

REVIEWS

JOHN HARMON McELROY, ed. *The Sacrificial Years: A Chronicle of Walt Whitman's Experiences in the Civil War*. Boston: David R. Godine, 1999. xxiv + 168 pp.

This is a handsome and well-made book, the kind we have come to expect from the publisher David R. Godine, whose 1971 edition of *Specimen Days* is one of the most beautiful Whitman books ever printed. John Harmon McElroy's *The Sacrificial Years* reprints many of the Civil War photographs and portraits of Whitman that appeared in the Godine *Specimen Days*, and, while the quality of the reproductions is not quite up to the stunning standard of the earlier volume, this book is one that all Whitman collectors will want to add to their shelf of fine editions.

McElroy sets out here to create "a diary-like narrative" of the Civil War, using Whitman's letters, notebooks, journalism, and the Civil War passages in *Specimen Days* to construct a chronological prose account of Whitman's experiences in and reactions to the war. Readers familiar with Whitman's work will immediately want to compare this book to two earlier gatherings of Whitman's Civil War writings, Charles I. Glicksberg's *Walt Whitman and the Civil War* (1933) and Walter Lowenfels's *Walt Whitman's Civil War* (1961). McElroy claims in his introduction that "the Glicksberg and Lowenfels compilations, because they mixed poetry and prose and separated their materials by topic, thwart the reader interested in having a diary-like narrative." The chronological arrangement is vital, McElroy contends, because it allows him "to construct a semblance of the diary Whitman regretted not having kept during that period." McElroy does not explain the nature of that regret (nor does he cite where or when Whitman expressed it), and he does not deal with the complex history of Whitman's *Memoranda During the War* (1875), which Whitman considered his substantive account of the war, what he called "a book of the time, worthy the time—something considerably beyond mere hospital sketches." (McElroy only briefly mentions *Memoranda* in one note in his introduction and, surprisingly, does not include it in his list of sources.)

While it is true that Glicksberg and Lowenfels do not arrange material in a strictly chronological way, both editors do offer a rough chronological account. Glicksberg begins with Whitman's then-forgotten "City Photographs" articles published in the New York *Leader* in the spring of 1862 and moves through other newspaper pieces published in 1864 and 1865, then offers a gathering of letters to various correspondents, diary notes and jottings, and finally writings about Lincoln's death. Lowenfels offers an even more coherent gathering, beginning with Whitman in New York City at the start of the war, moving to his reactions to the attack on Fort Sumter and the First Battle of Bull Run, following Whitman to the Fredericksburg battlefield, then departing from strict chro-

nology to gather descriptions of life in wartime Washington, descriptions of hospitals and wounded soldiers, descriptions of the war in letters to his mother and to other soldiers, accounts of prison camps, black soldiers, Confederates, and army officers, ending with Whitman's views on Lincoln and his summaries of the significance of the war. I find Lowenfels's arrangement more effective than a strict chronological arrangement, since Whitman's often fragmentary insights about a wide variety of events, personages, and issues are often best understood in relationship to the other things he said about each particular topic. If coherence is the goal, a thematic structure works better.

Still, there is something to be gained by arranging the material by date, and McElroy's construction leads to a strikingly different account than those to which we have become accustomed. It is, however, a very selective gathering of material, and I'm left wondering what a chronological account would look like that included *all* the available material. As it is, McElroy ignores many illuminating Civil War passages and excises key parts of the material he does quote. So, for example, in the June 1863 section, he quotes from Whitman's letter to his mother about Lincoln but leaves out the poet's amazing description of the president's face: "I had a good view of the President last evening. He looks more careworn even than usual, his face with deep cut lines, seams, and his *complexion gray* through very dark skin—a curious looking man, very sad." McElroy quotes, from the same letter, a brief passage about black troops ("There are getting to be *many black troops*. There is one very good regt. here black as tar; they go around, have the regular uniform—they submit to no nonsense. Others are constantly forming. It is getting to be a common sight."), but he ignores Whitman's remarkable account of his visit to the First Regiment U.S. Colored Troops the following month, where the poet struggles in detail with his feelings about black Union soldiers. The fragmentary mentions of race in the McElroy book would be far more illuminating if presented together and along with Whitman's other Civil War comments on race. And, in any case, the excisions leave the chronology incomplete. We can imagine that one revelation of a careful chronological arrangement would be a full record of what Civil War battles, figures, and issues Whitman responded to and which he remained silent about, but McElroy's chronicle is too selective to be a reliable provider of that data.

It is not clear just what McElroy believes is gained by excluding all poetry from the chronicle. He does include some of Whitman's journal entries that are rough notes for poems, like the description of the church-become-hospital after the battle of White Oaks Church; Whitman later turns these notes into "A March in the Ranks, Hard-Prest." The absence of the actual poem does not enhance the chronological effect; in fact, the journal entry seems diminished by the absence (since it isn't allowed to flower into the poem it points toward). Another revelation of the chronological arrangement might have been an order of composition and set of historical circumstances for many of the *Drum-Taps* poems, but that chronology is silenced here.

