



Woodress, James ed. Critical Essays on Walt Whitman [review]

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REVIEWS

Woodress, James, ed. *Critical Essays on Walt Whitman*. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1983. 338 pp. \$35.00.

Gathered here, and arranged chronologically, are twenty-six early reviews and reactions by Whitman's contemporaries, thirty-one previously published essays, articles, letters, and poems, and two original pieces commissioned especially for the anthology (articles by Jerome Loving and Roger Asselineau). The editor introduces these fifty-nine selections with a historical survey of Whitman criticism and scholarship. Because the secondary writings on Whitman are voluminous, Professor Woodress necessarily devotes most of his overview to discuss substantial treatments, i.e., book-length studies. Nevertheless, he correctly observes that the poet's critical reputation begins not with a book but a note—the highly laudatory letter that Emerson penned just seventeen days after Whitman had issued the slender, quarto-sized, and profoundly green first edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

To peruse the early responses to Whitman's poetry is to meet with extremes in opinion. At one end of the critical spectrum a reader encounters unbuttoned enthusiasm, lavish praise: "I find [*Leaves of Grass*] the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed," asserted Ralph Waldo Emerson. Edward Everett Hale said of the book that "it is well worth going twice to the bookstore to buy it." Henry David Thoreau remarked that "though rude and sometimes ineffectual, it is a great primitive poem—an alarm or trumpet-note ringing through the American camp." And an anonymous reviewer argued that "it is the healthiest book, morally, this century has produced; and if it were reprinted in the form of a cheap tract, and . . . put into the hands of youth, and . . . of men and women everywhere, it would do more towards elevating our nature, towards eradicating this foul, vulgar, licentious, sham modesty which so degrades our people now, than any other means within my knowledge."

At the other end of the spectrum a reader finds contempt and caustic abuse. In a review of the *Leaves* printed in the *New York Tribune*, a writer claimed that "the chief question raised by this publication is whether anybody—even a poet—ought to take off his trousers in the market-place." A commentator in the *London Critic* averred that "Walt Whitman is as unacquainted with art, as a hog is with mathematics. His poems—we must call them so for convenience—twelve in number, are innocent of rhythm, and resemble nothing so much as the war-cry of the Red Indians." And a reviewer in the *Boston Intelligencer* considered Whitman's book a "heterogeneous mass of bombast, egotism, vulgarity, and nonsense," adding that "the beastliness of the author is set forth in his own description of himself, and we can conceive of no better reward than the lash for such violation of decency as we have before us."

The later studies of Whitman reprinted by Woodress reveal that immoderate views persisted for quite some time after the period during which *Leaves of Grass* was a new book. Well along toward the end of the nineteenth century, for example, Anne Gilchrist, John Burroughs and Richard Maurice Bucke were uttering extravagant approbation, while Sidney Lanier, A. C. Swinburne and George Santayana were expressing imprudent disparagement. However, balanced assessments,

biographical as well as critical, steadily began to replace the effusions of adulation and detraction. Fairly early in the twentieth century there appeared two landmarks of Whitman scholarship: Basil de Selincourt's *Walt Whitman: A Critical Study* (1914) and Emory Holloway's *Whitman: An Interpretation in Narrative* (1926). De Selincourt's *Study* was devoted largely to an analysis of the poet's literary artistry. Holloway's biography was more thoroughly researched, and hence more reliable, than any that had preceded it. In less than a decade after the appearance of Holloway's book, a man who eventually would become the dean of Whitman scholars, Gay Wilson Allen, began to publish the first of his many writings. By 1946 Allen had produced his valuable *Walt Whitman Handbook*, and by 1955 he had completed a "life" that continues to be regarded as definitive—*The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman*. During the 1950s, other individuals began to make major contributions to Whitman scholarship: Roger Asselineau, Richard Chase, James E. Miller, Jr., Floyd Stovall and Edwin Haviland Miller, to mention just a few. Woodress's selections, which include essays by all those referred to here except for Holloway, afford an insight into the major trends in interpretation that have characterized Whitman commentary down through the years.

Anthologies of criticism on Whitman are now plentiful. Since 1955, the year of the centennial celebration of the *Leaves*, Whitmanites have compiled about two dozen such volumes. The most valuable, those which belong in any truly solid collection of Whitman materials, are these: *Leaves of Grass One Hundred Years After* (1955), edited by Milton Hindus; *Walt Whitman Abroad* (1955), edited by Gay Wilson Allen; *Start with the Sun* (1960), by James E. Miller, Jr., Karl Shapiro and Bernice Slote; *The Presence of Walt Whitman* (1962), edited by R. W. B. Lewis; *Whitman: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1962), edited by Roy Harvey Pearce; *A Century of Whitman Criticism* (1969), edited by Edwin Haviland Miller; *Walt Whitman: A Critical Anthology* (1969), edited by Francis Murphy; *The Artistic Legacy of Walt Whitman* (1970), edited by Edwin Haviland Miller; *Walt Whitman: The Critical Heritage* (1971), edited by Milton Hindus; *Walt Whitman in Europe Today* (1972), edited by Roger Asselineau and William White; *Walt Whitman: A Collection of Criticism* (1974), edited by Arthur Golden; and *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song* (1981), edited by Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom and Dan Campion. Although Professor Woodress's collection reprints some criticism that is easily accessible in several of these anthologies (see those by Miller [1969], Murphy [1969], and Hindus [1971], for example), and although it includes but a handful of pieces published since 1955 (there are only eight), it is nevertheless a volume that libraries should acquire. It is important because it brings together under one cover many of the milestones of Whitman scholarship. For instance, it contains D. H. Lawrence's "Whitman" and Randall Jarrell's "Walt Whitman: He Had His Nerve," which are among the most influential essays, perhaps even among the very best, ever written on the American poet. Finally, the book includes a useful list of the principal editions of Whitman's works and an index, a feature too often missing in compilations of this kind.