



Gay Wilson Allen at the Whitman Centennial Conference, The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, March, 1992

GAY WILSON ALLEN, 1903-1995

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, when two of Gay Wilson Allen's classic works of scholarship—his biography of Walt Whitman, *The Solitary Singer*, and his *New Walt Whitman Handbook*—had been reissued in new paperback editions, I wrote in a review that Whitman scholarship for the previous forty years had been in large part a set of extended footnotes to Allen's monumental work. Reviewing his remarkable scholarly career again now on the occasion of his death, I'm more convinced than ever that there are few areas in Whitman scholarship that Gay Allen did not map out years, often decades, before others began to do the necessary detail work.

Gay Allen was born just over a decade after Whitman's death. It is astonishing to realize that Allen's first published piece on Whitman (1933) appeared twenty years closer to Whitman's death than to his own. Allen's work on Whitman, in other words, has spanned well over half of the hundred-plus years since the poet lived. He led the generation of scholars who moved the study of Whitman out of the hagiographic period and helped invent the modern (and even post-modern) Whitman that all of us work with today.

Few biographies have had the staying power of *The Solitary Singer* (1955), still considered by most scholars to be the most reliable and complete life, forty years after its publication. And this in a field that has hardly been moribund: well over a hundred books on Whitman have appeared since *Solitary Singer*, with over sixty in the past ten years alone, but none of them has eclipsed Allen's work. The most common criticism of the biographies that have appeared since Allen's is that, while they have added some important information about Whitman's life, they have not in any way refigured Allen's essential analysis of how Whitman's life led to his poetry and how the poetry informed the life. It is perhaps a critical heresy to say such things these days, but it certainly seems that Gay Allen simply got it right back in 1955.

The quality about Gay Allen that I most admired was his refusal ever to rest on his very significant accomplishments. He continually entered new fields and seemed to master them effortlessly, and he continually returned to his already published work and opened it up again, revising and updating it. For him, a book was never done but rather was in an endless state of evolution—his 1946 *Walt Whitman Handbook* became the *New Walt Whitman Handbook* in 1975, and was thoroughly revised again in 1986. I was involved with Gay Allen literally up to the day of his death in another of his efforts to keep his work fresh and up to date. In the same year that he published *Solitary Singer*, he also issued a groundbreaking book called *Walt Whitman Abroad*, a collection of re-

sponses to Whitman from various foreign cultures. Gay contacted me in 1990 to ask if I would be interested in joining him on a "revision" of that book. As we discussed the project, it became clear to both of us that we would need to start from scratch because of the explosion of international scholarship about Whitman and translations of his work during the thirty-five years since *Walt Whitman Abroad* had been published. As we began the project, Gay was entering his 88th year, but it came as no surprise to me that he embraced, with the same energy that had defined all of his sixty post-PhD years, the daunting prospect of taking on once again Whitman's worldwide influence, complete with the organization of an international team of editors who would gather materials from over twenty different cultures.

From the day we began the project until the day he died, Gay gently pushed me to keep up with his unwavering and impressive pace. My files contain over a hundred letters from him concerning the book, which we decided to call *Walt Whitman and the World*. The last letter, written a couple of months before he died, was as lucid, generous, and informative as the first one I received from him twenty years ago, when, as a new PhD with no publications on Whitman, I wrote with some trepidation to ask him a few questions and was shocked to receive a six-page single-spaced typed response. Whenever I come across that first letter from Gay, I still shake my head in amazement: he set very high standards for this field, and, just as importantly, he set a tone of generosity and helpfulness rare in any field. I was halfway through the final proofs of *Whitman and the World* when I got word that Gay had died. I was able, at the last minute, to add a final dedication:

Gay Wilson Allen died while this book was in press. The contributors of *Walt Whitman and the World* join me in dedicating this, his last book, to him. For half a century, he towered above the field of Whitman studies and was a friend and mentor to hundreds of scholars worldwide. His generosity of spirit was legendary. He will be missed. He had been anxious to see this book appear; it was his labor of love during his final years. Well, Gay, now that you've set out on your cosmic journey, the ultimate open road, here it is. This book is not only *by* you, it's *for* you. Allons!

