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Shiveley, Charley, ed., *Drum Beats: Walt Whitman's Civil War Boy Lovers* [review]

Ed Folsom

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tive and rewarding. There are superb comments on individual poems (e.g., "This Compost," "Spontaneous Me," "The Wound-Dresser"), as well as stimulating responses to others ("The Sleepers," "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd"). While the Whitman who appears in these pages is far from complete, a disembodied intelligence rather than a full human being, still, the partial view we are given is impressive. It should do much to enhance understanding of Whitman's complex art.

*The University of Massachusetts*

R. W. FRENCH

Charley Shively, ed. *Drum Beats: Walt Whitman's Civil War Boy Lovers*. San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1989. 256 pp.

This book is a companion volume to Shively's *Calamus Lovers: Walt Whitman's Working-Class Camerados* (1987; reviewed in *WWQR* [Fall 1987]). Both books include collections of letters written to Whitman by various males, most of whom Shively believes to have been Whitman's homosexual lovers. While *Calamus Lovers* investigated these relationships across the span of Whitman's life, from his 1850s association with Fred Vaughan (whom Shively identifies as the inspiration for the *Calamus* poems) to his late involvements with Harry Stafford and Bill Duckett, *Drum Beats* focuses solely on Whitman's relationship with Civil War soldiers. As such, the book is an extension of Chapter Four of *Calamus Lovers*, "Many Soldiers' Kisses," which discussed soldiers Tom Sawyer, Lewis Brown, Alonzo Bush, and Elijah Douglass Fox, and printed some of their letters to Whitman. *Drum Beats* adds more letters by more soldiers and reprints parts of some originally printed in *Calamus Lovers*; it also offers an interesting collection of illustrations—photos of Whitman's soldier friends, other photos and engravings of Civil War soldiers, a facsimile of one of the letters, and various other visual documents.

As with *Calamus Lovers*, Shively is again identified as "editor" of the book even though nearly half of each volume is composed of his critical/biographical analyses of the relationships that the letters document. Shively's volumes form the most aggressively homosexual reading of Whitman that we have; written in reaction to generations of Whitman critics and biographers who have in Shively's view either misrepresented or evaded Whitman's sexual life, these books are written in the rebellious tones of someone who is fed up with the current state of Whitman scholarship and who is anxious to embrace Whitman's advice to "*Resist much, obey little*." Shively resisted much and obeyed little of scholarly convention in *Calamus Lovers*, refusing to clearly identify where the originals of the various letters are housed, making frequent careless errors in transcription, neglecting to acknowledge much of the previous work investigating these relationships, offering no annotations or bibliography, and generally thumbing his nose at established Whitman criticism. In *Drum Beats*, Shively continues to resist but obeys a little more than in the previous volume. The book is generally better produced than *Calamus Lovers* (though the back cover copy announcing "an exciting addition [*sic*] of letters to Walt Whitman from fifty soldiers and lovers" does not inspire immediate confidence), and this time Shively at least lists the location of the manuscript collection for each letter he prints. In a surprising use of his "Acknowledgements" section, Shively devotes space to acknowledging his

previous errors and misjudgments: he admits that he may have been “extravagant” in some of his claims in *Calamus Lovers*, and he recognizes the carelessness of his transcriptions—“On the scholarly side, I cannot defend any misspellings or incorrect transcriptions; however, the work is not undocumented.” This, of course, is the key: Shively’s representation of Whitman is as a cruising, sexually active gay who was engaging in frequent physical relationships with men and boys virtually until his death; if this version of Whitman can be documented, then previous work on the poet’s life clearly has ignored (or repressed or disguised) some vital aspects of Whitman’s experience.

