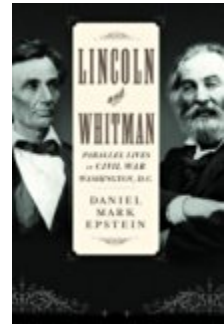


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Daniel Mark Epstein. *Lincoln and Whitman: Parallel Lives in Civil War Washington*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2004. xix + 380 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-345-45799-8; \$15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-345-45800-1.

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The year 2009 will mark the bicentennial of the birth of Abraham Lincoln, and as it approaches, a veritable mountain of books on the sixteenth president has been gushing from publishers large and small, adding to bookshelves already groaning with similar tomes. Some are written by accomplished Lincoln scholars, others by non-experts who share the same passionate interest that Lincoln seems to inspire. Daniel Mark Epstein is one of the latter, a talented and oft-published author who also admires Lincoln's contemporary, the poet Walt Whitman. In his book, Epstein compares the lives of the two men, who lived in wartime Washington, D.C., without ever meeting.

The most historiographically notable argument in the book is Epstein's contention that Lincoln's rhetoric improved after a reading of Whitman's famed collection of poetry, *Leaves of Grass*, published in 1855. Epstein concludes that Lincoln's reading of *Leaves* resulted in a more lyrical and poetic speaking style, that Whitman's influence enabled Lincoln to reach the rhetorical heights of the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural Address. Certainly, every writer is influenced by his or her reading, and Lincoln's law partner William Herndon said that though Lincoln read books infrequently, those he did read he committed to a formidable memory. Given that testimony, if Lincoln did absorb *Leaves of Grass* after Herndon obtained a copy in 1857, perhaps some of Whitman affected his writing. Yet the sources Epstein cites as proof that Lincoln actually read Whitman's poetry are the dubious reminiscences of Henry B. Rankin, published more than half a century later. Rankin, the son of a farmer in Athens, Illinois, claimed to have been a student in the Lincoln-Herndon law office from 1856-1861. Numerous distinguished historians have found

that claim and Rankin's assertions of an intimacy with Lincoln not credible, among them David Donald, Don Fehrenbacher, Albert J. Beveridge, and William E. Barton. Census data from the period indicates that Rankin lived in Menard County during the time he claimed to be residing in Springfield (in Sangamon County) and studying with Lincoln and Herndon. In short, Rankin cannot be relied upon. It is also true that Lincoln's logical style was fixed before 1857, and he had given speeches with literary flourishes, albeit not particularly successful ones, before that date as well. His address to the Young Men's Lyceum in 1838 and his eulogy of Henry Clay in 1852 were both efforts that included attempts at lofty rhetoric. First and foremost, though, Lincoln was a lawyer who respected reason above all things; his arguments reflected his legal approach as he advanced logically from point to point, building to an unshakable conclusion as if in a summation to a jury. His personal style owes nothing to Walt Whitman. Though unconvincing on the question of the influence of Whitman's poetry on Lincoln, Epstein is a fine writer, and his portrait of Walt Whitman is the book's strength. He provides a charming description of Whitman before the war as the literary lion of New York City, ensconced in the smoky darkness of Pfaff's cellar saloon. Here Whitman quaffed beer surrounded by admirers and participants in the city's artistic community, from fellow writers and journalists to actors and painters, all of whom regarded Whitman's poetry as groundbreaking and often breathtakingly risqué. Whitman left this idyll in 1862, traveling to Virginia in the wake of the battle of Fredericksburg to ascertain the fate of his brother George. He found his brother safe, but he also discovered thousands of maimed and wounded Union troops. To his lasting credit, Whitman began to minister to these men;

he moved to Washington and regularly visited the area military hospitals, giving the men gifts of writing materials, fruit, and money. He comforted dozens of wounded soldiers and probably saved lives in the process. Epstein does a good job evoking the spirit of the wartime capital and the reeking atmosphere of the hospitals.

Though the book is well written and the Whitman material compelling, it is marred by numerous factual errors. Some are trivial—Epstein misses Lincoln’s correct height by one inch—others less so. For example, Horace Greeley supported Edward Bates for the Republi-

can presidential nomination in 1860, not Lincoln. Epstein also incorrectly characterizes Stephen A. Douglas as a spokesman for the Buchanan administration. Even prior to their break over the Lecompton Constitution, Buchanan detested Douglas, whom he blamed for the ongoing sectional tensions that afflicted his administration. For his part, Douglas resented Buchanan for ignoring him on patronage and other matters. There are other mistakes of a similar vein. Despite the unsupportable conclusion regarding Whitman’s influence on Lincoln’s rhetoric and the factual gaffes, Epstein has written a thoughtful portrait of Walt Whitman during the Civil War.

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