Whitman himself seemed relatively unconcerned about chronology in his Civil War writings. He liked the clutter and fragmentation of his notes and talked proudly of his "little notebooks for impromptu jottings in pencil" where he "briefed cases, persons, sights, occurrences in camp, by the bedside, and not seldom by the corpses of the dead." He had "dozens of such little note-

books left, forming a special history of those years for myself alone, full of associations never to be possibly said or sung,” and he emphasized the random nature of his accounts, describing his book as “about the scenes, war, camp, hospitals &c (especially the &c.).” Contrary to McElroy’s claim that Whitman “regretted” not having kept a detailed chronological diary, his real regret was, as he said at the beginning of *Specimen Days*, that he could not “convey to the reader the associations that attach to these soiled and creased livraisons, each composed of a sheet or two of paper folded small enough to carry in the pocket and fastened with a pin.” Whitman maintained that he wanted to “leave them just as I threw them by after the war, blotched here and there with more than one bloodstain, hurriedly written,” and he claimed the Civil War passages in *Specimen Days* “are verbatim copies of those lurid and blood-smutch’d little note-books.” His point is that the debris of his notes is part and parcel of the war itself, that the fragmentation and confusion of the notebooks comprise a metonym of the “real war” that he was convinced would “never get in the books.”

Whitman clearly could live with debris and fragmentation more easily than most of his readers have been able to. Many readers, from Whitman’s day to our own, have tried to “improve” his work—make it more coherent, unified, linear—by rearranging, excerpting, excising, and even rewriting it. There is a long history of versions of his work that are unlike anything he himself published, reconstructions that various editors have argued are improvements over what the hopelessly careless and cluttered and indiscriminate Walt Whitman left us. Editors from his time to ours have therefore disparaged parts of his work, omitted offensive passages, recombined versions of his prose and poetry to create “improved” finished work that he was apparently incapable of creating on his own. McElroy’s book is part of this understandable but unfortunate tendency to rewrite Whitman. By taking parts of work from disparate sources and cutting and pasting them to form a neat chronological prose diary, McElroy undermines the fragmented and jumbled effect that Whitman worked so hard to achieve. It’s interesting to see, year by year, what Whitman had to say about the war, but it’s also important to remind ourselves that, finally, this is not Whitman’s chronicle we are reading.

We need to return to the challenge of encountering Whitman’s own odd structurings, less “finished” though they may be, and we need to learn to read the clutter—to discover what the unconventional forms themselves have to tell us about Whitman’s historical moment and about ourselves—instead of becoming editor-reincarnations of Mary Oakes Davis. Mrs. Davis, of course, was Whitman’s housekeeper who tidied up the chaos of his room, discarding papers and neatly stacking the ones she deemed worth keeping. Her efforts left the poet at a loss, unable to find anything, since for him things weren’t recovered through an orderly filing system, but rather, as in the sea, by what rose to the surface at any given moment, the result of currents and tides and swells the precise workings of which were impossible to fathom.

In his introduction to the Godine edition of *Specimen Days*, Alfred Kazin began by celebrating Whitman’s prose as an “untidy package.” This new Godine edition of Whitman’s prose, then, is a repackaging and a tidying-up. Many readers will no doubt welcome the linear time-line; this reader, after reading

through the new version, is happy to let the rearranged prose diffuse back into its beautiful, scattered, confusing, untidy, original packages.

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ROGER ASSELINEAU. *The Evolution of Walt Whitman: An Expanded Edition*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999. xiv + 376 + 392 pp.

Augmented by a retrospective "Introduction" by the author and an evaluative "Foreword" by Ed Folsom, this reprinting of Roger Asselineau's *Evolution of Walt Whitman* is only the latest development in a French scholar's sixty-year journey with a great American poet. Asselineau encountered Whitman's poems quite by chance in the early 1940s. Struck by their "extraordinary appearance..., strength and irrepressible dynamism," he set off, amid the perils of World War II, on a long and rewarding course of study. By 1953, at the Université de Paris-Sorbonne, he was defending his doctoral dissertation, a massive study published the following year by Marcel Didier and entitled *L'Évolution de Walt Whitman: Après la première édition des Feuilles d'herbe*. Some years later, assisted by Richard P. Adams and Burton L. Cooper, Asselineau translated his book into English. Harvard University Press published the translation in two volumes: *The Evolution of Walt Whitman: The Creation of a Personality* (1960) and *The Evolution of Walt Whitman: The Creation of a Book* (1962). This two-part study was hailed almost immediately as a standard resource, as well as a major contribution to the effort to view the poet and his writings less hagiographically, more objectively.

Like its earlier incarnations, the new, two-volumes-in-one Iowa edition of *Evolution* presents a biographical introduction to Whitman. It also discusses the poet's principal themes: mysticism, metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, sexuality, patriotism, democracy, slavery, and industrialism. Finally, it comments on Whitman's style, language, and prosody. Among the book's most distinctive features is Asselineau's attention to the developmental aspects of Whitman's poetry. *Leaves of Grass*, he declares, "is too often studied as a unit and critics tend to forget that it represents forty years of assiduous experimentation, that Whitman was thirty years old when he began, and that he was an old man when he stopped." Another distinctive feature is Asselineau's thesis, which contends that homosexuality is the key to Whitman's personality and poetry. Whitman struggled with "wild homosexual desires," Asselineau argues, and "it was probably his art which saved him by permitting him to express...the turbulent passions which obsessed him." Therefore, "his poetry is not the song of a demigod or a superman, as some of his admirers would have it, but the sad chant of a sick soul seeking passionately to understand and to save itself." It is now quite clear that subsequent criticism on Whitman was much influenced by Asselineau's emphasis on Whitman's sexuality and his persistent, and sometimes agitated, poetic growth.

The Evolution of Walt Whitman is, on one hand, a classic critical work. One associates it with the origins of modern Whitman biography and criticism and thus connects it to such mid-century studies as Gay Wilson Allen's *Walt Whitman*