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IN MEMORIAM: JUSTIN KAPLAN (1925-2014)

"Did you see the Holloway obit in the NY *Times* Tuesday?" Justin Kaplan asked me in a postscript to his letter of August 6, 1977. Emory Holloway, born in 1885, won the Pulitzer Prize for his 1926 biography of Walt Whitman. Kaplan, who had won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for his 1966 biography of Mark Twain, was then working on his biography of the Good Gray Poet. We had struck up a correspondence a year earlier when I learned that Justin had received a Guggenheim to write the Whitman biography. It appeared in 1980 and won the National Book Award. When the manuscript was ready for the publisher, I was one of a number of people he asked to read the work before it went to press. I was honored and thought I got more benefit from reading his life of Whitman than he got from my meager comments on his text.

Walt Whitman: A Life (he wasn't altogether happy with that title, as I remember) brought the poet to life in a way Gay Wilson Allen's *The Solitary Singer* (1955) hadn't. Kaplan focused on the life over the work. He saw Whitman's life as the stuff of a novel, the story of a fascinating person (which he was, quite apart from having written *Leaves of Grass*) living in the nineteenth century—a century in American literature that Kaplan had come to love, possibly while studying for a Ph.D. at Harvard under such legendary professors as F. O. Matthiessen and Perry Miller. I don't know how far he went in the graduate program at Harvard, but I suspect he was what we used to call "ABD" (when such a credential could still mean a job in academe) as he left to become an editor at Simon and Schuster. Looking in vain for somebody to write a biography of Mark Twain, so the legend went, he finally gave up his search and decided to write the book himself. He knew as much as any of my American literature professors at Duke, and he knew it in a rather modern way, to my thinking at the time. Where others found sources and symbolism, he found context and irony.

The first sentence of *Walt Whitman: A Life* simply bristles with both: "In the spring of 1884 the poet Walt Whitman bought a house in the unlovely city of Camden, New Jersey, and at the age of sixty-five slept under his own roof for the first time in his life." When I visited the Cambridge home of Justin and his wife, the novelist Anne Bernays, in 1999, he mentioned to my wife Cathy and me that he was judging nominations for either the National Book Award or the Pulitzer Prize. He said that if the first sentence didn't grab him—certainly the first paragraph—he would stop and go on to the next submission, at least for the first round of his considerations. (I never forgot that little bit of information, and so ever afterwards my initial sentence in all that I subsequently wrote was always much better than all the sentences that followed!)

"Poets of ecstasy through the ages," wrote Justin Kaplan, who had published on the Classics before he wrote about American literature, "rendered the consummated marriage of the soul with God in sexual imagery. But sexuality as sexuality—'the desire to copulate'—is a force in *Leaves of Grass*, a work that celebrates the democratization of the whole person, the liberation of impulse and instinct from involuntary servitude" (193). Never mind, Kaplan seems to suggest, that mystical union of Body and Soul in section 5

of "Song of Myself": Whitman found ecstasy in the mundane. Kaplan also deftly sets Whitman's sense of sexual liberation in the larger political context within which the would-be orator dreamed. It was probably Kaplan who got me to see (and to suggest in my own biography of Whitman) how the idea of democracy and the plight of the working person dominate almost every line in *Leaves of Grass*.

In the summer of 1977, I camped out with my wife and two small children on Justin and Anne's beach in Truro, on Cape Cod, for a couple of nights. I was spending the summer in Concord, Massachusetts, working on *Emerson, Whitman and the American Muse* (1982), and we couldn't find an opening at any of the Cape motels; so Justin invited us to camp on his beach. Their house overlooked the bay in which they both swam every day. More than once I walked on that beach with Justin and talked of Whitman. It seemed such an appropriate setting for a discussion of the seashore poet, the author of "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life." We became friends ever after, seeing each other at various events involving Whitman. I remember being with him in 1980 for the conference at Hofstra University, celebrating the 125th anniversary of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. During the banquet, we heard the news that President Carter's military effort in Iran had failed to liberate the hostages. Reagan would get the credit for doing that, though he got little credit (or representation) in at least one of the editions of *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, which Justin edited in 1992 and 2002 (Kaplan was quoted as saying he had done Reagan a favor by including so few of his statements). I always thought it a bit odd that a biographer of Whitman, who is so *unquotable*, would go on to edit *Bartlett's*.

I last saw Justin and Anne at their Cambridge home over two years ago. He was using a walker but was otherwise in high spirits. We shared a fine lunch and a bottle of wine. Life, he joked, was simply "one fucking thing after another." It was this stoicism, I think, that informed his writing, his biographies, which also included a life of Lincoln Steffens in 1974, and *When the Astors Owned New York* (2006), the life of a hotel dynasty and the money-grubbing lives behind it. In addition to editing the Library of America edition of Whitman's *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (1982), he also wrote two books with Anne—*The Language of Names* (1997) and their memoir *Back Then: Two Lives in 1950s New York* (2002). They were a most interesting couple, each of whom had grown up as a "hotel kid" in New York City, as I was once told by another biographer and a friend of theirs. Anne is descended on both sides from Sigmund Freud, and her father, Edward Bernays, was known as the "Father of Public Relations." Well, Walt Whitman became the *poet* of PR. This self-appointed publicist anonymously reviewed his first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (three times) and never gave up his journalistic bent of promoting himself in the press ("I celebrate myself and sing myself"). Whitman "had his nerve," as a later poet remarked, and a later biographer, Justin Kaplan, captured that nerve in one of the most compelling narratives we have about our Poet of Democracy. For me, Justin Kaplan set the gold standard for biography.

—Jerome Loving, *Texas A&M University*