

## *A Backward Glance*

# HISTORY OF MY WHITMAN STUDIES

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I DO NOT REMEMBER WHEN I first became interested in Walt Whitman. My roommate in college says I talked about him in my junior year, but I did not take a course in American Literature as an undergraduate. I did take a course in the Bible in which the text was Moulton's *Modern Reader's Bible*. Moulton spaced Hebrew poetry like English verse, and I noticed similarities between Whitman's prosody and the use of "parallelism" in Hebrew poetry which Bishop Lowth had identified in 1753 as a prosodic device. In 1930 I mentioned this observation to Professor Jay B. Hubbell, editor of *American Literature*, and he suggested that I write a "note" about it for his department of "Notes and Queries."

In 1932 I took a graduate seminar at the University of Wisconsin under Professor William B. Cairnes in which I used the "parallelism" in *Leaves of Grass* and the Bible for my paper. By this time I had learned that these similarities had been noticed by several literary scholars, though none had written more than a few paragraphs on the subject. At first I thought that I had discovered the main source for Whitman's verse structure, and he certainly knew the King James version of the Bible, as I proved in another paper.<sup>1</sup> But I could not prove that he had consciously developed his verse structure on the Hebraic model; so I entitled my study "Biblical Analogies for Walt Whitman's Prosody." I submitted a condensed version to Professor Charles Cestre, editor of *Revue Anglo-Américaine*, and he published it in August, 1933. I suppose I submitted it to Cestre instead of Hubbell because my friend and mentor at Wisconsin, Harry Hayden Clark, had published in the French journal.

Though I had not majored in Comparative Literature, my first studies of Whitman happened to be in that field. My second study was on "Jules Michelet and Walt Whitman," which I read at a Modern Language Association program in Cincinnati in 1936, chaired by Sculley

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### *Editor's Note:*

This is the third in a series of essays written by some of the most eminent senior Whitman scholars of our time. These essays, both autobiographical and critical in nature, explore the ways that Whitman entered the lives of these scholars and trace the paths of decades of encounters with his work.

Bradley; the other participants were Emory Holloway and Rollo Silver, the best-known Whitman scholars of the day. This paper was published the following May in *Études Anglaises*, which had succeeded *Revue Anglo-Américaine*. Whitman admired Michelet, reviewed favorably his *History of France* in the *Brooklyn Eagle*, and later paraphrased *The Bird* in his "To the Man-of-War Bird." Passages of his 1855 Preface closely paralleled passages in Michelet's *Le Peuple*, published in English as *The People* in 1846. The *Mercure de France* published an editorial on my paper.

I had not planned an academic career as a Whitman scholar, or even as a teacher of American literature. My favorite subject at Duke University was Middle English, and I edited a Middle Scots poem, "The Tale of Colkelbie Sow," for my M.A. thesis. I would have continued the study of Middle English if Wisconsin had had a specialist in the field when I enrolled in Graduate School. In fact, American Literature in the early 1930s was barely tolerated, and Wisconsin required no knowledge of it for either the qualifying or the final oral examinations for the Ph.D. Consequently I studied *Beowulf*, the history of the English Language, and the major British authors under competent scholars. Almost by accident I took a course one summer in phonetics under Miles Hanley, and through the study of phonology became interested in prosody.

In fact, a tragic accident in the spring of 1932 had changed my plans, and maybe even my career. Professor S. A. Leonard was becoming famous for his course in American Speech. I wrote him a letter asking permission to enroll in his course, and the day before I received his permission I read in the *New York Times* that he had drowned the previous day while boating with I. A. Richards, who had survived. The fun I had with applying phonetics to the three American dialects makes me suspect I would have been an easy convert to Leonard's gospel of usage, though I might not have been as uncompromising (or as successful) as Allen Walker Reed, the nearest modern parallel to S. A. Leonard. Another of my teachers, William Ellery Leonard, was also a specialist in prosody. Thus several influences turned me to prosody, and one of Whitman's special attractions was what he called his "language experiment" in *Leaves of Grass*.

Study of Whitman's prosody also led me to study the versification of the other major American poets and to write *American Prosody*. I wrote that book one summer and submitted it to the American Book company. It was accepted for publication after favorable reports by Henry Seidel Canby and the Irish poet James Stephens. After it was in proof I got permission from the Dean of the Graduate School to use it for a thesis, with some revision and an official supervisor. Professor

Clark agreed to this arrangement; so publication was delayed until I got the thesis approved: an unusual, if not "irregular" procedure.

