



Pollak, Vivian R. The Erotic Whitman [review]

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REVIEWS

VIVIAN R. POLLAK. *The Erotic Whitman*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. xxiv + 261 pp.

No topic has received more attention in Whitman scholarship than sexuality and the body. As a theme in *Leaves of Grass* and an issue in biography, it has never been neglected, but attention has been particularly concentrated in the last two decades. To list the books, not to mention the articles and chapters, that focus on Whitman's infamous poetry of the body and his own ambiguous erotic preferences would require too much space in this review.

Into this crowded arena comes *The Erotic Whitman*, the new book by the distinguished scholar Vivian R. Pollak, author of the acclaimed 1984 book *Dickinson: The Anxiety of Gender*. In this new project, Pollak again appears as a force to be taken seriously. She demonstrates a meticulous mastery of previous critical and biographical work on Whitman, and on every page we find evidence of her own critical acuity as an experienced reader of Whitman's life and works. Her contribution to Whitman studies must not be doubted, and yet the quality of this contribution is decidedly mixed. In choosing to organize the book chronologically around the unfolding stages of Whitman's career, Pollak is true to her methodology, with its psychoanalytical interest in the development of poetic personality, an interest tempered and refined by feminist historicism and in particular by an understanding of the drama and the pitfalls of gender performance. But with the chronological organization, she must cover a great deal of ground already well trodden by other scholars with a variety of methods, some very similar to her own and some quite different. The result is that the originality of the argument appears in momentary flashes, bright nuggets in an all too familiar stream of narrative. Moreover, the insights tend to dwindle as the book progresses into its treatment of the best-known material, the poems of *Leaves of Grass*, and Pollak seems to press harder and harder for readings that distinguish her view from those of her fellow scholars. Even so, the book deserves our close attention as a largely unsympathetic feminist reading of Whitman's struggle with his own masculinity. As such, it serves as a foil to recent studies that take a more appreciative (though hardly uncritical) stance toward Whitman's gender politics, such as Sherry Ceniza's 1998 *Walt Whitman and Nineteenth-Century Women Reformers*.

The first half of the book is the most engaging. Pollak explains her method as an effort to "locate the erotic Whitman by tracing the development of his subjectivity as it emerged, fraught with contradiction, from and within a very particular context, the Whitman family, which, like other families, united individuals whose precise material and emotional needs did not coincide" (xviii). This approach offers some fascinating perspectives, notably in an excellent chapter on why Whitman gave up fiction, in which Pollak argues that "the

psychological urgency of these slippery fictions was incompatible with the inner serenity he was attempting to cultivate" (38). Ultimately he abandoned fiction-writing "because he was not yet ready to claim the unconventional sexual desires that his narratives had begun, furtively, to uncover. Grounded in an overarching vision of dysfunctional family life, these stories unsettled Whitman on a variety of fronts," arising as they did "out of a powerful need to redefine gendered morality"; thus the stories were "the children of an imagination, and a sexual identity, still in search of a stylistic home" (38). In Pollak's view, Whitman never found this comfortable home, though he came close in the early editions of *Leaves of Grass*, with its free-floating eroticism and a persona who alternated between inviting identification (to the point of imposing himself upon the reader) and fleeing from any clear sign of his own identity and sexuality, between confessing and masking his own desires. "Making textual sex," says Pollak, "emerged as Whitman's solution to psychological, social, and political dilemmas he could not resolve in life" (60). He thereby "creates a survivor's narrative within 'Song of Myself' that potentially links him to his audience" (71). He uses "the defamiliarized body as a symbol of democratic community" (82). But this project is never completely satisfying, according to Pollak, because Whitman could never escape his family. He thus "translated" the "available languages of power" into "family archetypes, which fail to accommodate his interest in the androgynous gender" (85-86). The father, predictably, raises a special problem: "Ironically, as Whitman sought to democratize models of reading based on the hierarchical relationship of father to child, he found himself mimicking aggressions which in their threatening intensity he associated with the quick loud word of the authoritarian father" (86). So we arrive at "Whitman's erotic double bind: he wanted to be understood but he was afraid of being understood. He had been conditioned to relative anonymity at home during his childhood and youth and he perpetuated this relative anonymity as an adult lover. Inconstant in his affections, quick to anger and despair, for Whitman the important issues were connection and control" (96).

