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REVIEWS

JEROME LOVING. *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. xiv + 568 pp.

The task of the biographer requires unusual authorial courage regardless of the subject. Whitman makes the challenge particularly formidable. We want to know about him in the first place because of an act, which begs explanation: the unexpected appearance, in a slim, tall volume of poems published in 1855, of the persona "Walt Whitman." Hitherto the poet had shown no particular signs (except perhaps to himself) of any particular originality or genius. What, then, accounted for the eruptive event of the first *Leaves of Grass*? That's the main biographical question, the question least likely to receive a satisfactory answer.

In his new biography, a monumentally meticulous reconstruction of the known facts of the poet's life, Jerome Loving remains properly reticent about any single catalytic event. Emerson, opera, the newspaper world, early literariness, working-class background and values, the crisis over slavery, family attachments and conflicts, the search for a vocation: all are likely influences. We can deduce why he may have wanted to write a "song of myself," but the explanation for the event itself—the self-transformation from sometime school teacher, scribbler of sentimental tales and poems, newspaperman, printer and house-builder into "Walt Whitman, one of the roughs"—remains shrouded in uncertainty.

Along with the mystery of origins, there's also the fact that the fictive Walt began to take over the historical or biographical Whitman. It was deliberate and calculated on the maker's part to conflate the poet with the persona—we might say, taking a cue from Loving's cunning title, to fuse the flesh-and-blood "himself" with the impalpable "myself" of the poetry. Indistinguishable from the new kind of poetry in which he appears, Walt Whitman names a universe of words as much as, or more than, it names a figure capturable by the usual tools of biographical research. The figure we care most about, the persona of the poems, lives wholly in the lines, the pages, the leaves in and through which he speaks.

This is how the poet, the maker of the persona, wanted it. His great book, he tells us, is equivalent to his life, all we need to know in order to know who he is, where he comes from, how he lives, and what matters to him. The invention of a new way of writing was absolutely identical in the poet's mind with the invention of a new way of being, a new kind of persona, one who insists on his actuality as a person identical with his author. The best poem in 1855 appeared untitled, then became "Poem of Walt Whitman, American," then simply "Walt Whitman," and finally in 1881, but not until then, "Song of Myself." But the personified "Walt Whitman" (the two parts of the name, like Mark Twain, perhaps should be uttered as one unit), tells us in fervently self-pro-

moting prose and ecstatic poetry, that his entire book is “a song of myself,” an epochal autobiographical act: the putting of “a Person, a human being (myself, in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, in America), freely, fully and truly on record.”

No one now doubts that this “Person,” this “myself,” is an elaborate fiction, one of the most astonishing in all of literature. Like the great shape-shifting heroes of oral cultures, the Ojibway Monobozho, for example, he is omnivorous for experience, always hungry and easily sated, talks with animals, lavishes attention on his genitalia, is stubborn and tenacious, cannot be shaken away or pinned down, enjoys being both in and out of the game. Whitman’s persona resembles epic and trickster figures in oral cultures, with this decisive difference: he speaks in his own voice and seems (this is essential to the fiction) to co-exist with his author, to be the same person. But try to deduce a detailed autobiography from the poetry, and you realize soon enough that if the poet has reinvented poetry, he has also reinvented the idea of what constitutes a “life,” what makes for a free, full, and true “record” of a historical being. For convenience, we might provisionally use the terms “inner life” and “outer life” to mark this distinction, between the life recorded in the poetry and the life lived by the maker of the poems, the outer or external or merely empirical life within which might lie glimmers of the origins and import of the fictive “Person.”

It’s the life unrecorded in the poems that the biographer seeks. Better than most previous biographers, Jerome Loving understands the distinction between what the poetry asserts and what the actually lived record reveals; he also has the benefit of significant archival additions to that record. An already distinguished scholar of ante-bellum literary culture and of Whitman in particular, he brings to the biographical task seasoned knowledge of the existing record and of pitfalls and promises on the road ahead. His prose gives us confidence that he knows his way, that he has been on the Whitman case long enough to tell a pitfall from a promise. And he seems to have absorbed well the Wittgensteinian lesson: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” He makes no self-serving claims to have plumbed the bottom and come up with all the truth in hand. Whitman’s deepest secrets remain intact. Loving has new details to put in place, sorts through all the known evidence about each phase of the poet’s career, blows away unsubstantiated rumors, permits himself surmise on occasion but always openly, and has nothing startlingly new to announce, no exposés, no smoking guns, no final answers to big anxious questions: was he gay? a racist? a mystic? a socialist? a woman-hater? a father of illegitimate children? Loving cannot say more than what the known facts provide.

