



## Reynolds, David S. Walt Whitman [review]

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The reader's desire for *more* becomes sharp in the last two chapters. Whitman's double identity as the poet of urban landscapes and Civil War landscapes is complex and multifaceted. Chapter 5 treats these dual roles clearly, framing them in a plot of poetic modernization. In this reading, Whitman's pre-War sense of "alternating insularity and openness of urban environments" (139) becomes a pronounced ambivalence that ultimately hardens into a strict opposition between nature and society during the War. Modernization means alienation, the loss of intimacy, and the pervasive figure of war in Whitman's thinking about the relationship between nature and culture.

In the last chapter, the Timber Creek entries in *Specimen Days* and the old-age annexes to *Leaves of Grass* reprise the ecopoetical themes of the book and of Whitman's career. As Whitman ages, he mounts a surprisingly strong resistance to modernity. So, for example, "A Sun-Bath—Nakedness" contrasts country and city in terms that recall the best of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, such poems as "Song of Myself" and "I Sing the Body Electric." The short lyrics from the annexes resume many of the great shoreline poems, and here again I found myself wishing for more extended discussion of such mini-clusters as *Fancies at Navesink*. Whitman's annexes contain more sacred shorelines than we see at the end of this excellent critical work.

In a recent book review in this journal, Wynn Thomas remarked that "the test of any study of Whitman is the extent to which it refreshes and augments our appreciation of the poetry" (*WWQR* 20:178). By that test, *Walt Whitman and the Earth* is a model of critical precision and learning.

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DAVID S. REYNOLDS. *Walt Whitman*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. 159 pp.

A few years after completing his magisterial 1955 biography *The Solitary Singer*, Gay Wilson Allen issued a delightful supplemental volume called simply *Walt Whitman*, which he explained was "intended primarily for the enjoyment of the non-specialist." David S. Reynolds has made a somewhat similar progression. A decade after publishing *Walt Whitman's America*—the imposing study that so richly documents Whitman's relation to, and his absorption of, his physical and intellectual milieu and demonstrates their relevance to his poetry—he has just published his own *Walt Whitman*, a pleasant little volume of some 40,000 words, essentially derived from the larger work. "Drawing from the extensive research behind my cultural biography *Walt Whitman's America*," he says, "the current book is the first to describe concisely the transformation of cultural materials into poetry that never loses its power to inspire, to provoke, and to heal." And, considering the formidable and probing research and interpretation that characterize Reynolds's larger work and its demonstration of the ways in which the complex and often self-contradictory poet reacted to and distilled his nineteenth-century American world into great poetry, one must admire the way in which the new volume successfully encapsulates the

essence of *Walt Whitman's America*.

Reynolds's concise volume should appeal to the popular reader for several reasons. Its short readable paragraphs are packed with interesting details and analysis, selecting from the larger work some of its most fascinating and cogent moments and integrating them into a generally seamless narrative. The Whitman it portrays is essentially attractive and likeable. And the book achieves an almost lyrical tone as Reynolds adapts his language to accord with that of Whitman, judiciously and generously quoting pertinent excerpts of Whitman's prose and verse, so that the scholar and the poet seem almost to speak with one voice. Reynolds's enlightened treatment of nineteenth-century sexual values and the ways that they color Whitman's portrayal of sex is one of the book's highlights. Likewise, the treatments of the poet's fascination with, and his poetic indebtedness to, photography, the visual arts, the theater and its actors, oratory, literature, and music are enlightening, particularly as they become mirrored in the poet's larger-than-life self-portraits. For as Reynolds remarks in the larger work, "Whitman's celebration of himself in egotistical poetry was right in step with the times." On the other hand, the process of condensation in *Walt Whitman* falls somewhat short in attempting to explain how such weighty matters as science, pseudo-science, and philosophy become fused into Whitman's philosophical outlook. Obviously, the task is a difficult one: the poet who often interpreted his world in terms of religious awe nevertheless, as we know, took pride in contradicting himself, and, as Reynolds himself declares, "was never far from skepticism."

By and large, though, Reynolds's *Walt Whitman* successfully represents and integrates materials from the larger work. Its chapters deal with Whitman's life (emphasizing the formative years preceding the writing of *Leaves of Grass*); with Whitman's development into a political creature with a strong bias toward democracy, personal freedom, and populist nationalism; with the enthusiasm for theater and theatrics that helped to shape his persona and his poems; with photography and the visual arts; and with his knowledge of the sciences and the pseudo-sciences—all of which were among the formative influences that are mirrored in *Leaves*. The volume also provides an insightful interpretation of nineteenth-century sexual mores that helps to interpret Whitman as a sexual being and a sexual poet. The text ends, rather abruptly, it seems to me, with a brief treatment of Whitman and the Civil War and Whitman's idealization of Lincoln—factors that may have helped to resolve Whitman's ideological uncertainties but that also marked the close of the major phase of his poetic career.

Reynolds's *Walt Whitman* portrays a heroic and national poet who can extract the essence of what he sees and experiences; who is a would-be mediator between the extremes and the contradictions that he beholds in his world, and who desires to become the inspired spokesman of his world and of his nation. Reynolds's intriguing and well-balanced treatment of the poet and his world may indeed challenge nonspecialist readers to pursue a further study of the poet.

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