It is somehow fitting that, after sixty very active years of publishing and revising and updating, Gay Wilson Allen died with a book still in press. Let his relentless energy, his desire to make his work continually more illuminating, be his epitaph and his legacy. His books defy the brief half-life of most scholarship and continue to be read half a century after they were published; they promise to be read for decades to come.

What follows is a group of brief tributes to Gay Wilson Allen from various Whitman scholars who learned from him, worked with him, and cared deeply for him.

Ed Folsom

Roger Asselineau:

I made the acquaintance of Gay Allen in 1946, shortly after the appearance of his *Walt Whitman Handbook*, the first systematic and exhaustive study of Whitman's poetry and a book that was a great help to the beginner I then was. At the time, I was doing my research at Harvard for the doctoral dissertation I was preparing for the Sorbonne. By a happy coincidence I spent all my vacations with friends who lived in New Jersey almost next door to Gay. I thus could visit him, and we struck up a friendship which was to last almost fifty years. Far from resenting the intrusion of a foreigner upon his territory, he most generously welcomed me with open arms.

From then on, we corresponded assiduously, and he received me in his home whenever I went to New York. We followed parallel lines, which, contrary to what happens in Euclidean geometry, often met. His *Solitary Singer* appeared almost at the same time as the French edition of my *Evolution of Walt Whitman*. He then invited me to contribute to his study of the impact of *Leaves of Grass* abroad and appointed me to the editorial board of the *Collected Writings of Walt Whitman*, which he initiated and supervised. He even invited me to co-author his last book, a biography of St. John de Crevecoeur. Actually, it was not quite his last book, since there was another in press, an updated and much enlarged edition of his *Walt Whitman Abroad—Walt Whitman and the World*. It grieves me to think that he won't see it.

Like all Whitman scholars, I owe him a great debt. He set an example for all of us. The impeccable scholarship of his books, the lucidity and clarity of his criticism, the harmonious combination of detachment and admiration of his approach—all are indeed exemplary.

Antony, France

V. K. Chari:

When in 1959 I came to New York University as a Fulbright Fellow from India to carry out post-doctoral work on Whitman, Gay Wilson Allen took warm interest in me and readily lent me all the support and encouragement I needed. He showed the same interest in me over the years and did me many personal favors. But nothing I could ever say to him by way of formal acknowledgment could adequately express the affection I felt for him.

Gay Wilson Allen has touched the hearts of generations of young scholars by the deep humanity and magnanimity of his nature. His critical tolerance and his friendly and receptive attitude toward people and ideas from across the world have endeared him to all those who came into contact with him. His generosity extended to all comers to the field of Whitman studies, great and small; in every contribution to scholarship he saw something of value. He had no adversaries. He looked for friends and found them ready for him in all

lands, one may say, echoing Whitman—who undoubtedly left his signature on his mind and character.

Ottawa, Canada

Arthur Golden:

Those familiar with Gay Allen's affable, laid-back, generous, courtly style wonder where all those definitive biographies of Whitman, William James, Emerson, and Crevecoeur, all those critical studies, handbooks, essays, reviews, and speeches, and all those personal letters came from. Take a look at the bibliography of Gay's work that Edwin H. Miller compiled in a book (*The Artistic Legacy of Walt Whitman*) presented to Gay upon his retirement from New York University. And that was in 1970!

Behind that very genuine pleasantness, there was a no-nonsense iron discipline, and behind that discipline was his wife of 59 years, Evie Allison Allen, a charming, gracious woman who not only maintained a very comfortable home for them in Oradell, New Jersey, but who also over the years translated for Gay works in Danish and other languages, helped with his research, catalogued his notes, typed his manuscripts through their several drafts, and compiled the indexes to his books (they had no computer). Gay did not exaggerate in his dedication of *The Solitary Singer*: "To Evie, as much her book as the author's."