Whitman has probably never been in safer, surer hands, hands less eager to fit the man into one totalizing explanation or another. “As if any man knew aught of my life; / As if you, O cunning soul, did not keep your secret well!” These lines from the 1867 version of “When I Read the Book” might be Loving’s ensign. The poem places an onus on any biographer, casting Whitman himself as an imagined reader of any book about him. He is already there, in a move typical of this poet’s defiance of space and time and of the boundaries between art and life, his eyes already scouring the biographer’s page. No previous biog-

rapher has been as mindful, I think, as is Loving of Whitman's fleeing remark: "And is this, then, (said I,) what the author calls a man's life?"

Relations between outside and inside, the ascertainable and the surmisable, are never absolutely transparent in any biographical case. For readers of Whitman the case is more extreme than usual, extreme to the point of seeming the core itself of the "life." Readers have recognized a certain bi-polarity, or a disposition towards polarities, at the heart of Whitman's vision. I and you, "one's-self" and "en-masse," me and "the Me myself," body and soul, "I and this mystery": these and other familiar locutions of opposition suffuse a climate of polarity, of contradiction and dialectic. And the constantly shifting and mutating versions of figures of self and other make disguise, evasion, and duplicity seem as crucial a part of Whitman's universe as the positing of oppositions. He changes his garments as freely as his place, he dresses and undresses with a liberty that can still make readers giddy to the degree of ecstasy. "Who goes there, gross, hankering, mystical, nude?" Who, indeed?

The poem, *Leaves of Grass* as a whole (though it's hardly "whole"), provides the truest, subtlest, most comprehensive answer. Yet any answer remains arcane and esoteric, veiled in figurative language with all inevitable obscurities, deceptions, and silences. Emerson wanted to rub his eyes; could such a person as this "Walt Whitman" really exist? Whitman would have been content for readers to take the who of the poems as identical with the who of the author, the "Walter Whitman" listed on the verso title page of the 1855 edition as having registered the anonymous book with the district clerk of Southern New York. As Loving retells the familiar story, from 1855 to the end of his life, in anonymous reviews and newspaper blurbs and articles and books under the name of one or another of his band of hot idolators, Whitman fashioned an extra-diagetical discourse of identity, fiddling with the facts, burying his secrets (but not the fact that he had some), trying to control the answer to "who goes there?" and only succeeding in feeding one speculation after another about "the Me myself."

What drives Loving's book is a desire to assemble all the known facts, to get them straight and to lay them out in clear, uncluttered, readable prose. There is no axe to grind (except perhaps the axe of the skeptical historian impatient with grand theories, especially those colored by Freud). Loving's wish is not so much to interpret but to narrate. Indeed something of an animus against interpretation appears occasionally, as Loving has his say, usually in pithy dismissals, of critics who find too much in "Song of Occupations" or in the triad of symbols in "When Lilacs in the Dooryard Bloom'd." Loving writes as a biographer, not a critic, though when poems insinuate themselves, he's pretty rough on views he opposes. "The job of the critical biographer," he writes, "is to reconfirm or correct the facts of the life, discover new ones, and reconsider the biographical evidence so that we can continue to study and appreciate this great poet as accurately as possible in the twenty-first century" (25). There's a positivist note in Loving's determination to steer clear of theory and to submit all speculations to the empirical test of fact. And while this may leave some readers growling for more definite answers or vindication of pet views, the cool detachment of the author allows evidence to achieve its own emotional register. Neither worshipping nor patronizing, Loving gives us as complete an "outside" narrative as ascertainable facts permit. Only in the language of cautious

surmise does he venture to speak of Whitman's interior being, of what he may have felt or thought, believed, or intended, on any occasion.

The result is a somewhat indeterminate Whitman, a man of secrets, a certain furtiveness in his intimate relations, and contradictory views on major social questions. In his poetry he proclaims absolute equality of persons and reciprocity between "I" and "you" as the fundament of his vision. "Of every hue and trade and rank, or every caste and religion," he resists "anything better than my own diversity," and among his identities: "I am the hounded slave . . . I wince at the bite of dogs." Outside the poetry, Whitman's speech was sprinkled with "nigger" and other demeaning terms. Describing himself as "of pure American breed," in one of his unsigned reviews of 1855, he added in 1856: "Not prejudiced one mite against the Irish," and "talks regularly with niggers" (212). He was moved by the plight of black slaves but hated slavery mainly as an affront to "free labor." He stood aloof from abolitionism before the Civil War and from the Reconstruction program of full equality and voting rights for ex-slaves after the war. He "was more pro-Union than he was anti-slavery," and with Lincoln he "favored" recolonization of blacks, Loving writes (12). While not flinching from discrepancies between the egalitarianism of the "poetic vision" and the prejudice of "his personal attitude," Loving offers no further commentary than to say that he "reflected the common northern attitude" toward blacks (128).