The next stage of my Whitman studies was also serendipitous. While doing research for my Whitman-Michelet paper in the Library of Congress in the summer of 1936, I saw for the first time a book in Danish with the simple title *Walt Whitman* by Frederik Schyberg. It had been published in 1933 but I had seen no reviews of it. I knew no Danish, but I promptly ordered a copy of the book from Copenhagen, along with a Danish grammar and a Danish-English *Ordbok*. When they arrived I plunged into the Danish language, and my wife, Evie Allison, began studying it with me. Within a few weeks she was so far ahead of me that I let her take over the translation. (Eve had a remarkable facility for learning to read foreign languages, though not a good ear for speaking them.)

We soon learned that Schyberg had done two things that surpassed any books on Whitman in English. The first was his discovery that by studying the poet's revisions in the successive editions of *Leaves of Grass* one could trace his psychology from 1855 to his "old age" poems. American scholars had not done this because they had regarded the "authorized" edition of 1892 as the best text, just as Whitman had wanted them to do. They regarded the 1855 edition as an oddity and a clumsy beginning. Some admired the Preface, but it too had a reputation of freakishness. The second edition (1856) was almost totally ignored, and the third (1860) edition, which recorded the great emotional crisis in the poet's life and contained some of the greatest love poems (mostly homosexual) in the English language, was largely ignored—though it had been pirated and was one of the easiest to obtain. Of course another reason for this neglect was that many readers were still offended by the "Children of Adam" and "Calamus" sections—neither fully understood.

Schyberg's second revelation for me was his discussion of "Whitman in World Literature." I knew that the poet had been translated into German, French, Italian, Spanish, Russian, with brief selections in other languages, but I had not thought of his belonging to a world movement—except of course through the general influence of European Romanticism. But Schyberg, with his extensive knowledge of European languages, found Whitmanesque poets in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Russia, and other countries—even Persia. "To discuss Whitman in world literature," he declared, "is to discuss those he resembled and those who resembled him."

I read as many of the Scandinavian works mentioned by Schyberg as I could find in translation, and my wife read and summarized the major ones not translated. Some of Schyberg's parallels may have been a little far-stretched, but the similarities to Wergeland in Norway,

Sibbern in Sweden, and Baggesen in Denmark were striking. I also reviewed German romanticism, which I had previously studied to trace Sidney Lanier's philosophical background.<sup>2</sup> In brief, with my wife's help, I gave myself a rather thorough course in Comparative Literature. As I surveyed what had been written about Whitman, I made lists of what still needed to be done. These outlines covered five fields of study: biographies, editions, ideas (social and philosophical), verse theories and practices, and Whitman's relations to world literature (sources, reception, influences, and translations). This became the plan of the *Walt Whitman Handbook*, undertaken first for my own guidance but published for use by other students of Whitman.

I used my vacations to work in the University of Michigan Library in Ann Arbor and Library of Congress, but I needed a year free of teaching duties to complete the world literature chapter, and Bowling Green State University did not have a sabbatical program. Then a lucky coincidence changed my life. Henry Seidel Canby, editor of the prestigious *Saturday Review of Literature*, came to Bowling Green to lecture. After lunch he wanted a place to rest and I offered him the couch in my study. After his nap he wanted to know why I had so many Whitman books (I did not know that at the time he was writing a biography of Whitman). I showed him my plans and preliminary drafts for the "Handbook" and told him of my need for a leave to work in a large library for a year. He replied, "I know John Marshall, head of the Humanities Division in the Rockefeller Foundation. I'll tell him about you when I return to New York." That sounded very encouraging, but I wondered if he would follow through. In a few days I received a letter from Mr. Marshall asking me to meet him in Toledo, and the result was that I was awarded a Rockefeller Fellowship for 1944-45. I chose to do my research in the New York Public Library.

In New York I met Oscar Cargill at New York University, who was interested in Whitman, and Oscar Lion, donator of a fine collection of Whitman books and manuscripts to the New York Public Library. I also met the editor of the *New York Times Book Review*, whom I asked why he had not published an article on Johannes V. Jensen, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature a few months earlier. He said he hadn't found anyone to write it; would I be interested? My wife and I had studied Jensen because he was an admirer of Whitman and had translated some of his poems. With her help I wrote an essay on Jensen, which was held until Knopf published a translation of Jensen's epic novel *The Long Journey* in the spring of '45.

In January 1946 Hendricks House published my *Walt Whitman Handbook*. It had been poorly copy-edited and contained typographical errors. I had hoped it would be reviewed by scholarly journals, but to my great surprise, in spite of the unknown publisher and the typos (not

to mention the title), it was reviewed on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review*, and also received favorable reviews in *The Saturday Review* by Willard Thorpe and in *The New York Herald-Tribune Books* by Delancey Ferguson. Oscar Cargill was delighted with the book and decided he would like to have me in his department. The reception of the *Handbook* and my essay-review on Jensen helped him get me appointed to New York University.

