



## Clarke, Graham. Walt Whitman: The Poem as Private History [review]

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rhythm. This book, then, despite some imperfections, stands as a useful addition to the small body of criticism that examines systematically Whitman's magic with words.

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GRAHAM CLARKE. *Walt Whitman: The Poem as Private History*. London: Vision Press & New York: St. Martin's Press (Critical Studies Series), 1991. 176 pp.

Cotton Mather died when Wallace Stevens was a boy—or so it's claimed in "The Blue Buildings in the Summer Air"—finally exhausted by the unavailing effort to make his rhetoric of certainty prevail over the still small voice of persistent inner questioning: "There was always the doubt, / That made him preach the louder, long for a church/ In which his voice would roll its cadences, / After the sermon, to quiet that mouse in the wall." Similarly, "Walt Whitman" seems to have died when I was a boy, since critics have tended, these past forty years, to listen for the mouse whose quietest nibblings at the poetry's surface "myth" of a heroic, healthy, all-American personality have been picked up by sophisticated modern sonic systems and magnified through the loudspeakers of countless latter-day critical writings. It is, therefore, puzzling to find Graham Clarke claiming that his study departs from established critical practice in the attention it pays to "the private Whitman"—the "lonely old grubber," in the famous phrase quoted from Ginsberg, consigned to the desolate margins of the very culture to which his poetry claims to be central and a far cry (not to say howl) from the painstakingly constructed fiction of his poetic self.

Original, on the terms it advertises, this short book may not perhaps be, but a stimulating addition to Whitman studies it nevertheless most certainly is, thanks primarily to the vivid quality of the writing which is epigrammatically succinct, rich in interpretative insights and marked by a restlessly quick critical intelligence. Confining himself almost exclusively to the poetry of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*—in the belief that here, before Whitman had perfected his public persona, the unaccommodated man most makes his uncomfortable presence felt—Clarke everywhere discovers signs of the state of contradiction in which Whitman's poetry lives and has its being. Even the priapic exuberance of "I Sing the Body Electric" (for convenience, I use the familiar later titles of these poems) is seen to carry within it the seeds of doubt which produce, in "Bunch Poem" (later "Spontaneous Me"), a hidden world of guilty sexual needs. A short chapter on the trope of vocal effects in "Song of Myself" culminates in an ingenious disquisition on the letter O which would have delighted Jonathan Swift, and is followed by a long, outstanding chapter on "The Sleepers," convincingly read as "an 'anti-text' to the world that 'Song of Myself' projects." These studies in the 1855 edition are at the very center of the book, but other, flanking, material includes an examination of the early stories (interpreted, not for the first time, as coded autobiography); an essay on Whitman's photographic images; and a chapter twinning him with Emily Dickinson—Clarke's approach allowing him here to see the secret spiritual

kinship between the poet who sang himself, inviting each and every one of us to join in the chorus, and the poet who self-deprecatingly boasted "I'm Nobody! Who are you? / Are you—Nobody—Too? / Then there's a pair of us? / Don't tell! they'd advertise—you know!"

The poem goes on, we all remember: "How dreary—to be—Somebody! / How public—like a Frog— / To tell one's name—the livelong June— / To an admiring Bog!" That's quite a shrewd critique of the Whitman who was, as it were, the jumping frog of Manhattan Island—the would-be public performer for whom, as Clarke points out, the mouth is central. "It is the purveyor of sound but it is also the physical *signature* of the poet's presence: his physical equivalent to the circle of the over-soul. The mouth is the *énoncé*, in the Lacanian sense, as it is the conduit of speech: a direct link to the lungs." Hence the "belched words of my voice," and the answering compulsion to gulp great draughts of American air until—like a certain frog of Aesopean fame—he sometimes seems fit to burst. As can be seen, Clarke is good on the metaphorical stuff of which Whitman's great myth of selfhood is made, but he is appreciably better again when it comes to reading the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, and related material, as the *Diary of a Nobody*. This is in truth the *raison d'être* of the study and the power and subtlety of this approach is seen to best advantage in two outstanding chapters.

