



## Whitman's Late Lives

Anton Vander Zee  
*College of Charleston*

ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)  
ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

Copyright © 2017 Anton Vander Zee

---

### Recommended Citation

Vander Zee, Anton. "Whitman's Late Lives." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 35 (2017), 174-200.  
<https://doi.org/10.13008/0737-0679.2277>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

---

## Whitman's Late Lives

### **Erratum**

12/14/2017: Corrected typo.

## WHITMAN'S LATE LIVES

ANTON VANDER ZEE



Throughout his life, Walt Whitman relished the mystery of “faint clues and indirections.”<sup>21</sup> He was intrigued by riddles and ciphers, hieroglyphs and cryptograms. All the more intriguing, then, to note the message divined through a frequency-based word list of the Deathbed Edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Subtracting pronouns, conjunctions, and auxiliaries, we arrive at a curiously imploring apostrophe: “o see old life.”<sup>22</sup> Even if we do not hear in this imperative Whitman’s voice from the grave—some electronic echo of King Hamlet’s ghostly “remember me”—this coincidence serves as a fitting invitation to think anew about how various acts of literary biography over the past century have figured Whitman in age.<sup>3</sup>

The noted biographer and critic Richard Holmes, in an essay from 2002 defending the field of biographical studies, charts out a critical methodology that might begin to make sense of the proliferating lives that surround certain biographical subjects. “Here,” he writes, “one is considering virtually a new discipline, which might be called comparative biography.” Such an approach, he notes, would “seek to capture the shift and differences—factual, formal, stylistic, ideological, aesthetic—between early and later biographies.”<sup>24</sup> For Holmes, this defense seems necessary given how biography has often been viewed as a mere supplement to serious scholarship: a genre caught somewhere between popular and academic audiences, between fact and fiction, between the subject at hand and the biographer’s unwitting self-portraiture. In relation to Whitman scholarship, however, biography has rarely been demoted in this way. Indeed, Whitman scholars most often view biography as central to academic criticism; biography powered the poet’s increasingly ensured canonical status in the first half of the twentieth century, and it has sponsored the persistent growth of Whitman scholarship from the middle of the twentieth century to the present. As M. Jimmie Killingsworth succinctly puts it in his overview of trends in Whitman criticism: “The great tradition of Whitman

scholarship has been biographical.”<sup>5</sup>

One might also note that the field of comparative biography—Holmes’s claim to a new discipline notwithstanding—was anticipated in Whitman studies well over half a century ago by critic and biographer Gay Wilson Allen in his substantial bibliographic essay surveying Whitman biography. That essay first appeared in his seminal *Walt Whitman Handbook* (1946) and was later expanded in *The New Walt Whitman Handbook* (1975). “To tell the story of [Whitman’s] biographical growth,” Allen writes, “is also to tell much of the story of the growth of modern literature and thought. What critics and biographers have thought of Walt Whitman, and the theories on which they have based their interpretations of him, is fully as important as the literal facts of his life.”<sup>6</sup> Keeping in mind that we have no unmediated access to these facts, tracking late Whitman through evolving literary lives serves an important purpose here. “If definite trends are discovered in the evolution of these biographies,” Allen continues, “perhaps future stages of Whitman scholarship may be anticipated—even aided and hastened” (2).

Though a more affirming sense of what biography makes available informs these words, we might also note the corrective power of comparative biography. A comparative approach, for example, might help one identify and redress that which has been routinely overlooked, insufficiently analyzed, or misconstrued. In the case of Whitman, it allows one to see beyond common assumptions, and to work against habits of reading, that obscure certain spans of his life and work. I hope that the survey of various biographical constructions of Whitman in age that follows, while not exhaustive, will hasten a more informed conversation about Whitman’s late life and poetry, a span of time and a body of work that deserves more—and more nuanced—attention in biography and criticism alike.

In the post-Civil War period, Whitman’s disciples often cast him as a transcendent figure who, having endured crises both national and personal, could now stand apart from merely temporal and material concerns.<sup>7</sup> This ethos of rarified veneration persisted as Whitman’s disciples worked to carry on his message in the decade after his passing.<sup>8</sup> In their ambitious ten-volume edition of *Whitman’s Complete Writings*

(1902), for example, Whitman's key disciples and literary executors Thomas Harned, Horace Traubel, and Richard Maurice Bucke eschew the merely temporal concerns that must ground any biography: "the mere dates which fix his poems into a calendar are, after all, of slight significance," they argue. "It is for their spiritual sequence and periodicity that their author was most concerned. And no loyal historian would substitute a reduced standard."<sup>9</sup> With Whitman lifted out of the materiality and temporality of lateness into that boundless "spiritual sequence," the aims of more traditional biography for these early disciples would seem rather pedestrian. For the scholarly biographer driven by an ethos of objectivity, however, this made the work of composing an honest life all the more necessary.

The era of scholarly biography in Whitman studies began early in the twentieth century. Early in this era, it becomes clear how the extreme enthusiasm of the disciples and the rarified iconography of age that they erected around the poet encouraged many early biographers to distance themselves not only from such unscholarly reverence, but also from the figure of late Whitman so revered. This transition from hagiography to more traditional biography—one that occurs both in Whitman studies and in the broader evolution of biography as a genre<sup>10</sup>—also paralleled shifting conceptions of age and aging in America. Writers in the years surrounding the Civil War often romanticized and idealized the plights of the aged. As historian of age Andrew Achenbaum notes, in an era of increasing urbanization, bureaucratization, and industrialization, this often rendered the elderly "conceptually segregated" from the rest of society.<sup>11</sup> Donning the venerable guise of age that he and his disciples had crafted, Whitman in age appears increasingly obsolescent to twentieth-century biographers, especially as age itself becomes less a subject of romantic notions and more an object of management and control. Even as the field of Whitman biography has grown less territorial in relation to the disciples, and even as emerging critical paradigms have opened a space in which the sexual, psychological, and cultural energies of Whitman's life, work, and world resonate so powerfully, Whitman in age waits for us still—a compelling, if elusive, biographical subject ready to sing beyond the constraints of what biographers like to call a *life*.

Given how much Whitman came to rely on support—financial and otherwise—from his transatlantic connections in the post-Civil War years, it is not entirely surprising that what Gay Wilson Allen called “the first complete, factual, and exhaustive biography” was penned by the Englishman Henry Bryan Binns in 1905 (*NWWH* 21). Binns, however, had more difficulty distinguishing himself from the more partial biographical reflections of the disciples, and his biography largely reaffirms the general arc of Whitman’s life in which the poet passes stoically through the twin crises of politics and physiology: first the Civil War, and then his severe stroke in 1873, which was followed closely by the death of his beloved mother.

