REVIEWS

NICK SELBY, ed. *The Poetry of Walt Whitman: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. 175 pp.

For anyone curious about the critical history of Whitman's poetry, Selby's book presents a colorful and fascinating account. From the formidable mass of analyses inspired by the poet and his work this guide reprints approximately thirty selections or excerpts and intersperses them with commentary by the editor. The account spans 150 years—from the remarks provoked by the first (1855) edition of *Leaves of Grass* to the deconstructive readings of the present day.

In his opening chapter, Selby surveys nineteenth-century critical reaction to Whitman's poetry. Mainly he reprints extracts—some appreciative, some dyspeptic—from the earliest responses to *Leaves of Grass*. Given prominence are reviews by Charles A. Dana, Charles Eliot Norton, and Edward Everett Hale, among others. Selby also includes Emerson's celebrated letter greeting Whitman "at the beginning of a great career," a review written (but unsigned) by the poet himself, and a lengthy section from John Robertson's *Walt Whitman: Poet and Democrat* (1884). These early criticisms, Selby declares, "set the tone and terms for subsequent analyses of [the poet's] work."

Chapter two focuses on Whitman's literary reputation in the early twentieth century. Highlighted are the generally mixed critical assessments of John Addington Symonds, George Santayana, Ezra Pound, and D. H. Lawrence. Chapters three and four carry readers up to mid-century, even a little beyond, with extracts from F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*, Charles Feidelson's *Symbolism and American Literature*, Randall Jarrell's "Some Lines from Whitman," R. W. B. Lewis's *The American Adam*, and Roy Harvey Pearce's *The Continuity of American Poetry*. Selby observes that by the 1960s some critics, notably Lewis and Pearce, regarded Whitman "as the central and defining American poet."

The editor covers the criticism of the second half of the twentieth century in his last three chapters. In chapter five, "Whitman, Cultural Materialism and 'Reconstructive' Readings," he presents abridged critical discussions that view Whitman's poetry as "a product of the cultural materials of mid-nineteenth-century America." These come from M. Wynn Thomas's *Lunar Light of Whitman's Poetry*, Ed Folsom's *Walt Whitman's Native Representations*, and David S. Reynolds's "Whitman and Nineteenth-Century Views of Gender and Sexuality." In chapter six, "Ideology and Desire: Whitman and Sexuality," he assembles passages from Malcolm Cowley's "Whitman: The Poet and the Mask," Robert K. Martin's *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry*, and his own essay entitled "'Queer Shoulders to the Wheel': Whitman, Ginsberg and a Bisexual Poetics." In chapter seven, "Ideology and Deconstruction: Whitman and 'New Americanist' Critiques," he presents ex-

cerpts from writings by Karen Sánchez-Eppler, Allen Grossman, and Jonathan Arac that argue that Whitman's centrality has come "to signify an America that is far less radical, far less democratic, and far more vexed than could ever have been supposed by earlier, more traditional, readings." From beginning to end, Selby strives to show that critical debate about Whitman "has reflected changing perceptions of America itself."

The Poetry of Walt Whitman is a useful guide. It might prove most worthwhile in college courses in which instructors and their students need a broad spectrum of critical opinion on Whitman but in a handy and inexpensive format. The selections are judiciously abbreviated and carefully transcribed, and Selby's comments on the reprinted materials are lucid and informative. In the last analysis, however, one must confess that the editor has produced *a* rather than *the* guide to essential Whitman criticism. There are certain problems with this anthology, and they result from misplaced emphases and outright omissions.

In the nineteenth century, for instance, Selby excludes or ignores William Douglas O'Connor's *The Good Gray Poet: A Vindication* (1866), Anne Gilchrist's "A Woman's Estimate of Walt Whitman" (1870), Edward Dowden's "The Poet of Democracy: Walt Whitman" (1871), and Richard Maurice Bucke's *Walt Whitman* (1883)—key statements all in the early criticism of Whitman's life and writings. Instead of foregrounding one or several of these works, Selby extols Robertson's *Walt Whitman: Poet and Democrat* (1884). Now Robertson is a noteworthy critic, and a strangely neglected one (not one reference to him appears in the *Whitman Encyclopedia*!), but is his book as germane as any of the criticisms just mentioned? And is it the first significant book on Whitman, as Selby claims? Most scholars would say that that distinction belongs to John Burroughs's *Notes on Walt Whitman, As Poet and Person*, or possibly O'Connor's 46-page *Good Gray Poet*.

