



## Coghill, Sheila and Thom Tamaro, eds., *Visiting Walt: Poems Inspired by the Life and Work of Walt Whitman* [review]

Carmine Sarracino

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While the precise relation between the soul (consciousness) and the body remains vague in Whitman's writings, the poet does not represent the mind as synonymous with the physical brain or nervous system. Although each self (personal identity) journeys beyond the corporeal realm, both soul and body are positively aligned through their affinity with the spiritual underpinning of creation. At one point Aspiz nicely summarizes these points and his understanding of Whitman's developing representation of death through each edition of *Leaves of Grass*: "The fear that had surfaced in earlier poems—that death may be only [an] eternal nothingness—has [in the later poems] become sublimated into a faith in an afterlife during which the elements of conscious (mortal) identity are somehow preserved" (209).

A testament to Aspiz's enviable intimacy with Whitman's poetry, *So Long!* mimics the poet's manner. As much symphonic as narrative in his technique, Aspiz advances his theme through strategic repetition and variation. Notable, as well, is a remarkable access to pertinent information dexterously drawn from closely-read poems as well as from their milieu. These details sometimes sparkle for a moment, then vanish, their afterglow lingering in the reader's mind. As with the poems, too, there are stray bits of inconsistency, particularly concerning the destiny of the soul in Whitman's scheme (117, 124, 130, 160). Also as with the poems, there are curious places where the reader resists a claim. Does, for example, the word *doubtless* really signify the poet's uncertainty in "A Song of Joys" (133)? Is "A Noiseless Patient Spider" really about the poet's "leap of faith" concerning his immortality (210)? Do not Transcendentalist ideas, as much as revised Christian concepts, inform Whitman's beliefs about death?

Such moments matter little to the reader absorbed in Aspiz's deep and rewarding meditation. If his book cannot quite be the last word on Whitman's response to mortality—for debated topics likewise prove immortal—it is the fullest and best treatment of the subject to date. An exemplary work, *So Long!* is the crowning achievement of Aspiz's career-long devotion to Whitman's poetry.

*University of Texas at Austin*

WILLIAM J. SCHEICK

SHEILA COGHILL AND THOM TAMMARO, eds., *Visiting Walt: Poems Inspired by the Life and Work of Walt Whitman*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003. Iowa Whitman Series.

More than twenty years ago, Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom, and Dan Campion had the kind of idea that always makes one wonder why no one had thought of it sooner. In *Walt Whitman, The Measure of His Song* (Holy Cow! Press, 1981) they collected the poems, letters and essays in which writers around the world did what readers of Whitman have always felt an irresistible impulse to do: "talk back" to Whitman. Not all poets elicit such a response, and some (Poe, for instance) positively forbid it. (It is hard to imagine a response like, "Yes! That raven rapped on my door too!") But both our national "poetic parents," Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman, invite interchange with their readers and literary progeny.

Whitman himself, of course, garrulous and forward, initiated the conversation in such poems as "Poets to Come." There he exhorted future poets, "Arouse! for you must justify me." His book, he had told us in "So Long!," is, after all, not some literary relic, but rather an extension of his body: "Who touches this touches a man." In "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand" he comes close enough—as we sit holding this book, this body, this man—to plant a kiss on our lips.

Countless readers and writers have felt that kiss, over and over. Many have given in to the urge to respond to Whitman, to answer his questions, to argue, entreat, confess, return the pledges of adhesiveness, and even the kisses. In *Visiting Walt*, Sheila Coghill and Thom Tammaro have collected one hundred poems "inspired by the life and work of Walt Whitman." Coghill and Tammaro also edited *Visiting Emily: Poems Inspired by the Life and Work of Emily Dickinson* (University of Iowa Press, 2001).

*Visiting Walt* begins with a foreword by Ed Folsom and an introduction by the editors, who then offer the good, round number of one hundred poems, arranged, quite democratically, alphabetically by the author's last name. Thus, the first poem is by the relatively young American poet Sherman Alexie ("Defending Walt Whitman") and the second by the elderly Portuguese poet, Eugenio de Andrade ("Walt Whitman and the Birds"). The collection includes famous dead poets, such as Ezra Pound, who confesses detesting Whitman, his "pig-headed father," as well as lesser-known, younger poets, such as Jonathan Cohen, who welcomes a visit from Whitman, his "old teacher and friend."