Shively, of course, is not the only critic who has been actively investigating Whitman’s homosexuality: Joseph Cady, Martin Bauml Duberman, M. Jimmie Killingsworth, Michael Lynch, and Robert K. Martin are just some of the scholars who in the last decade or so have completed revealing work on how Whitman’s homosexuality may have structured both his poetry and his life. But Shively is not so much interested in the *effects* of Whitman’s homosexuality as in the *facts* of it, often its raw details. Shively characterizes Whitman as “campy, gossipy and loose,” but the description better fits the style and substance of Shively’s own book. He proclaims that he will not use the polite, medical, Latinate terms for sexual organs and sexual acts (there is nothing so abstract as “genital contact” in this book), since those terms are in complicity with a tradition of naming homosexuality as deviant and criminal, so Shively’s profane portrayal of Whitman and his times may, for some readers, require a cautionary note not unlike William Carlos Williams’s prefatory warning to Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*: “Hold back the edges of your gowns, Ladies, we are going through hell.”

Shively’s Whitman is a promiscuous, omnivorous gay lover who cruises the same Washington parks that Shively announces *he* cruised a century later, who seeks sexual gratification (oral and anal) from a bewildering array of lovers, all of them young working class males (“he responded to young, hunky white working men”). Shively portrays mid-nineteenth-century America as a remarkably energized field of homosexual encounter: where Pfaff’s (Whitman’s bohemian hangout) becomes a “semi-gay bar” at which the poet could meet his two distinct types of companions, “the high-toned queers and the earthy drivers or longshoremen”; where Civil War soldiers, continually scratching their lice-infested crotches, excite each other and engage in cross-dressing, transvestite dances, and frequent homosexual activity (they “exemplified the gay life”); where Civil War hospitals become havens for gay encounters (in those crowded wards “opportunities for cocksucking and butt-fucking greatly increased”); where Whitman dedicated himself to his hospital work for other than purely altruistic reasons (“Whitman himself dressed as though he was going out cruising when he visited the hospitals, but he tried to look butch and presentable”); where Whitman’s hero, President Lincoln, is gay, too, as is John Wilkes Booth. (Scattered through the book are dark hints of a vast silenced gay conspiratorial history: “In the same Washington gay underground in which Booth recruited his army of assassins,” writes Shively, “Whitman also found his lover Peter Doyle.” And at one point, Shively even suggests that Whitman, Lincoln, and Booth may all have been cruising President’s Park simultaneously.)

Shively’s readings are often quite arcane as they attempt to align the available evidence to a world so gayly configured; from his perspective, it is simply obvious that when Lincoln purportedly said of Whitman “*he* looks like a MAN,” the President

was speaking in a kind of gay code: "This odd way of saying 'man' was another way of saying 'queer' in the most complimentary way." It seems inevitable that Shively's Lincoln would have to be a homosexual who "had a four-year love affair with his boyfriend Joshua Speed and at other times in his life had occasional male-to-male liaisons"; a history of protective repression and censorship, argues Shively, has again kept the truth from us. He goes on to offer far-fetched glosses to various statements, as for example in his reading of this threatening comment ascribed to a youthful Lincoln after he had witnessed a fight: "I'm the big buck of this lick. If any of you want to try it, come on and whet your horns." It's obvious to Shively that "buck" means "cock" here (not "deer") and that "lick" and "horn" have obvious "sexual echoes." This reading of a seemingly innocent comment leads Shively to title his chapter "Big Buck and Big Lick: Lincoln & Whitman," a provocative title that ends up working very much the way a *National Enquirer* headline works, promising much and delivering little. So it's not surprising that Shively hears clear "sexual echoes" in a story that Lincoln's brother-in-law tells about Abe getting up one night to put out a cat that was making a racket: "Lincoln got up in the dark and said: 'Kitty, Kitty, Pussy, Pussy.' The cat knew the voice and manner kind, went to Lincoln. L. rubbed it down, saw the sparkling." Here is Shively's wobbling psychosexual analysis: "The term 'pussy' among both heterosexual and homosexual men suggests sex; and 'sparkling' suggests 'sparking' which is an Americanism meaning 'making love.'" The story, to Shively's eyes, thus becomes clear evidence that Lincoln and his brother-in-law were doing more than just sleeping in their shared bed, and before long Shively is speculating about the size of Lincoln's penis.

