

Song of Ourselves: Walt Whitman and the Fight for Democracy AND Whitman in Washington: Becoming the National Poet in the Federal City

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Review

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Edmundson, Mark. *Song of Ourselves: Walt Whitman and the Fight for Democracy.* Harvard University Press, 2021. HARDCOVER. \$29.95 ISBN 9780674237162 pp. 217.

Price, Kenneth M. *Whitman in Washington: Becoming the National Poet in the Federal City.* Oxford University Press, 2020. HARDCOVER. \$29.95. ISBN 9780198840930 pp. 191.

Walt Whitman, regarded by many as America's National Bard, published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* and its signature poem "Song of Myself," in 1855. Thereafter, over the succeeding thirty-eight years, he would publish six new editions of the book—each time, typically, expanding it with new poems while also revising previously published poems to reflect his evolving poetics and "maturing" political and social vision. The changes Whitman made to *Leaves* are legion, and the explanations numerous. Bouts of melancholy brought on by often tumultuous sexual relationships, for example, is one. No less profound, the trauma of the Civil War, coming as it did after the publication of the third (1860) edition, deeply impacted his vision of democracy and the country he regarded as its synonym—indeed, the very subject matter of his poetry. But regardless of their origins, the changes are so significant that they often become the focus of critical analysis, with some critics expressing an aesthetic or political preference for the "more authentic" 1855 version of "Song of Myself," while others arguing for, say, the 1860 or 1855 versions on other grounds.

The arc of Whitman's career, particularly the Civil War's pivotal role in his development, is a significant concern in two recent studies. In *Song of Ourselves*, Mark Edmundson identifies the first, 1855, edition's "Song of Myself" as the most "spontaneous" and thus, "the best" version (16, 8). He makes it the primary focus of his discussion, occupying the first of three parts of the book which includes a brief second section, devoted to contextual material, and a third section consisting entirely of a reproduction of the 1855 "Song of Myself" (untitled until the 1856 edition).

Edmundson's mission is to explicate the "American shamanistic journey" that the poem enacts as it both "dramatizes the struggle to engender a democratic individual" and, by logical extension, the "quest to engender true democracy" (17, 8). But the poem comes, of course, just six years before the war, in the highly fractious environment that eventually led to southern state secession. And so, as Edmundson recognizes, Whitman's notion of the democratic individual is one deeply informed by the countervailing ethos of union—and his poem is designed to actually cultivate a kind of people disposed to see themselves as inexorably connected to others. Whitman's goal might have a political cast, but his means are literary and mystical. Edmundson's first concern, then, is to take us into the spiritual, metaphysical, and material process of unification that Whitman weaves together to draft the poetic blueprint of the 'Democratic Everyman' that must necessarily ground and precede all democratic social and political life.

For Edmundson, that unification is completed rather quickly (by line 81 of the 1336-line poem) in the famous passage in which Whitman uses erotic imagery to join 'self and soul'—aspects of human identity that the author refers to simply as "worldliness and sensitivity," and others might think of as the corporal-temporal self and a somewhat ascetic, emotional intuition of interconnectivity (i.e., not the Christian notion of soul) (29). Once so unified, the democratic individual is rendered capable of a multitude of insights that the poet dramatizes and Edmundson explicates in a sequence of revelatory episodes and catalogues that underscore the interconnectivity of all life, fundamental human equality, the cosmic unity of material reality, the transience of culture, the essential value of spirituality (and damaging impact of formal religion)—and the unique quality of American democracy to reflect and advance that understanding.

While Edmundson's overly familiar critical voice (e.g., his habit of referring to the poet as "Walt") will irritate many; and his apparent indifference to some of Whitman's personal failings (e.g., the small but unmistakable evidence of racism that many argue belie the poet's vision of equality) will offend more knowledgeable Whitman readers, Edmundson's interpretation is, nonetheless, well within the norm. He has said little that is new, and what novelties there are, I suspect, will strike many as minor idiosyncrasies. (For instance, his notion that Whitman uses the pronoun "you" in the second line to address his soul—not the reader, as most critics assume) (17). Moreover, Edmundson can at least claim some cover in the fact that he

has clearly pitched his book to a non-academic audience: “Unlike many literary critics,” he writes, he is less interested in judging the poet than in discovering what “Walt can *do* for us in here and now” (xii). To that effect, his “objective here is to lay out Whitman’s vision in *Song* and to give it the most affirmative reading that” he can (xii). For true believers in equality and the promise of democracy in achieving it, the sense of moral urgency Edmundson communicates may be compensation enough for such critical defects.

What is more disappointing, I think, is the implication in Edmundson’s work that Whitman’s vision of democracy is treated exhaustively in the pre-Civil War, 1855, edition. It is not—nor could it be. Democracy is more than a collection of enlightened individuals, sensitized to their interconnection—though that is certainly a useful place to start. It is, by definition, a system of “self-government,” both in the sense of people learning to govern themselves as individuals, and a people exercising the power to govern themselves as a *collective*. In 1855, Whitman evinced little to no concern for that challenge. By 1871, when he published *Democratic Vistas*—his awkward, sometimes conflicted, but often brilliant program for democratic reform—he had clearly come to understand the limits of a purely individualist reform. Indeed, there’s even a hint of this in Edmundson’s own preference for the “spontaneity” of the first version of “Song of Myself,” as if it is free of the governing impulses that might reign in excesses. In any event, Whitman learned the importance of governance during the economically tumultuous and corrupt post-war period. But his initial introduction to that lesson surely came during the Civil War.