Having skillfully developed this somewhat grim view of Whitman, Pollak seems unable to render it useful in reading the poems of *Leaves of Grass*. With the exception of passing insights (such as offering Hannah Whitman, the poet's sister, as a possible model for the twenty-ninth bather in "Song of Myself"), the conclusions tend to fall flat. We are told, for example, that "Whitman could not always believe in himself and he could not always trust his audience," but "he nevertheless hoped to create an enduring erotic community which might justify the psychological and perhaps physical risks he was taking" (151); and that "Challenging the nineteenth-century cult of domesticity and the allied doctrine of separate spheres, Whitman also tended to reinscribe the emotional power of 'the mother at home.' Of such fundamental contradictions is poetry made" (192).

The book also exhibits some methodological flaws. Certain terms seem to be applied in a rather cavalier way. For example, "dysfunctional," "survivor," "griefwork," and even "erotic" do not seem to be closely or consistently connected to a unified body of theory. The term "hysterical" becomes problematic at times, as when Pollak claims that "I Sing the Body Electric" is "ethically admirable in its concern for racial justice, but also hysterical in its attack

on fools who corrupt their own live bodies, pretentious in its feminism, and overall somewhat inert" (229, n. 16). The concept of "aggression" can also be troublesome, as when Pollak says that the speaker in "I Sing the Body Electric" "delights in taking others apart" and is therefore "out of touch with his own social aggression" (ibid.); or when she characterizes as "literary aggression" Whitman's "almost complete repression" of concrete details that might describe Lincoln's murder in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" (165); or when she reads "social aggression" into the scene from "Song of Myself" in which the speaker raises the gauze and gazes upon the sleeping infant, brushing away flies as he watches—"those silent brushes with social aggression and death (as exemplified by the flies)" (110). An argument about the nature of male aggression and competitiveness as related to literary authorship seems to underlie these examples, but it never rises to the surface. If it did rise to the surface, it might well reveal an essentialist position based on gender stereotypes that would not stand up to critical scrutiny.

Of deeper concern is a methodological trend that aligns Pollak with nonfeminist psychoanalytical critics of Whitman's work, from Jean Catel down to Edwin Haviland Miller and Stephen A. Black. She tends to overvalue certain kinds of seemingly confessional statements in Whitman's writings while undervaluing the poet's more positive and integrative accomplishments. In other words, we are directed to take him at his word when he gives evidence for peculiar neuroses, especially when these textual instances can be aligned with unhappy events from childhood and family life, but we are urged to read his outbursts of homoerotic joy or his more successful integrations of personal desire and public politics as mere screens, compensations, and masks for his profound sadness. The depressive Whitman becomes somehow more real than the joyous Whitman. At times, Pollak must work hard to dismiss the possibility that the melancholic persona is as much a pose as the heroic one, as in her comment on Whitman's "Sun-Down Papers from the Desk of a Schoolmaster." "Even after we allow for the fashionable melancholia of Whitman's lonesome bachelor pose," she writes, "the self-pity seems genuine, the loneliness real" (24). She must also go to some uncomfortable lengths to distance herself from other psychoanalytical critics. Fully committed to the idea that the heroic persona is a rhetorical screen for a fragile male ego, Pollak cannot abide, for example, Harold Bloom's portrait of Whitman as a heroic neurotic, an onanist who discovered social justification in his role as national poet. She finds Bloom's reading of autoeroticism in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" to be "implausibly lurid" even as she accepts the psychoanalytic core of the reading, the "father-centered analysis" that "accounts for the fact that Whitman writes like a man whose social world has collapsed because of the hero's death" (171).

Finally, however, even the sentimental persona, the man of feeling who confesses his pain before the world, gets no sympathy. In a particularly troubling passage, Pollak attests that not every reader finds the representations of the distraught lover in the *Calamus* poems to be worthy of a serious response. "Calamus 9" ("Hours Continuing Long"), she tells us, "evoked a laugh and the response 'poor guy' from an unsympathetic seminar I once taught" (142). In fact, this response may tell us more about the presentation of the poem in

the seminar than about the representational power of the lines.

The methodological imbalance of this book accounts for the unevenness of the analysis. Depending as it does upon a version of biographical fallacy—the overrating of arguments that can be aligned with Whitman’s admittedly dreadful family life—helps to explain why the early chapters, which deal with works written while Whitman was closest to his family, are much stronger than the later chapters. While Professor Pollak has succeeded in throwing open the question of gender performance and its attendant anxiety as an important topic in Whitman studies, a full understanding of this topic demands a different method, one that can account for the adult Whitman, the mature poet with an enormous range of literary and rhetorical as well as social and psychological conventions at his command. The picture here of the aggressive adolescent who never grows up I find unconvincing and (to drop the mask myself) utterly depressing.

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