Unfortunately, this is the nature of much of the evidence in *Drum Beats*. It is helpful and illuminating to have in print the letters that Whitman's soldier-friends wrote to him; Shively has performed a valuable service in filling in the silenced half of that correspondence. Those letters—many of them struggling against near-illiteracy to express deeply felt emotion—are often mysterious and evocative, but it is impossible to find in them the overwhelming evidence that Shively claims they offer about Whitman's active sexual contacts. The letters are filled with affection and loneliness and yearnings for family substitutes. But any clear reference to sexual engagement remains elusive. Shively does not acknowledge that Whitman himself expressed concern about precisely the kind of (mis)reading that Shively imposes on these letters; in the later 1880s, he and his friend Horace Traubel were reading through some of the letters between the poet and his young soldier-friends, when Whitman made a request to Traubel:

"I want you some day to write, to talk about me: to tell what I mean by Calamus: to make no fuss but to speak out of your knowledge: these letters will help you: they will clear up some things which have been misunderstood: you know what: I don't need to say. The world is so topsy turvy, so afraid to love, so afraid to demonstrate, so good, so respectable, so aloof, that when it sees two people or more people who really, greatly, wholly care for each other and say so—when they see such people they wonder and are incredulous or suspicious or defamatory, just as if they had somehow been the victims of an outrage." He paused. Then: "For instance, any demonstration between men—any: it is always misjudged: people come to conclusions about it: they know nothing: there is nothing to be known—they see what is not to be seen: so they confide in each other, tell the awful truth: the old women men, the old men women, the guessers, the false-witnesses—the whole caboodle of liars and fools."

Whitman could be directing those final accusations at Shively, who is always anxious to read into the letters the exact “awful truth” that Whitman was afraid some people would misconstrue from the affectionate tones that he and his soldier-friends used. Whitman’s comments here suggest that he was, during his lifetime, accused of and condemned for homosexuality, and that he was well aware of (and stung by) those attacks. And there is no doubt here (as there is elsewhere) just what Whitman is talking about – “you know what.” It was around this time that Whitman frequently told Traubel that he had a burning secret, one that he wanted Traubel to know, but was afraid to tell for fear that Traubel would no longer respect him and that it would essentially change Traubel’s feelings toward him. He never did tell, of course, though he continued to bring up the fact of a secret, and Traubel continued to ask about it. This secrecy – a terminal furtiveness – marked Whitman’s personality to the end of his life; it is a character trait that makes highly unlikely the discovery of any candid admissions of his own sexual practices.

Yet Shively believes he has found such definitive evidence in one letter written to Whitman by a soldier named Alonzo S. Bush in 1863; Shively quotes it, analyzes it, and reprints it in both *Calamus Lovers* and *Drum Beats*. The key part of Bush’s letter is this:

I am glad to know that you are once more in the hotbed City of Washington so that you can go often and see that Friend of ours at Armory Square, L[ewis] K. B[rown]. The fellow that went down on your BK, both so often with me. I wished that I could see him this evening and go in the Ward Master’s Room and have some fun for he is a gay boy. [Quoted here as Shively transcribes the letter in *Drum Beats*, which is different from the way he transcribes it in *Calamus Lovers*.]

Shively, of course, reads “BK” as an abbreviation for “buck” – and assumes that “buck” means the same thing here as it does in his reading of Lincoln’s comment mentioned earlier; what Shively construes, then, is a gay Ward Master who opened his hospital office to Whitman and to selected soldier/patients for fellowship and fellatio. Such a reading obviously assumes a great deal, including a suspiciously up-to-date use of terms like “go down on” and “gay,” which, if they did indeed carry the same connotations then as they do today, would render Bush’s protective gesture of abbreviating “buck” both useless and a bit silly. In *Calamus Lovers*, Shively was willing to entertain the possibility that “BK” could have signified other things (book, basket, bended knee, beak, bunk, back, buttock, and “big cock”), even while insisting that none of these possible readings (not even “book”?) would change the clear sexual implication of the passage. In *Drum Beats*, however, the meaning of “BK” has stabilized, and Shively now offers it as evidence to endorse his phallic reading of Lincoln’s use of the word “buck.” The passage in this letter is odd, to be sure, but it certainly does not neatly correspond to Shively’s reading; the “both so often with me” phrase that follows “BK” does not make much sense, even if we imagine a triangulated sex act of some kind. (To “go down,” in mid-nineteenth century parlance, commonly meant “to fail”; “gay” meant “merry” or “jovial,” and – in what Noah Webster called “a vulgar use of the word in America” – “intoxicated.” There are, then, indiscreet activities other than sex that could have taken place in the Ward Master’s room, and that might be slyly referred to in this letter.)