Whitman’s Civil War experiences have been well-documented for decades. But Kenneth Price’s *Whitman in Washington: Becoming the National Poet in the Federal City* opens up an unexpected new avenue of insight. Biographical and critical treatments of Whitman’s Washington, D.C. years (1863-73) typically stress his work as a kind of comfort nurse, daily visiting wounded soldiers (both Union and Confederate) in area hospitals to bring them small gifts, write their letters, commiserate with them, and often sit with them as they died. It was genuinely heroic, self-sacrificial work that quickly found its way into his poetry—while undoubtedly taking a toll on his health. But what rarely gets more than a passing reference is the “day job” he secured as a government clerk to support himself and his philanthropy: first briefly, in the Department of Interior, then, for nearly a decade to follow, in the Attorney General’s office. But as Price demonstrates in his study, Whitman’s work as a clerk may be less dramatic

than his work as a volunteer nurse, its shaping impact on the poet's life and literary work might have been just as profound.

In a search of the National Archives, Price, a well-respected textual scholar and co-director of the Walt Whitman Archive, has identified some 3,000 documents in Whitman's hand. Those documents, in addition to newly available correspondence and journalism, enables him to present a more complex and nuanced picture of the poet's years in Washington, DC. than heretofore possible. Far from an image of the indifferent, lackadaisical functionary the poet himself often promoted (often to bolster the persona he constructed in his poetry), Price shows us a diligent, hard-working, and well-respected worker, participating in the act of governing a rapidly changing nation. "Whitman entered a system," Price tells us, "filled with intelligent, well-trained individuals who held far-reaching authority but little autonomy" (105). And his "scribal documents let us see how his roles as poet of democracy and clerk in bureaucracy were more entangled than we've ever known or imagined" (105).

Price showcases that entanglement both elegantly and delicately. He organizes his study into five broad areas, each of which illustrates Whitman's struggle with the new realities of American democratic life he confronts in the nation's capital: "convulsiveness," or the essential social and political dislocation the war ignites, his hospital "missionary" work, a term Prices uses somewhat ironically, the supposed "pastoralism" that, he argues, some critics mistakenly claim informs a growing conservatism in Whitman's poetry, a new pensiveness, or uncharacteristic pessimism, that does seem to color his wartime thinking, and, finally, the poet's deep ambivalence over the prospects of a multi-racial democracy in his later work and *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman's searching social and political criticism, hobbled, in Price's view, by its silences on, and inadequate treatment of, race. And it is the issue of race that Price is most concerned with, particularly the racial attitudes that Whitman held despite his radically inclusive poetics. It is the recurrent theme of each of the chapters except his discussion of the poet's hospital work. Price is both fair and unsparing in documenting these views, revealing how they materialize explicitly in some of the correspondence with family and friends (most notably in a letter to his mother scornfully describing a "comical, yet very disgusting & alarming" procession of some 3,000 "darkies" celebrating a mayoral election) (148). Price notes that the same sentiment, albeit in more subtle form, can be found in some of his journalism. Moreover, much

of his late work on democracy is replete with telling evasions and silences on racial justice, inconsistent with his earlier commitments to universal brotherhood.

Price's goal here is not to discredit either Whitman or his lofty poetic vision, but to put them in fertile tension with one another. "Whitman's lapses are serious and not mere 'private liabilities,'" he writes in the book's penultimate paragraph. But the poet, like the United States itself, was (and is) always a work in progress, and their developmental process resists simple formulations or descriptions," (174). What is demanded, he suggests, is honest discussion, predicated on an honest confrontation with the truth. All this is not only fair to Whitman, but essential at a time when Americans are compelled to reexamine their democratic values, especially as history has delivered them to us in a tight weave with racial oppression. Still, I think Price's extraordinary work throws yet another—but also urgent—democratic story into relief: It's important to note that in *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman places all manner of social ill squarely on *individuals*, both the elite class of *thieves* and *scalliwags* that manipulate the political process to serve their own interests, and the common people whose lack of democratic training leaves them susceptible to such manipulation. But interestingly, Whitman's solution is *institutional* and systemic, an elaborate *programme* that includes reimagining political processes as educational instruments. Moreover, this reliance on institutional mechanisms for democratic reform comes at the very time when the poet became an agent in the rapidly burgeoning federal bureaucracy—a system suddenly on the front lines of democracy itself. To cite one example, Price notes that as a clerk for Amos Akerman, President Grant's Attorney General, Whitman inscribed more than thirty letters as part of the successful effort to smash the nineteenth-century iteration of the Ku Klux Klan—an effort clearly in line with Grant biographer Ron Chernow's observation that "through the Justice Department the federal government would emerge as the undisputed champion of civil liberties in the southern states, carving out a new role." It is difficult to imagine that Whitman did not internalize this work, or that it did not exert influence on his understanding of democracy. Without pointing it out explicitly, Price shows us that Whitman's 1855 conception of democracy may have been shaped by Jeffersonian individualist values, the democratic cast of his post-war work was decidedly Lincolnian in its reliance on a government of, by, and for the people.

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