Four o'clock tea at the Allens' was invariably the occasion for a comprehensive overview of the American scene, generally negative, especially their assessments of organized religion, fundamentalism, and Washington politicians. Gay was 85 when Evie died in 1988. With her death, it was in many ways all over for him. He sold the house in Oradell and moved back to his native North Carolina, where, with the invaluable help of his sister Mary, he maintained to the end a comfortable apartment in Raleigh.

Gay was 88 when he read his last paper at the 1992 Whitman Centennial Conference in Iowa City. At the evening banquet he listened carefully to what was purported to be a wax-cylinder recording of Whitman's voice, reading one of his late poems. The poem, Gay said, was simply awful. Nor did he believe that the voice was Whitman's. "I nominate Thomas Edison for both," was his summary evaluation.

Maribor, Slovenia

Jerome Loving:

I first "met" Gay Wilson Allen in the spring of 1971, when I was a student in Clarence Gohdes's last graduate Whitman seminar at Duke (which is where I first met, or came to appreciate, Whitman and his *Leaves of Grass*). This first meeting with Gay was textual, for that's when I read his incredibly comprehensive and critical biography, *The Solitary Singer*. I met Gay in person about a year later at Duke, when he spoke to Arlin Turner's graduate class. Gay had

(still has) a sister in Raleigh, and he would come down from New York every spring to see her and renew his North Carolina roots, for he was a graduate of Duke at the bachelor's and master's levels.

He was one of the most generous scholars I have ever known. When I went to Texas, he became my mentor by mail and read everything I wrote for publication through my *Emerson, Whitman, and the American Muse* (1982). While writing that book, I profited from his generosity in allowing me to read the chapters of his Emerson biography as he produced them. He thanked me in the preface of *Waldo Emerson* (1981), but I was the one helped, not he. In 1976, during the Texas A&M's centennial celebrations, he participated in our symposium on the frontier. The program also hosted Henry Nash Smith, Howard Lamar, Arlin Turner, and other scholars. Gay's paper was on "Song of the Redwood Tree," which he found ecologically absurd during the nation's second centennial.

I visited Gay several times at his home in Oradell, New Jersey. The entire second floor of the house in the back was his study, lined with books and mementoes of Whitman and other writers. He owned a first edition of Emerson's *Nature* and three copies of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*—at least one of them the very rare first issue. Once I had tea with Gay and his wife Evie Allen, also a scholar.

Gay was a gentleman and a scholar long before this expression became hackneyed. I'm sure his students loved him for both his gentleness and his wisdom. I owe him a large debt.

College Station, Texas

Edwin Haviland Miller:

After several weeks of initial alert, then waiting daily for reports, in August, Mary Allen, Gay's sister, requested I prepare an obituary for the newspapers as his death was imminent.

Forty years of associations flashed, as I remembered early conversations with Gay about the Whitman correspondence project, followed later by the years we were colleagues at New York University, and close friends—Evie (his wife) and Gay, Roz (my wife) and I, during all those Sunday teas which included Evie's bread and pastries, after which we settled in for talk, always about books, writers, impending projects, until dusk beckoned us home.

Gay: quiet, reflective, unassuming, nourished by his solitary hours of work in his second-floor study, surrounded by his books and files. But come spring or fall, the other Gay shone, enthusiastic, talkative, and proud, as he ushered us out into his garden where his iris, tulips, and roses, his tomato plants, and in the fall, his glorious, gigantic chrysanthemums greeted us—a gardener par excellence.

And then, it was with difficulty, I wrote the obituary for my friend, Gay Wilson Allen.