My discussion of Schyberg's contributions introduced him to American students and scholars of Whitman. Lionel Trilling was favorably impressed and advised the Columbia University Press to publish a translation of Schyberg's *Walt Whitman*. My wife had intended her translation only for my use, but she consented to revise it for publication if Schyberg himself would read her manuscript and correct any errors he found. He agreed, and the revision turned out to be more of a cooperative enterprise than we had expected because we found some errors in Schyberg's identifications of editions, and occasionally a better example for the point he was trying to make. He had actually not had access to the successive editions in Copenhagen and had had to rely on the Variorum in Holloway's edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which was a reprint of Trigg's compilation for the Putnam collected edition. The astonishing thing is that Schyberg could have done so much with so little.

Thus Evie Allison Allen's translation of Schyberg published in 1931 was really a revision. (I have deposited Schyberg's notes and corrections in the Manuscript Division of the Perkins Library at Duke University.) Though we had corresponded with Schyberg for several years, with a hiatus during the German occupation of Denmark, during which he was working in the "Underground," we had not yet met him, and unfortunately never did, for he died in August 1950, a few days after returning corrected proofs of the translation. He took an overdose of sleeping pills, whether intentionally or not no one knew. We did spend the following summer in Copenhagen, during which his friends gave a lavish dinner for Evie Allison Allen.

Schyberg's book not only gave me new ideas but also the ambition to write my own biography of Whitman. Oscar Cargill, editorial advisor to Macmillan, recommended my plans and Macmillan gave me a contract. (He would also have taken the *Handbook* if I had not already signed a contract with Hendricks.) In spite of the several biographies of Whitman in English, French, German, and South African, totaling forty or fifty in all, there were still myths, omissions, and inaccuracies in all of them, some perpetrated by the poet himself. The best biography published was Bliss Perry's in 1906. He had used all the documents available at the time but many were still in private hands and unavailable to him.

Whitman's letters and manuscripts were scattered, though Oscar Lion had given his fine collection to the New York Public Library. The Library of Congress had the Harned and Traubel Collections, and Duke University Library had the newly-formed Trent Collection. In addition to these Tom Hanley in Bradford, Pennsylvania, Milton Einstein in New York, and Charles Feinberg in Detroit, gave me unrestricted access to their valuable collections. The very important "Valentine" manuscripts had been purchased by Clifton Waller Barrett and given to the University of Virginia Library, but the dealer had permitted me to go through these manuscripts in New York before he sold them. Then while I was writing my book Professor Fredson Bowers shared with me his transcriptions of poems in the collection, including the hitherto unknown cycle of homosexual poems (see *The Solitary Singer* [abbreviated SS], pp. 222-228).

In recent years I have been accused of ignoring Whitman's homosexuality. Although I preferred the term "homoerotic," this was not because I denied his homosexual nature, but because I thought many of his manly-love poems were fantasies, rather than literally autobiographical. In these poems he feared his love would not be returned, or he would not find the lover he sought. Schyberg thought, correctly I still believe, that if Whitman had found the completely satisfactory lover he would not have written so many "yearning" poems. Also it cannot be denied that he felt guilt and "evil" in himself (see "Confession and Warning," SS, p. 218), though in other poems he beligerently asserted his homosexual nature: "I am as I am." Of course Whitman lived at a time when homosexuality was not tolerated, and an important part of his biography is the effect this intolerance had on him. By the time Whitman denied to Symonds that the "Calamus" poems were homosexual, he had given up fighting the intolerance. But during the period of his most acute suffering he wrote some great poems that rival Shakespeare's homosexual sonnets, such as "When I Heard at the Close of Day . . ." (SS, p. 223).

Back to the writing and publication of *The Solitary Singer*: A Guggenheim Fellowship, a sabbatical leave from NYU, and an ACLS grant enabled me to complete the manuscript in the spring of 1953. The publisher's readers were enthusiastic, and early in July Eve and I went happily off to Copenhagen for the summer. Then on my birthday, August 23, I received a letter from the president of Macmillan saying that the problem of the length of my manuscript had come to his attention. He did not think it would be profitable to publish the book in two volumes, and it was too long for one. That letter spoiled my birthday, but after I had returned home and re-read my manuscript, I decided I could improve it by condensation—not cutting but writing more concisely.