Binns does offer a slight qualification as to the quality of the post-Civil War poetry, noting that “with few exceptions” the works are “somewhat less inevitable and procreative than those of the earlier period.”<sup>12</sup> Binns’s account of Whitman’s bodily crisis in 1873 has a special dramatic flair, however, that trumps the weakness of the late work. Thus, we see the biographer establish a dark night of the poetic body out of which a purified soul might emerge: “neither living nor dying,” Binns writes, “through the sad, dark days of long, protracted illness and solitude, of physical debility and mental bewilderment—as it were, through year-long dream-gropings—he waited” (249). Such passages align Binns not only with Whitman’s disciples, but with certain later biographers, many of them foreigners as well, who tended to romanticize certain aspects of Whitman’s life—even his gravest illnesses. In light of these romantic reflections, nothing seems to stick to Whitman. For Binns, the work from the early 1870s—“Passage to India,” “Song of the Redwood-Tree,” and “Song of the Universal”—proves Whitman’s final ascent, capped with his Western jaunt in 1879 and his pastoral retreat at Timber Creek where he spent weeks at a time during the early 1880s. Focusing on this pastoral retreat as the key locus of Whitman’s late period has become a sturdy trope in the tradition of Whitman biography. Such a retreat, it seems, offers a venue of rejuvenation, a way of sidestepping the messier matters of a damaged body and a troubled body politic.

In this early biography, Binns says little more about the late work’s quality aside from its persistence and faith. “The poems of the new

collection are all brief and many of them descriptive,” Binns writes of the poems in “Sands at Seventy,” the first annex to the Deathbed Edition of *Leaves of Grass*. “For the rest,” he continues, “they are mainly the assertions of a jocund heart, defying the ice-cold, frost-bound winter of old age, and waiting for the sure-following spring.” The work included in the annexes—none of it described in detail—dissipates, for Binns, into “endless vistas of eternal purpose” (330). The contrary binaries of age—the bard is sleepless and suffering, yet cheery and blithe—reveal the essential, impossible attributes of achieved old age. Even in age, it seems, Whitman contradicts himself.

In this reverence for the elderly Whitman, Binns seems to struggle to extricate himself from the devotional morass of the disciples; and indeed, we might view him as a sort of belated disciple, having written Whitman a “dear master” letter two decades earlier at the age of 18. And yet one does see him pulling away at times. Near the end of his biography, he notes Whitman’s confession to fellow Englishman J.W. Wallace in the autumn of 1891: “I used to feel . . . that I was to irradiate or emanate buoyancy and health . . . to live up to the reputation I had,” Whitman confides, “or to my own idea of what my program should be.” Instead, Binns reports, Whitman felt the need to “give out and express what I really was” (338). This deliberate abandonment of a certain Whitman pose—or the possibility that it was all just a pose—strikes Binns as particularly momentous. We are invited to see Whitman here begin to shed the myths surrounding him—to become less “inevitable” and more intentional, to borrow Binns’s phrasing—even as the disciples who survived Whitman plotted his canonization along what were by then the well-worn tracks of a romanticized late style.<sup>13</sup>

Bliss Perry’s 1906 biography makes a much cleaner break from such romanticizing tendencies. Perhaps his academic pedigree—he was a Princeton professor at the time he wrote his biography—encouraged the marked weariness we sense in relation to the disciples. Perry, it must be admitted, still idealizes Whitman in age. It seemed to be a requirement at this time that one could not revisit Whitman in Camden without noting, amidst the scatter of papers and books in his low-ceilinged quarters, the venerable face that “grew more delicately

molded each year under the refining, spiritualizing touch of time,” or the hair, “glistening white,” adorning that “wonderful domed head,” which appeared to “take on a dignity and beauty as of some heroic, vanished epoch.”<sup>14</sup> Despite the recycled iconography of Whitman in age here, Perry did not feel he had to support what he derisively called the “undiscriminating eulogy” of the “Whitman Militants” (236-37)—those disciples that he cast off as so many “hot little prophet[s]” (286).

More unequivocally than Binns, Perry articulates a story of poetic decline that the disciples would never have condoned: “His departure from Washington in 1873,” Perry declares, “marked the end of an epoch” (211). He continues to devalue the late work in a manner that would soon become the norm, noting that while the bard “was still to write a few poems . . . the work to which he owes his fame was done” (212). What remains? If Whitman was to become a mere “picturesque object of literary pilgrimages,” it is not his fault, for few, Perry assures his reader, could “have passed unharmed through a Camden apotheosis” (263). Perry, here, inaugurates the antagonistic relationship with Whitman’s disciples that would become so common in Whitman biography through the 1950s and beyond. In this spirit, the biographer judiciously concludes by discarding the many myths surrounding the poet, among which he includes the “wild buffalo strength myth, the ‘superman’ myth, and many others” (291). In their place, and distancing himself from the stale, romanticized binaries of age that he himself couldn’t help but ventriloquize, Perry writes that we have “something very much better: a man earthy, incoherent, arrogant, but elemental and alive.” Intended as a comment on Whitman’s life, Perry does not offer any sense of what this novel characterization might mean for the work of Whitman in age.

The next significant Whitman biography emerged along with a handful of others in 1926.<sup>15</sup> Emory Holloway’s Pulitzer prize-winning *Whitman: An Interpretation in Narrative* ushers in a new era in Whitman biography in part because of the vast archival material at his disposal, much of which had been collated and published by Holloway himself during the previous decade. Rather than begin with apocryphal stories of Whitman’s perfect breeding and family background, Holloway opens with a decidedly less romantic sense of Whitman the



journalist. His “interpretation in narrative,” as his subtitle indicates, introduces a certain speculative reaching into Whitman biography as writers worked to reclaim the early years for which there is little documentation. From this point forward in Whitman biography, what Emerson called the “long foreground” that preceded the 1855 *Leaves* becomes something of a critical obsession. Perhaps because it was a period of time before the disciples, before certain myths began to accrue around the poet, the early years became the new frontier in Whitman biography, as much a charting out of new ground as an escape from the tightly scripted and well-attended scene at Camden.