Questions must also be raised about the twentieth-century commentaries. Selby's selections fail to take into account contributions made to Whitman criticism by modern, scholarly biography. There are no extracts from Gay Wilson Allen's *The Solitary Singer* (1955; Rev. ed. 1967), Roger Asselineau's *The Evolution of Walt Whitman* (1954; translated into English 1960-1962), Justin Kaplan's *Walt Whitman: A Life* (1980), or Jerome Loving's *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (1999). (Incidentally, can anyone put together a collection of "essential Whitman criticism" and include not one excerpt from the work of the late Gay Wilson Allen, the man who was frequently described as the dean of Whitman scholars?) There are no extracts from landmark psychological studies such as Edwin Haviland Miller's *Walt Whitman's Poetry* (1968), Stephen A. Black's *Walt Whitman's Journeys into Chaos* (1975), and David Cavitch's *My Soul and I* (1985). There are no extracts from books that had, in their day, lofty reputations—for example, Richard Chase's *Walt Whitman Reconsidered* (1955), James E. Miller, Jr.'s *A Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass* (1957), or V. K. Chari's *Whitman in the Light of Vedantic Mysticism* (1964). Finally, there are no extracts that accurately reflect Whitman's international dimension, his global appeal. Something might have been drawn from the kinds of criticism gathered in *Walt Whitman and the World* (1995), edited by Gay Wilson Allen and Ed Folsom, or in *Whitman East and West* (2002), also edited by Folsom.

The objections I have registered here may finally be unfair. Perhaps Nick Selby was quite aware of the books and articles cited above but felt forced to exclude them in order to remain within publisher-imposed page or word limits. Perhaps he could have reprinted far more extracts than he did but chose not to strive for a reader-unfriendly exhaustiveness. In the end he created a praiseworthy book, but its user should bear in mind that it does not relate the whole story.

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JUDITH GRACE. *Good-bye my Fancy: With Walt Whitman in His Last Days.* Oregon House, CA: Ulysses Books, 2004. 119 pp.

Judith Grace has had the excellent idea of sifting through the volumes of Horace Traubel's *With Walt Whitman in Camden* with a view to creating a literary-celebrity play in the tradition of Jerome Kilty's *Dear Liar* (1959), which brought Bernard Shaw and Mrs. Patrick Campbell on stage, Michael Hastings' *Tom and Viv* (1984), about the first marriage of T. S. Eliot, and several Oscar Wilde dramas. The result not only captures the alternately homely and fiery spirit of Traubel's monumental oral history project; it also strikes this reader as no mere closet drama. The *Leaves of Grass* sesquicentennial next year ought to inspire some enterprising producers to give *Good-bye my Fancy* a staging—if, that is, they can find skilled actors for the *tour de force* role of the voluble valetudinarian and the role of his wry, rather laconic young "background man."

Grace's "Dialogue in Three Parts" unfolds entirely in Whitman's Camden, New Jersey, upstairs bedroom-study on three evenings: in November 1890, on the poet's birthday the next year, and on his deathday, March 26, 1892. The first two parts are longer and contain most of the conversational drolleries and fireworks; the third part, necessarily, is shorter but offers several deeply affecting moments.

Walt predicted that Horace's busy note-taking would capture "the pulse and throb of the critter" he was better than any biographer could, and Grace has succeeded in preserving that pulse and throb while quilting together many choice patches of Mickle Street chat. "The poetic license is minimal," Robert MacIsaac (a co-editor of the last two *With Walt Whitman in Camden* volumes) accurately observes in his introduction. The most notable concession to theatrical license, he also grants, are the few instances in which Grace has Walt uncharacteristically recite lines from *Leaves of Grass*. "Song at Sunset" is movingly worked into Part II, as is the poem of the title in the denouement. Appended is a short informational essay on "Walt Whitman and Horace Traubel" by Thomas Fenn.

Good-bye my Fancy's chief pleasure and value are that it retires (at least temporarily) that benign eminence, the Famous Good Gray Poet, and introduces a mercurially witty, angry, quizzical, clear-eyed, weary-bodied, or passionate Walt—a Walt far more candid than he ever would have been in the formal public utterances of his last decade.