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Asselineau, Roger. The Evolution of Walt Whitman: An Expanded Edition [review]

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

The University of Iowa ED FOLSOM

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'Evolution de Walt Whitman: Après la premiere edition 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*

Handbook (1946), Randall Jarrell's "Walt Whitman: He Had His Nerve" (1952), Richard Chase's *Walt Whitman Reconsidered* (1955), Allen's *The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman* (1955), and James E. Miller, Jr.'s *A Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass* (1957). On the other hand, *Evolution* strikes one as surprisingly contemporary. It contains little (except perhaps for an expression such as "sick soul") that now seems dated. Indeed, it is a work that will continue to have an impact on emerging Whitman scholarship. Any library that does not have *Evolution* on its shelves should seize the opportunity to acquire a copy now.

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