Though Holloway’s primary accomplishment involves this swerve towards the early Whitman, he also deserves credit for the degree to which he tried to re-imagine the particular cultural context of Whitman’s late work. Binns and Perry wrote during the height of the Progressive Era and largely ignored the cultural context in which Whitman wrote. Holloway, however, composed his biography in the wake of World War I and in midst of his own very gilded 1920s America, a time that must have seemed to resemble Whitman’s own post-war years:

The years of disillusionment which quickly follow even a successful ‘idealistic’ war are peculiarly trying to the idealist. The illusion of progress has so quickly passed into the reality of stupid reaction wherewith pigmy politicians, no longer led by a great statesman or accentuated by the fear and pride of war, seem determined to compensate themselves for the unwonted heroism which the national emergency called forth. In morale as in materials, war is always a mortgage on the future; and those who lack the imagination to dwell in that future are first to foreclose the mortgage.<sup>16</sup>

Though he powerfully captures the sense of post-war disillusionment—both Whitman’s and his own—he does not allow that disillusionment to follow Whitman into the post-war years and therefore overestimates the degree to which *Democratic Vistas* (1873), which includes some of the most caustic, disenchanted passages in nineteenth-century literature, marks a lasting “triumph of faith over despair” (241). Still, the sense that Whitman’s optimism was earned—“his was no cheap optimism,” Holloway tells us—does mark an important shift in the critical approach to Whitman’s late work.

If Whitman's optimism was effortful and intentional, and not simply an inevitable marker of spiritual growth, then it follows that the late work should bear the marks of such straining. Holloway hints at this understanding, even if he does not quite follow through: "When we turn to read the verse he was writing at this time, we are impressed anew with the fact that we have a different Whitman," he writes. "Here is no longer the youthful feeling of immortality born of high animal spirits, not even the agonized realism of the war-time verse; here is the aspiration of the pioneer soul, taught by frustrated human hopes, if not disgust, yet a certain despair of realizing itself through union with another in this life" (244-245). It is such a careful observation: that *despair of realizing oneself*. Here, Whitman appears damaged in some fundamental sense despite his apparent optimism and faith. Holloway writes suggestively that "[t]he mystic survives in him," a sort of shadowed optimism, a spectral lingering that persists alongside that quiet realization of despair.

This vivid sense of crisis, however, serves only as a prop for Whitman's miraculous recovery. For Holloway, the crucial poems of the early 1870s—"Passage to India" and "Prayer of Columbus"—show a "dauntless confidence ... an absolute faith," and they form, for the biographer, the real "swan song": "For, though he is to live and write for twenty years more, a great affliction will soon touch body and mind; the rest will be long afternoon" (252). So ignored is Whitman's properly late work, cast into that long afternoon, that his immediate post-war poetry—closer to the first edition of *Leaves* than the last—comes to take the place of Whitman's lateness.

After describing Whitman's stroke and his mother's unexpected death, Holloway offers a curt career epitaph: "the great hours of Whitman's labor and love have come and gone," he writes. "No more will the weak and wounded lean upon his body for strength. The time has come for him to be old—at fifty-four. Nor from that 'wounded brain' will his fancy again set sail for the daring passage to India" (268). The final fifteen years of Whitman's life get about a page each as the annual Lincoln lectures give way to a growing and enthusiastic cohort of disciples, and finally the last years punctuated by birthday bashes for the old bard and Traubel's pestering Boswellian presence. Much

of Holloway's reflection on the late life is given over to description of Whitman's editorial work as the poet continues to repackage and release numerous editions of *Leaves*. This editorial work represented, for many early biographers, a new industriousness that might fill the space left by the early evacuation of genius. The poems published in the two annexes to *Leaves*, which represent his poetic productivity over his final decade, receive little attention. Holloway concludes somewhat cruelly with a brief reflection on the extreme belatedness—especially for a poet who had a habit of saying “So Long!” early and often—of Whitman's “Good-bye my Fancy,” the concluding poem to the second, and final, annex to the Deathbed Edition: “On March 26<sup>th</sup> he passed away,” Holloway writes, “to join his Fancy,” which, he suggests, had apparently fled nearly two decades earlier (314).

As biographers become more openly critical of the late poetry, they tend to retreat further and faster from Whitman in age. In the Englishman John Bailey's *Walt Whitman*, published the same year as Holloway's biography, the author does not varnish his view of the late work. Of the “Sands at Seventy” cluster and *Good-Bye my Fancy* he writes: “in all these there is little that is new and still less that can rank among the work by which he will live. The man remains the same and the artist has learnt nothing.”<sup>17</sup> The theatrical “yawns of indifference, boredom or contempt” that Bailey glibly brings to Whitman's “final scraps”—more, he writes, like “merest prose cut into lengths and printed as verse”—reveal the uncharitable and unimaginative reading of Whitman's late work that would come to predominate in Whitman biography and criticism alike. As the poet's faith in union and progress begins to lose its luster, and as the trappings of rarified spirituality begin to fade, the aging Whitman becomes a far less compelling figure and a greatly diminished artist.

After a spate of biographies in America and abroad during the 1930s that introduced few new materials and added little insight into the late work,<sup>18</sup> Henry Seidel Canby's *Walt Whitman: An American* (1943) emerged as a major advance in cultural biography, anticipating David Reynolds's *Walt Whitman's America*, published over fifty years later. Beginning with the problem of biography itself, Canby's tome bears a fitting self-consciousness as to what can possibly be added to

the accrued truths and myths of Whitman. Echoing the disregard that other biographers had for the disciples, and emphasizing how difficult it could be to see through their often exaggerated ardor, he writes of how trying it is to think of Whitman as something other than “an old man, paralyzed, sitting in an untidy room among drifts of letters and manuscripts, scratching out with his cane documents of long-dead controversies and tributes to his genius, in order to help his disciples build up a legend of greatness in which the plain facts of an uneventful life would be obscured or forgotten.”<sup>19</sup> In order to resolve this dilemma Canby expresses his desire to weave the biography more fully into the sociocultural life of the time, the facts of which, he writes, “are not to be found in unrevealed scraps of personal experience, but in the unique history of the eclectic America in which he matured, an America charged with spiritual idealism, double-charged with intellectual and physical energy” (3). Alongside these profound historical ideals and energies, Canby also recognizes the era’s palpable sense of disillusion and anxiety: “the great poems of love and democracy which Whitman was also writing from the latter fifties onward,” he writes, “were drawn (in a kind of Hegelian synthesis of opposites) from a confidence which transcended, but also and certainly included, the experience of complete disillusion” (170). The emphasis on what we might call the haunting Hegelian remainder here presents a powerful interpretive model for Whitman’s lasting insofar as it makes room for a certain melancholic debris impacted in the later works. Evidence of such debris makes Whitman’s optimism, to recall Holloway, less cheap.

This is not, however, an interpretive model of which Canby avails himself. Even as the biographer suggests the possibility of this darker resonance in Whitman’s later work, he nevertheless presents a picture of the poet in age that replays past prejudice even as it provides a roadmap for future neglect. “From 1875 on,” Canby writes, “all that is significant in Whitman’s writing is referential to or repetitive of the earlier ‘Leaves.’ His poems are only a filling in of the chinks of his life work, or are captions for what has been done before” (285). The more optimistic poems of this period, he notes, show a “stiffening and flattening of his so flexible mind. . . . His personal story as a seer and

poet is nearly finished” (287). What is left? Borrowing a figure from the world of manual labor rather than true artistic making, Canby leaves Whitman to some final “mopping up” (292).