The delay in publishing *The Solitary Singer* (my wife's title) had advantages I had not fully anticipated. I knew the centenary of the first *Leaves of Grass* would be celebrated by the media, but I had not anticipated the extent of the coverage. My book came out in January and was immediately reviewed on front pages of book reviews from coast to coast. I was invited to appear on radio and TV programs; Channel 13 gave me a full hour for an illustrated lecture on Whitman, for which I received a flood of fan-mail. I also received the Tamiment Award (the last time it was given!), which was delivered by W. H. Auden, and several other prizes. I soon tired of talking to women's clubs, but was pleased by an invitation to give a lecture at the Library of Congress, to be followed by lectures by Mark Van Doren and David Daiches. (LC is still selling copies of these lectures.<sup>3</sup>) Most unexpected of all was the decision by the Exchange of Persons branch of the U.S. State Department to send me (and William Faulkner) to Japan to attend a conference at Nagano and then give lectures on Whitman at the U.S.I.A. libraries and to university audiences. (Faulkner attended only the Nagano conference.)

The publicity director at Macmillan estimated that *The Solitary Singer* received more press coverage than any other book published in 1955. One might think that it would have been a "best seller," but all that it proved was that publicity does not sell a "scholarly" book. After 10,000 copies, sales tapered off. However, Grove Press brought it out in paperback in both the U.S. and England, and in 1967 the New York University Press began reprinting it. It has never been out of print, and in 1985 the University of Chicago Press reprinted it in paperback.

In 1975 I thoroughly revised the *Walt Whitman Handbook*, calling it *New* to distinguish it from the Hendricks editions which had been reprinted five times, even though I had not been given a chance to correct errors. The original copyright had expired, thus permitting me to copyright a revised edition. I brought the biography and editions chapters up to date, eliminating the awkward chapter on "The Great Chain of Being," and I wrote a new chapter on more pertinent "ideas" in *Leaves of Grass*. I did not have enough new ideas about Whitman's literary techniques to rewrite that chapter, but I greatly expanded the final chapter on Whitman and World Literature.

Meanwhile the ambitious *Collected Writings of Walt Whitman* had been conceived in innocence and nurtured with pragmatic concessions to original sin, bibliographically speaking. In the autumn of 1955, after my return from Japan, Filmore Hyde, the "gung-ho" Director of the New York University Press, asked me to suggest an important Whitman project for the press. I told him a new edition of Whitman's writings was needed. The ten-volume Complete Writings published by Putnam in 1902 was far from complete and not professionally edited. But I

cautioned that to prepare and publish such an edition would be costly and would require large subsidies. Mr. Hyde brushed aside the financial difficulties and said, "Let's do it!" So we signed a contract in the spotlight of publicity.

I had not yet recovered from the euphoria of my 1955 triumphs, and so I agreed to act as General Editor for the new edition. But I soon realized that those duties would leave me no time for other writings, and there were still biographies I wanted to write. Furthermore, though I had done some editing, I realized that it was not what I did best or most enjoyed. So I invited Sculley Bradley, Provost for Academic Affairs at the University of Pennsylvania, to share the General Editorship, and he accepted with enthusiasm. We selected an Advisory Editorial Board, which helped us plan the separate volumes and select editors for them.

I need not list all the editors and editions selected because they have all been published (a total of twenty-two volumes), except for the journalism. Because of delays and unsolved problems, such as identifying anonymous editorials and articles, this unit was finally severed from the New York University edition. Herbert Bergman still expects to publish it with the Michigan State University Press.

The great unknown was Whitman's unpublished diaries, notebooks, and manuscripts, some of which Emory Holloway had published in fragments and unscholarly editions. Cleveland Rodgers had also edited two volumes of editorials, but many had not yet been identified. In writing my biography I had of course examined all the manuscript material I could find in institutions and private hands, but some of it was being traded and was difficult to trace. Charles Feinberg was building his large collection, but he himself did not have a complete catalogue of his holdings. He readily agreed to our publishing everything he had. Otherwise it would have been impossible to do a *complete* new edition, and he urged us to make it complete.

I assigned William White and Edward Grier to edit the manuscripts, expecting them to work in collaboration, but with White in Detroit and Grier in Kansas, this proved to be difficult—even with the use of Xerox, which had recently come into use. So I agreed for White to edit *Daybooks and Notebooks* from manuscripts in Feinberg's collection, and for Grier to edit the remaining manuscripts, many in the Library of Congress, which we finally called *Notebooks and Unpublished Manuscripts*. But instead of filling two volumes, as I had inaccurately estimated, the LC manuscripts filled *six*. I knew we would be accused of printing the poet's laundry lists, but we had publicized that promise to include everything, and Mr. Feinberg continued to insist that we could not do less. Actually the critical reception of Grier's volumes was better than I had feared, except for a pounding by the *London Times Literary*

*Supplement.* Most surprising of all, the NYU Press did not lose money on Grier's edition, or in fact on any of the twenty-two volumes of the CW.