Riverdale, New York

James E. Miller, Jr.:

In the summer of 1946, after four years in the U.S. Army, I began graduate work in English at the University of Chicago and took a course taught by Napier Wilt on Walt Whitman. One of the texts for the course was Gay Wilson Allen's *Walt Whitman's Handbook* (1946); my much-worn copy remains in my library. When, a decade later, I wrote the acknowledgment page for *A Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass* (1957), I referred to Allen as "the current dean of Whitman studies, author of the invaluable *Walt Whitman Handbook* and the definitive biography, *The Solitary Singer* (1955)." Two chapters of my book had already appeared as essays in *PMLA*, for which he had been the Whitman-specialist reader. He wrote to me saying that my calling him a "dean" made him feel older than he was. When I saw his obituary in the *New York Times*, I was saddened at the loss of a friend—a kind and generous friend in an academic world where kindness and generosity are often viewed as naive.

Chicago, Illinois

Robert Strassburg:

My admiration for Gay Wilson Allen goes back to the fall of 1954 when I received the inaugural issue of his *Walt Whitman Newsletter*, published at New York University, where he was a professor. What astonished and delighted me was the scope of the programs and exhibitions he had projected for the centenary celebration of the 1855 publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, ranging from his January talk on "Whitman the Man" at the Library of Congress, to his State Department-sponsored lecture tour of the major universities of Japan in the fall of 1955.

Over the past decade, I have been the recipient of his generous advice and counsel where my own compositions were concerned, among them my choral symphony "Leaves of Grass" and my Whitman opera, *Congo Square*, currently in the making. I cherish the letter he sent me after he viewed the videotape of the Japanese premiere of my "Leaves" symphony: his opening words were, "Every time I hear the tape of your program, I am overpowered with admiration. You have made a great contribution."

When I could not locate his out-of-print *Waldo Emerson*, he sent me one of his own, inscribed "For Robert Strassburg, with warmest affection." "Warmest affection" characterized the nature of Gay, whose generosity and love of people, coupled with his profound erudition, endeared him to students and colleagues alike.

I shall miss greatly our exchanges by phone and letter. I sought his advice for the last time three days before his death, when I called him about an article I was writing about Walt's views on religion. In a frail but warm voice, he suggested that the title of my brief essay might be "Walt Whitman, a God-Intoxicated Poet."

Like Walt, Gay had a cosmic vision, a vision that has enriched my own life and my music, and the lives of all who knew him.

Laguna Hills, California

M. Wynn Thomas:

I cannot pretend to have known Gay Wilson Allen well: after all, sadly, we met only the once, at the Whitman Centennial Conference in Iowa City, 1992. However, that meeting left a deep impression, and so I am honored to have been asked to recall that single, singular occasion.

My abiding sense of Gay is of how affectingly unconscious he was of his own eminence, authoritativeness, both on paper and in person, all the more powerful. Coupled with this is a vivid memory of his own admission that he did not particularly *care* for Whitman as a man. What he clearly *did* care about, however, was that Whitman's life and work should be interpreted in the clearest light that dedicated, dispassionate scholarship could make available. His own definitive biography—and for once “definitive” is the indisputably exact word to use—coupled with his pioneering explorations both of the form and the informing contexts of Whitman's poetry, are indeed monuments to his own magnificence as a scholar-critic. Given his unchallengeable stature in the field of Whitman studies, he had no reason whatsoever to pay respectful attention to the marginally revisionist studies published (far too often, I suspect) by me and my generation of Whitman scholars. And yet he did, in the most courteously kind, non-competitive, and generous of ways. I, in particular—a non-American, writing about Whitman out of a Welsh culture strikingly remote from that of the U.S.A.—was scarcely deserving of his notice. And yet he went out of his way to treat me (undeservedly) as an equal, and indeed as a friend. I shall always be grateful to him for that. And while regretting that only once did we meet, I shall always cherish our one encounter, when I felt that, through my conversations with Gay, I had at last come of age as a Whitmanian.

Swansea, Wales