But Canby, for all his unreflective dismissal of the late work, still finds some essential, confounding contrast in Whitman’s late-ness—something he sees especially in the visual traces Whitman left behind: “There is an important symbolic record of these years in the many photographs of the aging poet,” he writes, “some magnificent, leonine, with a slow-burning vitality, though in others and especially the profile views, where the beard does not much conceal the features, he looks like a worn old man nearly burnt out” (292). He notes in particular the famous image of the artificial butterfly, perched on his finger, that Whitman posed with in a photograph he used in his 1882 *Specimen Days & Collect*—a staging of organic pastoralism and union with nature that ended up being a ruse: Whitman, it turns out, had strapped to his finger a cardboard butterfly with an Easter message of clanging rhymes beating between its wings. Though Canby can seem to dismiss such strangeness, he also seems compelled by it: “Walt was both the powerful rememberer and interpreter of himself and his times,” he writes, “and the worn-out, weary, vivid, defeated, yet still hopeful artist, depending upon when you saw him” (352). Though Canby commits fewer than a dozen pages of his biography to Whitman’s last decade, the contrastive visual record he alludes to here suggests a parallel approach to the late poetry that has yet to be taken up in earnest. It is precisely that strangeness that should be recovered rather than dismissed. Concluding his biography, Canby aptly casts the strongly symbolic Walt into distinctly allegorical futures: “Thus departed the symbolic man of the nineteenth century,” he writes: “Centuries do not die, they live on in their consequences. And so it was to be with him” (352). Thus late Whitman gives way to the long American century, as the bard, early and late, becomes less a poet and more of what Keats might call a continual allegory both in the figures his own life took and in the record of cultural and aesthetic appropriation that trails through his long wake.

By the time Gay Wilson Allen published his authoritative *The Solitary Singer* (1955), Whitman biography had fully matured as

Whitman himself gained a firmer foothold in the canon of American literature. At the same time, however, one senses a certain fatigue in a biographical enterprise that was already entering its own late phase over half a century after Whitman's passing and nearly a century after the first significant biographical jottings emerged. In Allen's book—the first post-World War II biography—one senses this weariness most fully in relation to Whitman's rigorous economy of progress. Since the First World War, biographers had been toiling away in an extended post-war period punctuated by minor hopes and momentous depressions. For Allen, writing in what Robert Lowell called the “tranquilized *Fifties*,” the economic expansion and commodification of culture must have seemed an echo of the massive industrialization, monopolization, and institutionalization that followed in the wake of the Civil War, just as the 1920s had echoed this prior age for Holloway.<sup>20</sup>

In his review of Whitman's poetry of the early 1870s, Allen grows critical of the poet's work, finding only a “reworking of old themes and ideas.”<sup>21</sup> Moreover, he judges Whitman's use of symbolism to be somewhat “mixed and trite” (443). After two world wars, one senses a tendency to view with skepticism Whitman's vague sense of spiritualized, inevitably progressive democratic hope that is the hallmark of poems such as “Passage to India”: “There, too, as in many of his former poems,” Allen writes, “he regarded the United States as a culmination of past civilizations and prophesied that the nation would surpass them all and eventually achieve the ‘destinies of the Soul,’ whatever those were” (443). That concluding sardonic aside makes Allen's skepticism clear, and even a bit cruel. The poet himself, though, could be just as critical, and in some ways Allen is just taking him at his word. The biographer notes how already in the early 1870s, Whitman had declared *Leaves* at a terminus, and everything else “surplusage forming after that Volume.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, rather than track Whitman's self-deification, as his disciples did, Allen tunes into his deep exhaustion, an exhaustion increasingly evident in the late work: “Whitman seems . . . to feel now that he had written himself out,” he writes. “This was probably the result of his physical decline. The ideas were no longer bubbling to the surface; his emotions had cooled, and the images had lost their freshness. Yet out of habit he must keep

on” (443). Of Whitman’s train trip out west in the fall of 1879, Allen relates the poet’s thrilled excitement, his sense of growth, but declares this a mere illusion: “Everything he saw merely confirmed the ideas and theories which he had been expressing in his poems since 1855” (488). Though he clearly dismisses the late work’s importance, he is nevertheless drawn to the poet’s late humility, and to a sense of cultural weariness that seems at times to echo Allen’s own.

As we read more about what Allen has to say of the disciples, however, a deeper cynicism disrupts this sense of kindred weariness. Reflecting on the final four years of the poet’s life, Allen relates that they “have been so minutely recorded by Horace Traubel that it would be almost impossible to find anything new for a biographer to tell” (531). He applauds Traubel’s zeal, but he writes that *With Walt Whitman in Camden* is “actually—and unintentionally—one of the cruelest [acts of biography] in literary history,” a record “banal” and “repetitious,” much, he suggests, like the poetry itself. Allen casts Whitman very much as the reluctant prophet in his later years, resistant to disciples that were always “laying it on too thick,” as Whitman himself liked to say (534). But once the stuff of spirituality fades, Allen is left only with the bathos of old age, a supplement more dull than dangerous. The biographer in many ways re-affirms the emerging canon of Whitman’s work that had come into view in the scholarly work of F.O. Matthiessen, R.W.B Lewis, and others: Whitman is the irrecoverable American innocent alongside his sterner peers, a poet that now appears somehow lost to us.

Although Allen’s biography was the first significant post-World War II account of Whitman’s life, it must be viewed alongside a significant contemporaneous biographical effort from the other side of the Atlantic. A year earlier in France, Roger Asselineau published his *L’Evolution de Walt Whitman* (1954), a substantial, two-part critical biography that was published in the United States as separate volumes in 1960 and 1962, and recently reissued through the University of Iowa Press’s Whitman Series, a testament to that biography’s lasting importance. Writing in a very different post-war context, and carrying on the bolder, more optimistic inheritance that is often the mark of Whitman’s international reputation, Asselineau reads the work from

the 1870s as a supreme act of poetic and personal recovery. In the first, more traditionally biographical volume, the late work produced during the period of decline that inevitably followed such heroism is largely cast aside: “‘Sands at Seventy’ contained only one important poem,”<sup>23</sup> Asselineau writes of the First Annex to the Deathbed Edition of *Leaves*, which contained the bulk of the poet’s poetic output after the 1881 edition. But the weakened Whitman, at least, remained consistent: “The remarkable thing is that the tired, paralyzed, old man renounced no part of the message of his youth and, in spite of illness and suffering, continued to celebrate the joy of living” (1:259). The notion that Whitman’s lateness has nothing left to work through, that it is generally untroubled and unchanged, has been one of the most persistently damaging readings of the late work even when it would seem to place Whitman himself on the rarified pedestal of age. Writing of the second annex to *Leaves*, Asselineau peppers his language with diminutive modifiers that demonstrate how a rarified and exceptional sense of age meets a sort of erasure verging on neglect when it comes to the late work itself: “this *thin* volume... contained *only* thirty-one poems, all *very* short, in which Whitman *hardly* did more than take up again, with *less* energy, some of the themes he had treated earlier” (1:265, my emphasis).

