

REVIEW

Gay Wilson Allen. *The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman*. With a new Preface. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985. xxii, 616 pp. Paperback. \$15.95.

Gay Wilson Allen. *The New Walt Whitman Handbook*. With a new Introduction and Selected Bibliography. New York: New York University Press, 1986. xxxvi, 423 pp. Paperback. \$15.00

For the Whitman scholar, these two publications represent wisdom reissued in paperback. Though produced by different presses, the books look like a matched set; they are the same large-format size, and both are handsomely designed with striking sepia-tone photos of Whitman (Gabriel Harrison's 1854 daguerreotype and Frederick Gutekunst's 1880 portrait) on their white covers. And they *should* be a matched set: they are the critical works that we can safely say must be on every Whitman scholar's shelf; no other critical books have had the impact on Whitman scholarship that these two have. If we were to imagine a Whitman scholar stranded on a desert island, allowed to take only two secondary works to accompany the twenty-two volumes of *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman* (the general editor of which is, of course, Gay Wilson Allen), these would be the ones. And now, in their paperback incarnations, they are more portable than ever. Many lingering typographical errors have been corrected, and both books contain useful and illuminating new material in their prefaces.

The Solitary Singer remains the definitive biography of Whitman. Justin Kaplan's *Walt Whitman: A Life* (1980) brought Whitman's life back to the attention of a wide public, but it offered few new facts and virtually no interpretation of the poetry—it simply is not a critical biography, but rather a fetching narrative of the life, with some good insights into the relationship of Whitman's fiction to his family situation, with a fine analysis of Whitman's response to the Civil War, and with a useful exploration of Whitman's troubled relationship with Harry Stafford. In his new Preface, Allen discusses the biographical contributions of Kaplan and of Paul Zweig, whose *Walt Whitman: The Making of a Poet* offered some brilliant and imaginative insights into Whitman's life from the 1840s through the Civil War and ways that the life generated the poetry; Allen judges that Zweig has made the greatest recent contribution to Whitman biography.

Allen makes some other important observations in his preface. He acknowledges that much recent commentary about Whitman's sexuality challenges his characterization of Whitman as a "homoerotic" but not necessarily a homosexual poet, but he goes on to suggest that the shift in cultural attitudes away from viewing homosexuality as a sickness or disorder has made the distinction unimportant anyway. Allen notes that most of the advances in Whitman studies in the past generation have been in editing and bibliography, not in biography. That is true enough, though we do need to acknowledge the biographical contribution that the publication of Whitman's correspondence, daybooks, journals, notebooks, etc., has made,

especially the illuminating notes that Edwin Haviland Miller, Edward Grier, and William White offer about specific relationships the poet had with various people named in the correspondence and notebooks.

The New Walt Whitman Handbook still maps the major regions of Whitman scholarship: the evolution of Whitman biography, the growth of *Leaves of Grass*, the realm of Whitman's ideas, Whitman's poetic style and techniques, and Whitman's influence on world literature. Virtually every book on Whitman that has appeared since the *Handbook* owes an essential debt to one or more of these chapters, which have been so fully absorbed into the critical debate that they now read like common sense. Allen's new introduction to the volume contains an entertaining history of the *Handbook* itself, detailing its odd development and its several incarnations. Allen also offers a solid review of the important scholarship since 1975, singling out C. Carroll Hollis's *Language and Style in Leaves of Grass* (1983) as the major advance in understanding Whitman's literary techniques, and detailing the most recent plans for the ongoing project of *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman*. Finally, Allen adds a substantial discussion of Whitman's growing influence in China.

The "Selected Bibliography 1975-1985" contains a nice mix of the established senior Whitman scholars and the emerging new generation of critics; both groups have produced an impressively wide range of work in the past decade. Allen notes that there is no clear "direction" in Whitman scholarship, but that an immense amount of work is being done. It seems to be an exciting time of critical composting, a churning preparation, perhaps, for the emergence of a new epoch-making book.

The *Handbook*—in one version or another—has been with us for forty years, the *Solitary Singer* for thirty. Reading through these two books again, I recognized just how much Whitman scholarship in our time has been an extended set of annotations to and embellishments of the information and insights contained here. Clearly these volumes form the backdrop against which the last thirty years of commentary on Whitman must be read. To go back to them now is to experience the firm ground of fact and solid perception that lies beneath the vast accumulation of scholarly materials that have appeared since the centenary of *Leaves of Grass*. The magnitude of Gay Wilson Allen's influence on Whitman scholarship is something like Whitman's influence on American poetry: it is everywhere, acknowledged and unacknowledged, argued with and embraced, impossible to ignore. In their new paperback issue, these books should now make their way into advanced classes studying Whitman, where they can instruct and inspire the next generation of Whitman scholars.