***Kenyon Review***

**Why We Chose It**

**David Lynn  
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**“Walt Whitman and the Bohemians” by David S. Reynolds appears in the** [**July/Aug 2016 issue of the *Kenyon Review***](http://www.kenyonreview.org/journal/julyaug-2016/selections/david-s-reynolds/)**.**

Let me begin simply by saying that David S. Reynolds is a marvelous writer. His review-essay in the July/August 2016 issue of the Kenyon Review on two new books about Whitman is elegant, vivid, and very smart—it’s a pleasure to read him engage these works, revealing not only their strengths and a few weaknesses, but also much that I didn’t know about Whitman’s life in New York. Look at how spryly he creates an historical scene early on:

*Located below a hotel lobby at 647 Broadway, just north of Bleecker, Pfaff’s was approached through a sidewalk hatch that opened onto metal stairs leading down to a gas-lit room. A table that sat thirty ran through the room, which was lined on one side with wine casks. At the head of the table was Henry Clapp, Jr., a short, raspy-voiced raconteur who had made Pfaff’s a place of merriment and repartee for creative types—poets, novelists, journalists, actors, and others—who comprised America’s first bohemians.*

It may strike you as odd that I am writing a WWCI column about a book review, even a review-essay as I call it above, rather than an original piece of art, a poem or story, a memoir or a play, as we usually do. Not all literary journals even publish such criticism anymore, though those forms dominated—were the premise of journals from the very start in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. That’s why, after all, they were typically called reviews.

Even in the 1940s and ’50s, years of great fame for this journal and the few others on the literary landscape, from the Partisan Review, to the Sewanee and the Southern, book reviews and criticism formed the heart of the enterprise. Look in the early issues of KR and you’ll find a few poems, fewer stories. Most of the contents are criticism, reviews, and literary essays.

That this has changed so profoundly reflects, in part, the vast and continuing fragmentation of American culture. Readers are ever more specific in their tastes and habits. “Creative writing” has become a world unto itself. (And sometimes it feels a bit hermetically so.) But it also has to do with the growing specialization of literary theory and criticism, for which narrowly focused publications exist in print and online.

Since the ascendancy of critical theory in the 1980s, the language of criticism has grown ever more philosophical and abstract. This was a natural evolution, it must be said, from the formalist New Criticism practiced by John Crowe Ransom and his many pals. Structuralism led to post-structuralism, and then to deconstruction and beyond. No longer written by public intellectuals such as Lionel Trilling, Hannah Arendt, and Irving Howe for a broad, well-educated audience, academic criticism of recent decades has been dominated by an elite band of theorists anchored in university departments and writing largely for and to each other.

Practical criticism such as David S. Reynolds’s brilliant article in KR, however, has continued to fade from the American cultural landscape. Faced with financial exigency, newspapers trim their staffs and their pages—and reviews are all too easily sliced away. It must be said that reviewers of this skill and expertise are hard to find. Many, perhaps most, literary magazines and journals no longer feature reviews at all. (I am grateful to those that do, Rain Taxi, Threepenny Review, and of course the New York Review of Books among them.)

This trend is, to my mind, a shame and a real loss. Practical criticism offers not merely an intellectual pleasure; it provides a public service to the literary community. How else are we to encounter books beyond those that have, essentially, won a lottery for notice in a handful of prominent venues? Where to find publications that are quirky, offbeat, on a different slant, or just plain brilliant?

For all these reasons the Kenyon Review remains committed to thoughtful book reviews in a variety of forms, from essay-reviews such as this one by David S. Reynolds, to shorter reviews of individual books featured on KROnline and edited by Adam Clay, to the recent introduction of micro-reviews edited by Janet McAdams. Stay tuned: other new and exciting initiatives are soon to arrive.

David S. Reynolds, I’m glad to say, is writing precisely for the broadly well-educated reader, someone intellectually curious but not necessarily a specialist. Reynolds himself, clearly, is learned and passionate about poetry, about Whitman in particular, and Whitman’s world. He assesses these two recent books on the great poet’s relationships with the early Bohemians of New York by putting them in context, and I feel that I’m the one to profit from knowing a little more both about a poet I deeply admire and the American scene that helped create him.

*[I]t’s notable that Pfaff’s was the setting for his relationships with stage driver Fred Vaughan and, later, with a number of young men known as the Fred Gray Association, as explored in an essay by Stephanie M. Blalock in Levin and Whitley’s volume.*

But the pleasure encountered in an essay-review like this is deeper: we watch as Reynolds’s critical intelligence engages these books in an intellectual agon, pointing out what has been ignored:

*Then there was the elephant in the room: slavery. For all their posturing against institutions, the bohemians had little important to say about the most oppressive institution of their day. A striking absence in both* Whitman among the Bohemians *and* Rebels Souls *is any serious discussion of politics and social reform.*

In other words, Reynolds can be appreciative of these books while also bringing them to task. And we as readers are drawn into what is really a lively conversation. We become participants. Thus, criticism can afford a literary delight. It may not be for every taste, but surely is for mine.