If the first volume of Asselineau’s biography romanticizes the late life even as it dismisses the late work, the second volume breaks from a dedicated diachronic trajectory. Here, Asselineau offers instead a series of partial career arcs cast through distinct thematic clusters bearing titles such as “Ethics,” “Aesthetics,” “These States,” and “Prosody.” This organizational schema allows certain anomalous intensities to emerge that were obscured by the more traditional diachronic overview. Indeed, with this varied thematic focus, Asselineau in fact anticipates many of most meaningful re-assessments of Whitman’s old-age poetry. He writes convincingly, for example, of how Whitman “became increasingly mindful of form” (2:255), as is evidenced in his scrupulous revisions that reveal a sense of music, timing, and metrical prosody that were largely missing in the early work. And though Asselineau speaks of Whitman in age as a poet who “could only repeat weakly what he had formerly proclaimed in a stentorian voice” (2:255), he also



combats those diminutive modifiers noted above with a sense verging on the superlative when it comes to the general music of his verse: “he slowly became a more and more conscious artist,” Asselineau suggests, “a more and more subtle craftsman, more and more master of himself and his means of expression” (2:252). In matters of language, Asselineau notes Whitman’s increasing use of archaisms, which reflect a general tendency towards abstraction over the concrete. Though this tendency is often viewed as a diminishment of prior originality, much can be learned from how carefully Whitman negotiated his relationship with convention and tradition even as he continued his language experiment.

Despite these promising suggestions, however, the evolutionary paradigm of the first part of his study, dominated by the thesis of decline, leaves him little room to ask how Whitman’s increasing preoccupation with form might reflect both a productively different poet and also a profoundly different world. In a key chapter tracing Whitman’s relationship to industrial civilization, for example, the biographer finds no contradiction between Whitman’s love of nature and his investment in industry, or his unease with the failures of Reconstruction and his faith in democracy. Asselineau’s own investment in Whitman’s faith in futurity, his sense of “the world as a constant becoming,” often mutes the divergent energies of Whitman’s late work that exist not so much within but between the biographer’s distinct thematic emphases (2:49).

After Asselineau’s account, the era of major Whitman biography waned for a time. A revised edition of Allen’s biography was published in 1967, but it had little new to offer regarding Whitman’s late work. Perhaps sensing that there was no need for yet another exhaustive and authoritative life after Allen’s, a number of critics chose to tell more partial tales. A trio of critical psycho-biographies from the late 1960s through the early 1980s, which revive a tradition of biography initiated most powerfully by the French critic Jean Catel in his 1929, are variously dismissive and outright antagonistic in their approach to the late work.<sup>24</sup> In the last of these, David Cavitch in *My Soul and I* (1985) unequivocally dismisses Whitman’s poetry after the second edition: “With the exception of a handful of good poems written

after 1859,” Cavitch writes, “Whitman only added voluminous fat to *Leaves of Grass* during the remaining thirty-two years of his writing career, by writing poems that sound like imitations of himself.”<sup>25</sup> Other partial biographies during these decades include Joseph Jay Rubin’s *The Historic Whitman* (1973), which covers the life of the poet prior to 1855 with an emphasis on the journalism. Paul Zweig’s *Walt Whitman: The Making of the Poet* (1983) terminates with Whitman’s Lincoln elegy “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” never attempting anything like an account of the final 25 years of the poet’s Whitman’s life. “After Lilacs,” Zweig concludes, “there was not silence but sporadic effort, sparse and diminished. . . . [H]is great work was done.”<sup>26</sup>

Amidst this swath of minor lives, Justin Kaplan’s *Walt Whitman: A Life* (1980) emerges as the first complete and exhaustive biography after Allen’s revised edition of his *Solitary Singer* in the mid-1960s, and the first to reframe Whitman’s later years both structurally and thematically. The biography proper ends with a chapter that takes us from the end of the Civil War, through the poems of the 70s, and to a final meditation on the prose work *Specimen Days*. He does not deny that Whitman’s work declined in age, but he has a more reverential way of saying so: “Lilacs,” he writes, “is also an unconscious farewell to the creative powers of an ‘elderly, literary gentleman’” who had said he expected to “range along the high plateau of my life & capacity for a few years now, & then swiftly descend.”<sup>27</sup> Whitman as self-elegist of his own creative powers—although, with a quarter century to live, the descent in literal terms was less than swift—seems more compelling than Whitman as a merely failing artist. But by not actually following Walt through his so-called long afternoon at the biography’s conclusion, Kaplan grants Whitman a slightly swifter poetic descent. “When he placed on Lincoln’s coffin his symbolic sprig of lilac in flower,” Kaplan writes, “he looked ahead to his own tomb in Harleigh Cemetery” (309).

Kaplan concludes his biography at Timber Creek, the farm of Whitman’s young friend Harry Stafford where he summered and visited occasionally in the mid-to-late 1870s. Thus, he ends at a moment of rejuvenation and, compared to the devastating year of 1873, recov-

ering health. “Like Adam, in this wild garden that he called Timber Creek,” Kaplan writes in words that channel the disciples’ fondness for this pastoral interlude, “Whitman, gaining back strength and spirit, looked at nature as if for the first time” (267).

In an organizational move unique to Whitman biography, the late years proper that would normally be the final chapters make their way instead to the front of the book. And rather than present this time of life as one of decline and desuetude, he uses it to establish the fundamental mystery of the poet. Kaplan makes a compelling choice here. By foregrounding Whitman in age, he avoids the transitional moments that so often happen in Whitman biography: the perfunctory suggestion of inevitable decline that shadows the final chapters of so many biographical lives. When one begins with the period of so-called echo and repetition, it no longer has the triumphant sounding board of “Song of Myself” and the earlier work to contend with. The late years come to life unburdened at the start of this biography in a way that they never do when they are presented as the scene of inevitable decline.