Despite some forced sexual readings, though, Shively does at times offer surprising

and quite convincing sexual interpretations of passages that initially appear innocuous. One striking example is his reading in *Calamus Lovers* of "The Oaks and I" section of *Specimen Days*, where he applies Whitman's "hickory sapling"/Harry Stafford" code [in an 1878 letter, Whitman playfully referred to his young friend Harry Stafford as "hickory sapling"] to the passage where Whitman talks of the "simple exercise I am fond of—to pull on that young hickory sapling out there—to sway and yield to its tough-limber upright stem—haply to get into my old sinews some of its elastic fibre and clear sap." Is the suggestive relationship between this passage and the code in Whitman's letter a mere coincidence, or is it the result of repressed longings emerging in displaced forms, or is it Whitman's very conscious and clever way of disguising his sexual feelings about Stafford—a sly code that presumably only the intimately initiated would understand? Shively believes the answer is that Whitman was quite openly announcing his homosexuality, and that Whitman scholars over the years have been the ones who have repressed and concealed it through their failure to reveal the evidence and to read the texts properly.

The essential problem with Shively's work is that it reduces Whitman, makes him and his poetry one-dimensional, forces everything in the life and the writing to refer to the same narrowly defined sector of experience. There have been many reductive readings of Whitman, of course, and Shively just adds one more, albeit one cast in language uncommon even in the relatively permissible world of Whitman scholarship: "Whitman's doctrine quite simply was that cocksucking, butt-fucking and boy-loving were religious activities equal to what some Christians call 'god's love.'" Perhaps the value of Shively's work—besides making readers aware of the potential usefulness of all those letters to Whitman—ultimately will consist of clearing the ground to help make possible a revisionist biography of Whitman that does not assume that the poet was *heterosexual* (we've had those biographies before) or that he was *asexual* or *omnisexual* or *monosexual* or passively *homoerotic* (we've had those, too), but one that—drawing on the evidence that Lynch, Martin, Duberman, Killingsworth, Shively, and others have gathered—represents a full life built on the assumption that (not built out of the suspicion that) Whitman was gay. We have seen how the facts of Whitman's life, his attitudes, and his poetry are illuminated and obscured by embedding all the evidence in a matrix that assumes he was *not* actively homosexual; it is probably time for someone to fit the evidence into a matrix that assumes that he *was*, so that we can see what aspects of Whitman's life and writing become clear that had been obscured, and what familiar aspects of Whitman become silenced in such a re-configuration of his life.

Ideally, such a biography would not collapse the life and work around the fact of Whitman's sexuality, would not make *Leaves of Grass* implode until it was little more than an expression of gay sexual experience, but rather would contextualize Whitman's homosexuality, would examine the ways it related to, resisted, challenged, and expanded Whitman's familiar concepts of democracy, poetry, camaraderie, and the cosmos. It would weave the poet's life into relevant aspects of the cultural history of nineteenth-century America, so that we could see clearly how Whitman's sexual nature would have been defined and understood and reacted to by various elements of the culture as well as by himself; his unsanctioned sexual nature could then be viewed as the seed of his unorthodox poetry and as an impetus for his radical democratic demands. The time for such revisionist work seems ripe, and Shively's books—like many disturbing, unsettling, and excessive insurrectionary acts—may eventually

come to be seen as necessary precursors for a more measured and more expansive new view of Whitman. For now, they serve the function of shaking up, challenging, and taunting all the safe assumptions and received wisdom, trying hard to turn the standard conceptions back into compost. Much of the received wisdom will prove sound and will grow again out of the newly fertilized soil, but not before it has all been tested and retried against the new evidence.

*The University of Iowa*

ED FOLSOM