over the years. We

can certainly be grateful for the current MLA format of parenthetical
reference so that we don't have to keep looking at the bottom of the
page, wondering whether there will be an explanatory note, only to
discover a mere page number. Then different editions of Whitman are
used in separate essays, and notes in some articles fail to identify the
specific poem or prose work, simply giving a page number. Couldn't
this have been standardized—and references to articles here reprinted
refer to these rather than original page numbers—to make the book
really usable by someone studying Whitman?

What a cynical way to get money from the unsuspecting. The book
costs \$33.50, for heaven's sake! That's more than \$2.00 per article,
which is a hell of a lot more than the original subscribers paid to read
them. The editors have done absolutely nothing beyond selecting the
articles and writing a short introduction—not for this particular
volume and author, but only a generic one for the entire series. Yes,
librarians, you can look forward to volumes on Twain, Melville,
Dickinson, Cather, etc. But don't get too excited. What academic
library (or even major city library) in the country does not already have
access to the entire run of *American Literature*? So why duplicate what
already exists in most collections, when budgets are tight and libraries
are cutting back on periodical subscriptions as well as book purchases?

Oh, the book does have one feature that makes it more than just a
collection of reprints—if only slightly. An index has been prepared—
though apparently by someone who does not know very much about
Whitman. While some section headings are entered with quotation
marks ("Children of Adam," "Enfans d'Adam"—though there is no
cross-reference from one to the other in this case), *Calamus* is
italicized. Appropriately so, for the Peter Doyle book published by
Richard M. Bucke in 1897, but the indexer has apparently not realized
that the book and the *Leaves of Grass* section are two separate entities.
And get this—a book published on Whitman in the late eighties with
no index entry for homosexuality!

Here is definitely a sore point. Unlike Joann P. Krieg's much more
interesting, lively, and valuable collection of essays from a Whitman
conference at Hofstra University (*Walt Whitman, Here and Now*,
Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985), this compilation includes

nothing from the positive gay perspective on Whitman that has developed during the seventies and eighties. Of course, as far as I know (and I'd be happy to stand corrected), *American Literature* has not published anything on Whitman from this perspective; one would have to go to the Whitman journals or even such an unlikely place as *Victorian Studies* for discussion of the homosexual aspects of his life and work.

Of course the Series Introduction says that "a chronological order has the virtues of displaying both the development of insight into a particular author . . . and the shifts of scholarly and critical emphasis since 1929" (p. ix). But publishing an egregiously dated piece like Floyd Stovall's "Main Drifts in Whitman's Poetry" (1932) without commentary is unconscionable in the late eighties: "he ascribed to sex a special importance that is hardly normal in nature" (p. 2); "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" is "the first and only true love poem that Whitman ever wrote" (what about "When I Heard at the Close of the Day"?) and "a lament for the loss, by death or permanent separation, of a beloved companion and mistress" (p. 6). God forbid that he might have been thinking of another man.

Then Emory Holloway's ineptly titled "Whitman Pursued" (1955) focuses on speculation about a relationship with a woman of minor importance in Whitman's biography. Why, one wonders, did Whitman scholarship have to wait until 1987 for a thorough discussion of Whitman's relationships with the young men he gave his heart to in the course of his life? See Charley Shively's *Calamus Lovers: Walt Whitman's Working-Class Camerados*, San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1987—especially for an explanation of Sculley Bradley's query in "Walt Whitman on Timber Creek" (1933): "What fortunate chance led him to find the place and the hospitable family of George Stafford we do not know" (p. 26). His relationship with the teen-aged Harry Stafford, a printer's assistant in Camden, is amply documented through letters. Could not the editors have added a note or an introduction to clarify this significant point?

Of course the editors simply want articles "speaking for themselves and entirely making their own points rather than serving the compilers' view of literary or philosophical or historical patterns" (p. ix). But one

hardly suspects their purpose was to make us laugh at earlier critics' shortsightedness as we do when we read excerpts from Whitman's contemporary commentators in such anthologies as Edwin H. Miller's *A Century of Whitman Criticism* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1969). One shudders to picture some undergraduate reading Stovall or Holloway and thinking this is the last word on the subject: after all, it was published in 1987! (Dates for the articles are provided, of course, but only in the table of contents, not on the first page of each article.)

Yes, this volume makes me mad—that paper and effort were used to bring out this totally unnecessary compilation. For the record, the other articles included, a few of which do provide some real insight, are Henry Alonzo Myers's "Whitman's Conception of the Spiritual Democracy, 1855-1856" (1934—already reprinted in the Norton Critical Edition of Whitman); another Bradley article, "The Fundamental Metrical Principle in Whitman's Poetry" (1939); Alfred H. Marks's "Whitman's Triadic Imagery" (1951); Lawrence Buell's "Transcendentalist Catalogue Rhetoric: Vision Versus Form" (cited as 1958 but actually 1968); Lawrence Templin's "The Quaker Influence on Walt Whitman" (1970); Robin P. Hoople's "'Chants Democratic and Native American': A Neglected Sequence in the Growth of *Leaves of Grass*" (1970); Robert Scholnick's "Whitman and the Magazines: Some Documentary Evidence" (1972); John B. Mason's "Walt Whitman's Catalogue: Rhetorical Means for Two Journeys in 'Song of Myself'" (1973); David W. Hiscoe's "Whitman's Use of the Middle Ages" (1980); Myrth Jimmie Killingsworth's "Whitman and Motherhood: A Historical View" (1982); and Ivan Marki's "The Last Eleven Poems in the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*" (1982).

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