That said, Kaplan’s first two chapters themselves give little indication that Whitman even wrote poems after 1876. Kaplan does not even cite the late work for its autobiographical or thematic value. What Kaplan puts in place of the late work is a careful cultivation of mystery. He presents an image of Whitman as a stand-in for the biographer himself, “stir[ring] his archive with the crook of his crane” (16), trying to make some sense of these scraps from a life. Late in life, Kaplan writes, “the relics of personal history floated to the surface”—the letter from Emerson, for example, a note from Edward Dowden, small evidences of poetic beginnings. But Kaplan wrests a sense of unease, and a tension lacking in so many accounts of late Whitman, from this nostalgia: “there were hints that a less robust spirit had once prevailed,” he writes, “a spirit covert, hesitant, perturbed, lonely, and always unrequited” (17). Along these lines, he recalls Whitman’s statement to his first biographer Richard Maurice Bucke that “I am by no means the benevolent, equable, happy creature you portray” (17). Kaplan also notes how Whitman’s British admirer, the writer Edward Carpenter, sensed a certain “remoteness and inaccessibility”

about the poet. Kaplan seems drawn to Carpenter, who suggested that behind every line of *Leaves of Grass* lies something hidden, or, in words Carpenter reported the poet had spoken to him, something “concealed, studiously concealed; some passages left purposely obscure. . . . I think there are truths which it is necessary to envelope or wrap up” (18). Discussions about what Whitman, exactly, felt the need to conceal most often return to questions of Whitman’s sexual identity. But the poet’s penchant for what he variously called indirection and suggestiveness, as Kaplan seems to grasp, transcends any narrow application and speaks broadly to the man and his world.

Kaplan concludes the late life somewhat anomalously with words from the relatively early-career 1860 poem “Facing West from California’s Shores,” taking it as a talisman of Whitman’s late years, and as a statement of the fundamentally elusive, mysterious nature of this particular biographical subject: “But where is what I started for, so long ago? / And why is it yet unfound?”<sup>28</sup> Late Whitman lives in Kaplan’s account as he rarely lives today in the popular or scholarly imagination: as a question, as something unknown and even mysterious—perhaps even to the poet himself.

After Kaplan and a minor, more impressionistic life by Phillip Callow,<sup>29</sup> David S. Reynolds’s cultural biography *Walt Whitman’s America* (1995) returns in earnest to the cultural contexts of Whitman’s life, filling out more fully a project that had its roots in Canby and, later, Allen. Not until Reynolds’s biography, however, do we gain a deeper sense of what motivated Whitman in age. Reynolds, for the most part, sees Whitman largely conceding to the disillusionment of the post-war years: “industrialization and growth of centralized power structures brought new challenges for the poet intent on social salvation,” Reynolds writes. “His rise from rebellious individualist to Good Gray Poet was played out against the background of the rise of corporate capitalism and institutional organizations.”<sup>30</sup> While Reynolds does a superb job of presenting this cultural context, he is less successful at productively reading the poetry alongside it as he sees in the late work little more than a generic demotion from his former lyric heights to the merely occasional: “Although [Whitman] believed more ardently than ever that America would be ultimately redeemed

only through poetry,” he writes, “most of the poetry he writes after the war were brief vignettes or thoughts, as though his imagination had surrendered its all-encompassing posture on behalf of writing for the occasion” (450). Reynolds recognizes a similar demotion in the wake of Whitman’s bitter disappointment as he came to understand the Civil War’s inability to purify the cultural and political air in America. Noting Whitman’s increasingly theatrical and conventional tendencies in his later years, Reynolds relates these traits to a more thickly mediated culture. This more mediated culture reflected and in some ways encouraged a change in Whitman’s poetics as the intimacy of public life ceded ground to a culture of the spectacle. Though very alive to the ways in which these broad cultural changes shaped the poetry, Reynolds is again less interested in exploring the ways that the poetry not only accommodated these conditions, but also responded to them. And so, in the end, the familiar dismissal of Whitman’s late work persists: “He was now beyond even thinking about writing a sweeping, cohesive poem about America,” Reynolds writes. “His role combined nostalgic storyteller, the benign nature poet, and the wallower in self pity” (565). Everything becomes simplified in what Reynolds terms the “homogenized optimism” of positive thinking that accompanies Whitman’s late work (585)

Allen’s cynicism in relation to the late Whitman often turns, in Reynolds, into something like disgust. What bothers Reynolds beyond any aesthetic failure is Whitman’s concession to the cultural forces around him. Reynolds is perturbed, for example, by Whitman’s fawning over capitalists such as Andrew Carnegie, who attended one of his famous Lincoln lectures and gave him \$300. He also notes Whitman’s not-so-subtle racism and his non-committal politics. In short, as he entered the age of institutionalization, Whitman himself became an institution. However unflattering these images of Whitman’s post-Civil War years might seem, they form the crucial background of Whitman’s lateness where his earlier ideals become almost unrecognizable at times—perhaps, most of all, to the poet himself.

Gary Schmidgall’s *Walt Whitman: A Gay Life* (1997) shares with Reynolds and other biographers a deep regret over Whitman’s late concessions and accommodations, but on decidedly different grounds.

Indeed, Schmidgall takes Reynolds to task for what he calls his “radical neutralizing (neutering, rather) of Whitman’s sexuality” (91) in which the male same-sex romantic attachments that inspired the *Calamus* poems are both normalized and sanitized. What he excoriates Reynolds for, however, he then perpetrates himself by constructing a life whose grounding lament is precisely this radical neutralizing and neutering that the poet himself seemed to pursue in both public and private, in both his literary and literal lives, as he aged. Schmidgall writes by way of introduction that what he offers is not a full life—that it is restricted, obviously, in terms of theme, but also in its temporal focus: “Being devoted principally to sexual identity, sex, and love,” Schmidgall writes, “the following pages will necessarily be mainly focused on the most pertinent time of Whitman’s life: his prime.” He defines this span as running from 1837 to 1864, but notes that the true focus will be on the development of the first three editions in the 1850s up to 1860. Later editions receive attention primarily for what has been altered and expurgated as Whitman, Schmidgall writes, casting one of the poet’s own darkest self-assessments as a given truth, undergoes a “destructive transformation in age” (xxxii).

