

Bellow himself was famously impatient with people who tried to read too much into his work, or trace too deliberately the development of his writing over the course of his career. And so, in *The New Republic* (April 25, 2005), critic James Wood, a longtime friend of Bellow's, concluded his tribute by setting aside the encomiums and simply returning to the man himself: "Like anyone, writers, of course, are embarrassed by excessive praise, just as readers are burdened by their excessive gratitude—one cannot keep going on about it. And, eventually, it is easier to turn the beloved literary work into a kind of disembodied third

party: to admit that the work itself exceeds the writer, that it sails . . . away from the writer and toward the delighted reader. In the final year of Saul's life, as he became very frail, I would read some of his own prose to him, something he would doubtless have found, as a younger man, mawkish or cloying or tiresome. It did not feel any of those things, as Bellow sat there in forgetful frailty; rather it felt as if I were gently reminding him of his own talent and that he was grateful for this, and perhaps grateful for my gratitude. But, in truth, I could not thank him enough when he was alive, and I cannot now."

Whitman Samplers

"Whitman in Selected Anthologies: The Politics of His Afterlife" by Kenneth M. Price, in *The Virginia Quarterly Review* (Spring 2005), One West Range, P.O. Box 400223, Charlottesville, Va. 22904-4223.

"I am large. . . . I contain multitudes," Walt Whitman boasted in "Song of Myself," and the century and a half since publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in July 1855 has proved him right. We've invented any number of Whitmans, from free spirit to prophet to patriotic sage to civil rights advocate to gay icon. Price, who is a professor of English at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, traces the political uses to which Whitman's "fluid identity" has been put in a number of 20th-century anthologies of the poet's work and in a 21st-century collection meant to comfort Americans after the 9/11 attacks.

The earliest of the anthologies belongs to the "Little Blue Book" series that Emanuel Haldeman-Julius published out of Girard, Kansas, from 1919 to 1951, for working-class audiences. Along with Shakespeare, Hardy, Poe, Thoreau, Balzac, Kipling, Wilde, and the like, Haldeman-Julius introduced readers to the Soviet constitution and to an array of controversial thinkers, including Havelock Ellis and birth control pioneer Margaret Sanger. As many as 500 million of these Little Blue Books may have been sold over the years—for 10, five, and even two and a half cents a copy. (Tempered by his capitalist success, Haldeman-Julius, who began as a committed leftist, ended up a liberal New Deal Democrat.)

The publisher, says Price, saw Whitman as "a sympathetic figure who was compatible with his own views on religion, politics, and sexuality," and it was in a context emphasizing socialism and openness about sexuality that the poet appeared in the series. Blue Book 73 had three different versions: *Walt Whitman's Poems*, *Poems of Walt Whitman*, and *Best Poems of Walt Whitman*. These were not critical editions, to say the least, and they often misrepresented Whitman's meaning by rearranging the poems. Moreover, the cheap-looking volumes would never have met the aesthetic standards of the poet, who was always particular about his books' appearance. But the cheap look made possible a low price, and that assured the series the widest distribution.

However little Haldeman-Julius charged, he "could not match the absolutely free distribution of the World War II Armed Services Editions." In *A Wartime Whitman*, edited by Major William A. Aiken, the poet became, through judicious selection and "editorial intrusiveness," the champion of the American way of life that soldiers were fighting to defend. Aiken "goes to some pains to make Whitman's comradely love safe for the troops." Indeed, writes Price, "the Whitman who emerges from the Armed Services Editions is a virile heterosexual man, a trumpeter of democracy, a

Periodicals

person equivalent to a medic with direct experience of the war, a fellow a GI wouldn't mind sharing a foxhole with."

The most recent of the anthologies, *I Hear America Singing: Poems of Democracy, Manhattan, and the Future*, published by Anvil Press in 2001, makes no explicit reference to the attacks of 9/11, but the epigraph leaves no doubt: "I am the mash'd fireman with breast bone broken, / Tumbling walls buried me in their debris." And these words appear on the back cover: "This selection of courageous and consoling poems focuses on Whitman's vision of democracy, his love of

Manhattan, his sense of the future—and of the community of peoples of this earth." The publisher (no editor is named) calls Whitman "as much a poet for our time as he was for the time of the American Civil War and its aftermath."

Price believes that "American culture has been in an incessant conversation with Whitman ever since he imbued his art with the political vision of the founders, making freedom and equality the guiding principles that literally shaped the form and content of *Leaves of Grass*." The voluble poet never tires of holding up his end of the conversation.

Republican Art

"From Royal to Republican: The Classical Image in Early America" by Caroline Winterer, in *The Journal of American History* (March 2005), 1215 E. Atwater Ave., Bloomington, Ind. 47401.

In the 1770s, as the 13 colonies drew closer to war with England, neoclassical images began to flood the consciousness of Americans. Prints and engravings were filled with temples, eagles, and triumphal arches. Pictures of the Roman goddesses Liberty and Minerva appeared everywhere—in journals and broadsheets; on coins, currency, seals; in fashion and architecture; on wallpaper and

furniture and even punch bowls. Was the wide distribution of these images a deliberate effort at political spin?

Clearly yes, says Winterer, a Stanford University historian. "Classical imagery in and of itself did not point to revolutionary ideology," she writes, "but that imagery was reinvented to suit the ends of a new political program." By using the symbols of the classical world to

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Arthur Miller's Mission

Reservations about [Arthur] Miller, whether expressed by a critic patronizing his lack of avant-garde aspirations or a Broadway producer unwilling to finance anything but yet another revival of Salesman, seem to me to reflect a deeper unease with his notion of what theater is. For more than half a century, everything he wrote and said glowed with the belief that theater is a public art with a mission to bring people together in a public place to speak to them about matters of common concern. That is an old-fashioned idea, and not just because commercial theater is now so ridiculously expensive that its increasingly gray-haired and well-heeled patrons are wary of anything except guaranteed entertainment. It's more fundamental than that. We live in an age when public libraries and public schools, for example, are too often regarded as institutions of last resort for those who can't afford anything better, and when people can't walk down a street or through a park without isolating themselves in a private space via their cell phone conversations. Theater is a beleaguered outpost of collective life, an activity that cannot take place in your living room, online, or over a headset. That is why Miller's old-fashioned idea is eternally relevant and spiritually indispensable.

—Wendy Smith, author and theater critic, in *The American Scholar* (Spring 2005)