The simple alphabetical arrangement of poems is far better than any organizational concept would have been (arrangement by theme, or form, or time period or national origin), for it allows us to discover for ourselves the crisscrossing patterns of similarity and sometimes stark difference, the repetition of images, the return to often the very same sources in Whitman, and, in short, the myriad possible ways in which these poems "speak" not only to Whitman (and to us) but also to one another.

We find in this collection some startlingly beautiful evocations of Whitman's poetic genius. In "This Night" Robert Bly says, "Each poem is a curving stair of sound / And a barefooted dancer coming down." And in "Despair," on the opposite page in fact, John Berryman says, "Walt! We're downstairs, / even you don't comfort me / but I join your risk my dear friend & go with you."

In a collection that includes Allen Ginsberg and Louis Simpson, Daniel Hoffman evokes both in "Crossing Walt Whitman Bridge": "Walt, my old classmates who write poems / Have written poems to you. / They find you, old fruit, / In the supermarket, California; / They hear you speaking from the brazen mouth / Of your statue on Bear Mountain. . . ."

Famous Whitman lines often recur, such as his "I think I could turn and live with animals." Joeseeph Bruchac, in "Canticle," says, ". . . if the old grey poet felt he could turn and / live with the animals / why should I be too good / to stay and die with them. . . ." Thomas Centolella, on the other hand, in "Small Acts" says, "I have lived with animals. They kept me up all night."

The famous Whitman line most repeated in epigraphs, alluded to, and quoted directly is: "If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles." The line

is viewed in some poems reverentially, in others as revelation, but perhaps the biggest—and funniest—surprise is Thomas Gannon's completely literal treatment in "Meeting the Master," which progresses from the poet's awareness of having felt a sudden *squish* underfoot to his peeling off his left boot a "teeny Walt / Whitman, flat as a / leaf of grass, only a lot / wider." For my tastes, humor works best, as it does in Gannon's poem, when dealing with Whitman lines that have been beaten to death by scholars, critics, and serious classroom discussion. It explodes them—with laughter—so that, oddly, they can come to life again.

But of course we all have different tastes, and the greatest strength of this wonderful collection of poems is that there is something here for everyone. This is a collection not only for Whitmaniacs who have carried on their own interactions and imaginary dialogues with Walt, but for lovers of poetry in general, for many of these poems, apart from the connection with Whitman, are brilliant and moving in themselves.

Elizabethtown College

CARMINE SARRACINO

ANGUS FLETCHER. *A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of the Imagination*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. xiv + 316 pp.

In defining "the environment" broadly as anything that surrounds (what is surrounded being usually some distinctly human endeavor), Angus Fletcher's highly original (and occasionally eccentric) effort at redefining American poetics expands the field of ecocriticism while all but ignoring the thematic connection to such matters as environmental protection, wilderness celebration, endangerment of species and land forms, and technological intrusions upon nonhuman (or pre-modern) communities. Rather than sticking with what has become the usual canon, beginning with the Romantics and following the development of nature writing through Emerson and Thoreau and on to such worthies as John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Edward Abbey, Gary Snyder, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Mary Oliver, Fletcher treats Whitman as the central figure in a historical tradition of descriptive poets rooted in the eighteenth century and including John Clare on one side and John Ashbery on the other in a two-hundred-year continuum. As a genre, the "environment-poem," according to Fletcher, originates with Whitman. The poems in *Leaves of Grass* "are not *about* the environment, whether natural or social," Fletcher argues, "They *are* environments" (103). Fletcher arrives at what seems to me a special version of formalism that insists on a radical separation of these poetic environments from the natural and social world, which entails an insistent separation of rhetoric from poetics and a separate treatment of place and space. While American democracy, according to this theory, may have created the conditions for a shift in focus from place to space, the environment-poem does not seem to sustain a dialogic relationship with the social context that made it possible. Though he does not make the connection himself, Fletcher's treatment of the environment-poem in Clare, Whitman, and Ashbery seems to foretell not the ecological crises of modern times so much as the concern with