The late work—which commences, for Schmidgall, after the Civil War—receives some of its most withering critique in the tradition of Whitman biography. Writing of “Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood” (1872), Schmidgall calls it a “very good example of bad late Whitman, at once earth-treading and bombastic” (67). There is no question here as to what separates the good from the bad, the early from the late. What began, Schmidgall suggests, as one of the “bawdiest poetic houses of the nineteenth or any preceding centuries” transforms into the conservative, ceremonial space of the “cathedral” (145). “No longer a celebrator of the cruiser’s life,” Whitman became, in words that echo Reynolds’s complaint, “a diplomat, a poet/prophet, an American-boosting master of ceremonies for the national pageant” (144). A bit later, he writes that “the Whitman poetic voice loses its ability to sing pianissimo . . . and tends to become rather boorishly stentorian[;] . . . his delivery becomes browbeating, unsubtle, barky, as often happens . . . with a once-fine voice in decline” (144). The boys whom Whitman used to cast in sensual and saucy terms become, Schmidgall

laments, “like so much else in his later poetry, bodiless abstractions.” (222). Apparently unable, like his figure of late Whitman, to summon the verve necessary for a fitting concluding statement, Schmidgall offers a final, titanic cliché: “As I have often suggested, we would not be greatly poorer if those last two editions of *Leaves of Grass* Horace slaved over had never appeared. They amounted, more or less, to rearranging deck chairs on a slowly sinking ship, a ship that was getting increasingly long in the beam and unwieldy” (232). In light of this critique, it would seem that Schmidgall’s book, admirable for its dedicated focus on Whitman’s sexuality, nevertheless joins a group of studies interested in Whitman and sexuality that inadvertently obscure another neglected Whitman: Whitman in age.<sup>31</sup>

But if few biographers have been as unsparing in their critique of Whitman’s late work, no biographer has also been so thoroughly attentive to the poet’s late life. Despite the apparent focus on that “prime” decade of the 1850s, over half of Schmidgall’s biography traces what he calls Whitman’s “arc of camaraderie” (174) well beyond the Civil War years, and even beyond Whitman’s own life. Furthermore, much of the reflection on those prime years themselves do not simply cast us into the throbbings and perturbations of the *Calamus* poems, but, rather, route us carefully through the retrospective record of those years in correspondence, notebook entries, and, most importantly, Traubel’s monumental record of Whitman’s final years as the two comrades comb through the archival record scattered across the floor of his second-story bedroom in Camden. Not including the annex and afterword to Schmidgall’s biography, *Whitman in age*—filtered through Traubel’s record—can be found on nearly a quarter of its pages. And though Schmidgall, as noted above, coldly notes that there would be no great loss if Whitman’s annexes never appeared, the fact that he includes a deeply personal and beautifully achieved “annex” along with an afterword to his own biography is something like a veiled tribute to what might otherwise be cast off as merely supplemental.

And so, behind his broad dismissal of late Whitman, a much more subtle story persists as Schmidgall draws out the ghost of what was lingering behind revision, or echoing through the absent space of expurgation. “Several passages in the later editions of *Leaves of*

*Grass* (or passages that vanish from them) are particularly haunting,” he laments: “For they seem to capture especially well the sadness of an author so busy to renounce the libidinous joys that made him the most revolutionary of all American poets” (151). Schmidgall later elaborates on this distinctive Whitmanian melancholy: “In his prime he was the supreme poet of locomotion,” he writes, “which gives a specially melancholy flavor to his many rueful comments on his ‘slippered and pantalooned’ Camden dotage in the conversations with Traubel” (167). When Schmidgall writes near the end of his record that “Whitman in his last decades sounded his retreat from love in part through poetry” (223), he suggests a way of engaging the late work that his own dismissal of that work, unfortunately, foreclosed upon. Whitman, as he has been canonized and re-cast through a series of biographical lives, is not a poet of that distinct “melancholy flavor.” He is, as later critics have predominantly argued, a quintessentially ante-bellum poet of exuberance, innocence, adhesiveness, and, as Schmidgall argues throughout, throbbing impetus. It can seem that Whitman is utterly distant from our own world-weary concerns; indeed, this is the dominant lament of post-World War II criticism and biography alike, a lament that also resonates in so many of Whitman’s poetic afterlives. But what would it mean to trace the road to our own melancholy age more directly through late Whitman? This is a question that too many of Whitman’s biographers and critics have not yet taken up in earnest.

No subsequent Whitman biography has emerged that would challenge the composite image of Whitman in age that we see in dozens of biographical reflections. Jerome Loving’s *Walt Whitman: Song of Himself* (1999) does lavish significant attention on Whitman’s later years. But this has more to do with an extraordinarily detailed and less territorial accounting of Whitman’s disciples, more thorough work on Whitman’s editorial endeavors, and new information about the Lincoln lectures that Whitman delivered in the 1880s. And, though Loving pushes back against Ezra Pound’s defense of Whitman’s deliberate artistry, he does note, in relation to the rare enjambed line in the poem “To the Sunset Breeze,” that “until the very end, Whitman was experimenting with form.”<sup>32</sup> Despite this keen formal attention to



the late work, however, Loving writes that Whitman “is packing his literary bags for eternity” in final poems “filled with . . . anticipation of his own impending death.” Constricting the emotional and intellectual range of Whitman’s late poetry, Loving writes that their “tone is wonderment instead of fear” (476). Loving expands the standard accounts of Whitman in age in admirable detail, but he offers little new interpretive ground when it comes to the late work itself.

What to do with Whitman’s lateness? In an essay titled “Whitman and the Biographers,” Justin Kaplan writes of the odd contrast between the extraordinary wealth of documentation concerning Whitman’s late years and the thinness of any corresponding narrative tension that might sustain a compelling plot. “For the biographer writing Whitman’s life in the usual linear way, from birth on,” Kaplan reflects, “all this material can be dismaying in its quantity, even an obstacle to the completion of a story that has already run on too long. The writer smells the stable and gallops through Whitman’s last ten years.”<sup>33</sup> Kaplan, as noted earlier, avoided this problem by placing the late years first in his biography. However novel, such a strategy merely exorcizes the haunting that these late years hold—a haunting that Kaplan largely avoids by making these years into his biography’s inaugural mystery, and that other biographers have dismissed by ignoring the more complex and layered relationships between Whitman’s late work and his late life. If this more complex story has not fully emerged in the context of biography, Whitman criticism—held for too long under the sway of this narrative of decline—has begun over the past three decades to work beyond these constraints and chart out a more nuanced approach to the late work. This evolving investigation, however, is a bibliographic song that remains to be sung.

*College of Charleston*  
vanderzeeal@cofc.edu

NOTES

1 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1891-92), 14. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* ([www.whitmanarchive.org](http://www.whitmanarchive.org)).

2 This string was generated using the TokenX tool on the *Whitman Archive*. There, you can limit your search to the 1891-2 edition of *Leaves* and generate a frequency-based word list that automatically excludes certain common words or “stop words” as they are called in the field of natural language processing. I further removed pronouns, the conjunction “yet,” and the auxiliary verb “shall.”

3 While my primary focus is on traditional biography, I give some attention to criticism and correspondence in Whitman’s own time, as these constitute what I call biographical acts—acts that endeavor to significantly shape the story of a life even as that life unfolds.

4 Richard Holmes, “The Proper Study,” in Peter France and William St. Clair, eds., *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 15-16. For more on comparative biography, see Michael Benton, *Literary Biography: An Introduction* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 117-130.