Determinedly historicist in an older sense of the term, Loving warns against reading into Whitman late-twentieth-century attitudes and values, thereby removing him "from his times" (186). But of course, pointing to contradictions itself introduces a presentist point of view. Is it enough to say, "there is a distinction to be made" between the poet and the man, and that in his "conflicted state of mind" (hatred of slavery, prejudice toward blacks) he "resembled most other white nineteenth-century Americans" (232)? Can we say exactly what the distinction is? The question is not whether Whitman was a racist. It's beyond debate that many of his random remarks were racist then just as they would be racist today. The more troubling question is the light this lurid feature of the Whitman landscape casts upon the meaning of equality, of democracy itself, in that landscape. Loving constantly reminds us how deeply attached Whitman remained to his roots as a workingman, never forgetting his "blue-collar, poverty-ridden background" (272). But it's predominantly white working-people that Whitman (the name itself derives from "white man") celebrates, which raises the very disturbing question: is it the "white republic," Andrew Jackson's "democracy," of which Whitman sings and from which he derives his vision of equality, another twist on the crippling American paradox of slavery/freedom?

How might this possibility affect our current reading of Whitman's "America"? It's not the job of the biographer, as Loving conceives it, to pursue such matters at length. His dismissal of *Democratic Vistas* as "unsatisfactory for anyone looking for a coherent thesis" (332), however, may be an opportunity missed, not only for fuller discussion of what Whitman meant by democracy, but also of the character of his mental universe, his typical modes of cognition. "Prose was too linear for Whitman's imagination," Loving writes; "his syntax is often interrupted by long parenthetical ideas" (332). That may be, but the dismissal fails to account for the essay's unmistakable hold on the minds of

important thinkers; it has been called the most important treatise on democracy and culture in the United States. Perhaps the power of his prose, as Gilles Deleuze suggests in a brilliant brief essay on Whitman's fragmentary asyntactic sentences, comes exactly from that groping, tentative, piecemeal method which reaches for but never reaches a totality, a final capstone "whole" which would subsume all the parts into itself. The parts, the pieces of Whitman's *agon* with the demon "democracy," remain each alive, independent, charged with feeling, and thus the essay as a whole seems less than a whole, a "collection," as Whitman acknowledges, of possibly contradictory "memoranda." A biography may not be the proper venue for wider explorations of poetics and politics, but Loving's complex portrait of a great poet who had trouble thinking in a straight line might well stimulate discussion and argument about the shadowed regions of Whitman's thought. The implications of his racialist (or are they cognitive?) lapses for the very breath and fiber of his egalitarian persona seem too serious to pass over as private liabilities.

The full picture Loving presents is of a not altogether prepossessing figure. The transcendental egotism of the poems gives way on occasion to outbursts of merely mean egotism. The poet's need for attention sometimes runs against the grain of the figure who says "Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am, / Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idol, unitary." Loving doesn't let the crafty old self-publicist pull the wool over his eyes. He is "grossly and unconscionably unfair" (395), scolds Loving, in some late remarks he makes about Emerson, and "literally insincere" (309-310) in denying that he had read the man he called "Master" before the 1855 edition (it should be said that Loving has a major investment in the idea of Emerson's indisputable influence on Whitman, whom he sees as a transcendentalist with genitalia). Especially after the great personal agony of his Civil War experience, and, of course, in response to the continuing vilification in the press (compensated by the gathering of a small band of ardent friends and proponents), he worried about the permanence of his reputation. His daily round of the hospitals during the war ruined his health for good, just as the war itself took away much of his earlier ebullience about the future of American democracy.

Loving is superb in showing how the war shaped the rest of his life as, one might say, one of its victims. He is also forthright and compelling in giving us a Whitman with all his vulnerabilities. The pathos of one of the final images sums up the richness of portrayal of this full and provocative life. It's the image of the man who in 1855 having bequeathed himself "to the dirt to grow from the grass I love," thirty-six years later, months before his death, going into the tomb he commissioned for himself at twice the cost of his house on Mickle Street, leaning up against a wall, and looking out at the trees.