We had already published seven volumes before the founding of the Center for Editions of American Authors, sponsored by the Modern Language Association and financed by the U.S. Government, with William Gibson as the director in New York. The Whitman edition was approved for inclusion in the CEAA program, and we applied for financial assistance for the editors of the remaining volumes. Immediately our rate of publication slowed up. Cynically, one might suspect that the editors wanted to milk Uncle Sam for all they could, but the snail's pace was more likely the result of the enormous paperwork required of every government-sponsored project.

Also there were arguments with the inspectors appointed by the Center to examine and award the seal approving the accuracy and quality of the editing. The Center approved a "clear text" (that is, not cluttered by footnote numbers or brackets), but it insisted that absolutely everything should be recorded and every emendation recorded in an appendix. Although a worthy ideal, this could sometimes become pedantic.

The first two volumes of Miller's *Correspondence* had already been published, and he had "sinned" by some very slight violations of bibliographical "purity." First, Whitman was very inconsistent in recording the place and date of his letters. Miller conventionalized the heading, a common practice in many standard editions of letters. Whitman was also very inconsistent in using periods, often using a dash of varying length, somewhat as Emily Dickinson did in punctuating her poems. Some scholars argue that she had a system in the length of her dashes, but Whitman's dashes were apparently a nervous habit. He also was in the habit of writing a final "-ing" with a squiggle, a sort of short-hand for the word-ending. Miller simply printed these as "-ing," as Whitman himself did when he printed his MSS. The CEAA inspector demanded that Miller list every instance of these corrections—hundreds of them—in an appendix. Miller refused and I backed him up. So the *Correspondence* did not receive the seal.

With the *Variorum* we had so much difficulty that I think I will not try to tell the whole story here, except to say that after completing the superb edition of *Leaves of Grass* with Harold Blodgett and most of a manuscript for a *Variorum*, Bradley began losing his memory, which a few years later became total. He had the printer set up the *Variorum* MS before it was inspected—and rejected. Since I trusted Bradley's judgment on this edition, I did not insist on an inspection first—that was my mistake. With the help of Arthur Golden and William White we finally doctored three-fourths of the MS so that it could be published—with

the seal. For the last two-thirds of the volumes of the *CW* it was useless for me to try to consult Bradley, though I kept his name on the title page as co-General Editor. He was a valued friend and I appreciated the work he had done for the edition before he became incapacitated.

During the publication of the *Collected Writings* the New York University Press had six directors. All but the last, who is still in office, were dismissed by University officials for real or imagined financial incompetence. I personally liked all of them and was sorry for the changes—especially the one who after too many martinis in a swank Italian restaurant insulted a man at the next table, not knowing that he was head of the Mafia in Greenwich Village. The manager had his bouncer escort this director to the street and warned him not to come back. Actually, he was not the only director too fond of cocktails at lunch, and I learned to get important decisions made in the morning.

This account may leave the impression that Walt Whitman was only a project for me, and perhaps that was true of my first studies of him. I never became enamored of him as a personality, as most of the collectors I knew did. In fact, the strange thing about Whitman is that he was so ordinary, preferring uneducated men for friends and, he vainly hoped, for his readers. He knew how to communicate with them in his letters, but not in his poems, which have always been appreciated mainly by poets, artists, musicians, and gifted authors. He liked to pose as the non-artist, and for a long time critics took him as his word.

In 1955 Charles Davis and I edited a small volume of *Walt Whitman's Poems* with an Introduction in which we tried to call attention to his artistry. At that time T. S. Eliot and the American "New Critics" were flying high, and they had a low opinion of Whitman's poems—and, of course, like every major poet he did write some poor ones. Then in 1952, Randall Jarrell, a prestigious poet-critic, published an article in the *Kenyon Review* calling attention to the skill and power of his best poems. His method was to quote passages and say to the reader, "Just listen to it!" And many did. Today almost everyone regards Walt Whitman as America's greatest poet. I would like to think that *The Solitary Singer* turned the tide, but I suspect Jarrell had more influence in the change.

## NOTES

1 "Biblical Echoes in Whitman's Works," *American Literature* 6 (November 1934), 302-315.

2 "Sidney Lanier as a Literary Critic," *Philological Quarterly* 17 (April 1938), 121-148.

3 "Walt Whitman: Man, Poet, Philosopher," Three Lectures . . . Gay Wilson Allen, Mark Van Doren, David Daiches (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1955).