5 M. Jimmie Killingsworth, “Scholarship, Trends in Whitman,” in J.R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 613

6 Gay Wilson Allen, *The New Walt Whitman Handbook* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 2. The quoted passages remain unchanged from the original 1946 *Handbook*. Hereafter, *NWWH*.

7 I trace this tendency in the work produced by Whitman’s disciples—including the influential pamphlet “The Good Gray Poet” by William Douglas O’Connor; the hagiographic writings and anthological compilations of William Burroughs and Richard Maurice Bucke; and the early criticism and correspondence of Edward Dowden—in a separate essay forthcoming in *ESQ*, fall 2017.

8 Traubel’s magazine *The Conservator*, which ran from 1890 to 1919, carried hundreds of Whitman-related defenses. Traubel also began publishing his casual conversations with Whitman in *With Walt Whitman in Camden* in 1906, releasing three volumes before he died and leaving six more in shorthand. Burroughs published another biography—*Walt Whitman, A Study*—in 1896, and Bucke published *Cosmic Consciousness* in 1901, a new-age tome that includes Whitman amongst a list of spiritual savants, ranked alongside Buddha and Jesus Christ. Burroughs—along with later disciples such as William Sloan Kennedy, Edward Carpenter, Thomas Harned, and others—continued this strain of criticism. Rarely, in these accounts, is Whitman’s literary reputation questioned, much less the fitness of his late work challenged.

9 Thomas Harned and Horace Traubel, “Introduction,” in Richard Maurice

Bucke, Thomas Harned, and Horace Traubel, eds., *The Complete Writings of Walt Whitman*, vol. 1 (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1902), lxviii.

10 See Nigel Hamilton, *Biography: A Brief History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009). Hamilton succinctly captures the broader evolution of biography, which, during the period under consideration, includes a move from what he calls the "Victorian laundering process" (119), a kind of fawning pseudo-biography that was more about rendering one's subject antiseptically exceptional instead of truly capturing the subject's flaws and unvarnished humanity.

11 W. Andrew Achenbaum, *Old Age in the New Land: The American Experience since 1790* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 37.

12 Henry Bryan Binns, *A Life of Walt Whitman* (London: Methuen, 1905), 245.

13 For an overview of the emergence of this kind of late-style critique during the nineteenth century, see Gordon McMullen, *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing: Authorship in the Proximity of Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 50-59.

14 Bliss Perry, *Walt Whitman: His Life and Work* (New York: Houghton, 1906), 247-248.

15 In distinguishing the more significant achievements in Whitman biography from more derivative or partial efforts, especially as it related to early Whitman biography, I follow Gay Wilson Allen's thorough account of the growth of Whitman biography that appears in *NWWH*.

16 Emory Holloway, *Whitman: An Interpretation in Narrative* (New York: Knopf, 1926), 240.

17 John Bailey, *Walt Whitman* (London: Macmillan, 1926), 189.

18 Additional biographies published in this period include Newton Arvin's *Whitman* (1938), more a critical study of Whitman's accommodation of socialist ideals than a proper biography, and Edgar Lee Masters' *Whitman* (1937), geared more for a popular audience. Frederik Schyberg's 1933 biography appears less dismissive of the late work perhaps because of its more objective and less territorial relationship to the work of the disciples. Without overly idealizing the late work, Schyberg, as Allen notes in his essay on Whitman biography, finds a sublimation of earlier sexual anxieties in Whitman's exertions in the Civil War, after which *Leaves* approaches something like grand unity.

19 Henry Seidel Canby, *Walt Whitman, an American: A Study in Biography* (New York: Houghton, 1943), 2.

20 Robert Lowell, *New Selected Poems*, ed. Katie Peterson (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007): 78.

21 Gay Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 443.

22 Whitman, *As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free: And Other Poems* (Washington, D.C., 1872), v.

23 Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, expanded edition (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999), 1:259.

24 For a brief and useful account of psychological approaches to Whitman in biography and beyond, see Stephen A. Black's entry on "Psychological Approaches" in *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia* (561-562). Notably, the French critic Jean Catel's 1929 biography *Walt Whitman: la naissance du poète* is the first to apply Freudian psychoanalytical theories to Whitman's life. As Gay Wilson Allen notes in his overview of Whitman biography, this leads Catel to greatly diminish the later work—or any work after 1855—in which the dynamic psycho-sexual energies are obscured if not altogether forgotten. Catel suggests that what erupted so powerfully in the early work was later simply discarded. And what Whitman chose to cast aside, the disciples—"as ardent as they were blind," Catel writes—did little to recover. "Thus for what he hid Whitman substituted the soul of a poet ready to receive the habiliments of glory," Catel laments: "After [the first] edition is pruned, recast, and diluted into the later editions of *Leaves of Grass*, it lacks the air of reality of that first long revealing cry" (quoted in Allen 36).

25 David Cavitch, *My Soul and I: The Inner Life of Walt Whitman* (Boston: Beacon, 1985), xiv.

26 Paul Zweig, *Walt Whitman: The Making of the Poet* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 345. See also Joseph J. Rubin, *The Historic Whitman* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1973).

27 Justin Kaplan, *Walt Whitman: A Life* (New York: Simon, 1980), 308.

28 Whitman, *Leaves* 95.

29 Phillip Callow, *From Noon to Starry Night: A Life of Walt Whitman* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1992). In the wake of Kaplan's broadly praised biography, Callow's life offers another truncated life, giving less than ten pages to the final ten years and ominously naming his final chapter, covering the entire post-war period, "The Descent." See Callow, *From Noon to Starry Night: A Life of Walt Whitman* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1992).

30 David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 447-450.

31 Gary Schmidgall, *Walt Whitman: A Gay Life* (New York: William Abrahams, Dutton, 1997). See also Schmidgall, ed., *Intimate with Walt: Selections from Whitman's Conversations with Horace Traubel 19888-1892* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001). In his introduction, Schmidgall provides background on the range and dynamism of Traubel's record, but he also leaves room for what remains unsaid, or at least undocumented, as when the incident involving John Addington Symonds inquiry to Whitman that directly broaches the question of the extent to

which Whitman work relates to and even condones sexual relations between men goes almost entirely ignored. What resided in such silences or omissions? And what does that tell us about Whitman in age? This is a suggestive question that remains to be more fully explored both in Traubel's record, and in Whitman's late life in general.

See also Vivian R. Pollak, *The Erotic Whitman* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). Pollak's penultimate chapter, "Whitman Unperturbed: The Civil War and After," ends with a rich discussion of "When Lilacs Last," but finds no space, given her thematic constraints, for discussion of any works from the final quarter century of Whitman's life.

32 Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 476.

33 Kaplan, "Whitman and the Biographers," in Joann P. Krieg, ed. *Walt Whitman: Here and Now* (Westport: Greenwood, 1985), 15.