Refusing to treat "The Sleepers" as simply a surrealist dream poem, Clarke prefers to regard it as disclosing both a private Whitman *and* a private America—it leads both into the psychological underside of the personal and public self, and to "the urban *lumpen* of a diseased and decaying body politic." As Clarke suggestively remarks, "it is at once a private world made public, and an historical condition given its perverse mythic image." He shows how the ordering principles of the poem are the precise opposite of those that operate in "Song of Myself," and he uses Poe as his guide to the claustrophobic interiors and internal maze of Whitman's "City of Dreadful Night." In fact it is when mapping out the area of this nightmarish city that Clarke is at his very best. If the daylight Whitman was an habitué of Broadway, the straight-up-and-down thoroughfare of business and fashion, then the homeless night-time Whitman—like Dickens on his visit to New York—cuts across the grand avenue and plunges into the streets and alleys of a very different urban habitat. And just as all roads in Dickens's London seem sometimes to lead to Newgate, so Whitman ends up in the metropolitan institutions he normally avoids—the prison, the insane asylum and the morgue. These, Clarke suggests, are the landmarks of a world to which Whitman is reluctantly drawn—"cold, evil, dark, yet attractive."

Due to its outstanding quality, the chapter on "The Sleepers" is a difficult one to follow, but next fortunately comes one of almost equal distinction, entitled "Public Faces and Private Icons: Walt Whitman's Photographic Images." This begins by placing Whitman's obsession with his self-image in the context both of the nineteenth-century American passion for a national iconography and of the developing visual technology of the time, before proceeding to distinguish between the mass of carefully posed studio portraits made of Whitman and the handful of informal snapshots taken of him during his very last years. Clarke shrewdly notes how far the daguerreotype was from being the

supposedly perfect democratic medium for catching the fleeting moment. After all, it required the subject to hold a pose for long moments—that originally extended to whole minutes—and it produced contact prints which were not reproducible. Even after the evolution of superior photographic processes the image produced remained exceptionally static, by modern standards, but although this was the very opposite in effect to Whitman's poetry of flux this cannot of poets found it could nevertheless be used for his own purposes. "Whitman uses the photograph," says Clarke, "like the 'surface' of his poetry, to 'free' himself into a mythic (and made) image. He uses the image to deny the historical context and flattens and polishes the surface as a *made* image hiding behind its status (in the period) as a natural and 'real' reflection of the original: the actual world." Clarke demonstrates this in his subsequent "reading" of several of the pictures conveniently collected together in a recent special number of the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* by Ed Folsom (spelled Fulsom throughout by Clarke, an example of the occasional misprints that are a minor blemish on this book).

As Clarke points out, the intimate glimpses we get of the stricken, house-bound Whitman in the late photographs appear to constitute a kind of invasion of the privacy he had so energetically exerted himself throughout his career to protect. Or had Whitman simply adjusted his act one last time to suit his reduced circumstances? There are surely signs in the late poetry that this was at least partly the case, and it would have been good to have seen Professor Clarke's lively mind ponder the implications. Instead, he chooses to close his book with a chapter on Emily Dickinson and the briefest of codas on Michael Lesey's *Wisconsin Death Trip*. The writing there is never dull or barren, but it does leave one feeling—as do other parts of the book—that an opportunity, exhilaratingly created by the author himself, has rather been missed; that there are here the makings of an exciting fuller-length study.

Stevens ended "The Blue Buildings in the Summer Air" with an envoi: "Go, mouse, go nibble at Lenin in his tomb. . . ." And decades later, it seems that the mouse has at last made it into the mausoleum. Arriving as Professor Clarke's book does at this extraordinary political juncture, it serves to remind us how lucky America is to have, as the grand ideologue of its democracy, a poet whose greatest work is consumed, at source, by private doubts that serve only to humanize, and not to destroy, its challenging public affirmations.

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