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WALT WHITMAN: A LIFE, by Justin Kaplan. Simon and Schuster, 1980.

Walt Whitman, to date, is one of the most closely scrutinized figures in American letters. According to Gay Wilson Allen in a preface to his 1955 critical biography, *The Solitary Singer*, there have been approximately fifty attempts thus far to document the life and career of the poet.

One may argue that the reason for this is rather simple: there is no figure in either American drama or fiction who can compare with Whitman in his relation to American poetry. Hawthorne, who died in 1864, is a major American writer, yet there are far fewer life-studies. The same can be said for other major American nineteenth century literary figures, such as Melville and Twain. Alone among poets, only Poe (whom Whitman was to recall to Horace Traubel as "a little jaded") has generated anywhere near as much interest.

But there are other factors. Whitman, like Poe, is a major - and seminal - figure in American literature taken as a whole. *Leaves of Grass* is not only one of the world's truly great books, it has also had more influence on American writing than any other volume except possibly the Bible. (Think, just off hand, of the writers who openly allude to Whitman in their work: Thomas Wolfe, Hart Crane, John Dos Passos, Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, Willa Cather... The list could most likely be expanded for pages.) Then, too, Whitman the man is by no means a dull subject for the biographer: cagey, contradictory and virtuous (occasionally even saintly), he presents a tempting challenge. Many have risen to that challenge.

Yet none, so far, has given readers what might be called a "definition" biography, by which I mean that there is no biography of the poet which would make yet another effort seem superfluous. To say that there is no definitive Whitman biography is not entirely to demean the attempts made thus far: several, particularly Allen's *The Solitary Singer*, are very accomplished. But by and large, the attempts to present the poet's life have been flawed to some degree. The reason is simply that Whitman is an enormously difficult figure not only to document, but even to understand. He is, as Allen points out in his preface, "one of the most remarkable personalities of the nineteenth century." Behind that saintly veneer of simplicity there is an immensely complex man.

One of the first problems which presents itself to the biographer is the question of how Whitman the newspaper hack, the scrawler of doggerel, woe-fully sentimental and moralistic short stories, and an awful temperance novel (all of which he was later to repudiate), came to be the author of *Leaves of Grass*. There are two schools of thought here: one which argues that Whitman had some sort of visionary or mystical experience (such as Blake claims to have had), the other pointing to the "long foreground" which Emerson mentions in that famous first letter to the poet ("I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start..."). The truth is no doubt located somewhere in between.

One of the apostles of the former view is Edgar Lee Masters, who argues for the "vision" theory in his 1937 volume, *Whitman*. He writes: "a definite spiritual change came over Whitman in his early thirties. His friend, Doctor Richard Maurice Bucke, asserted that Whitman achieved cosmic consciousness at about that time." Probably as a consequence of this "cosmic consciousness" theory, Masters dismisses virtually all of Whitman's pre-*Leaves* writings as "rubbish."

Which misses the point. As Allen noted in *The Solitary Singer*, Whitman had read probably more, and unquestionably in wider circumference, than his college-educated rivals and contemporaries, Whittier, Longfellow, Holmes, Lowell, et.al. All of that reading went into the "long foreground," as well as Whitman's boyhood experience on Long Island ("Starting from Paumanok") where he acquired his lasting love of nature. All of this one can see evolving through the pre-*Leaves* writing, and it is the biographer's obligation to discuss that rather than dismiss it as "rubbish." Yes, it was rubbish, but it was WHITMAN'S rubbish.

Studies of Whitman's pocket notebooks indicate that *Leaves of Grass* was in gestation some time in the 1840's - probably seven or eight years before the first (1855) edition. (Kaplan, by the way, doesn't think so, arguing that Whitman would not have waited so long to publish at least some evidences of a great discovery). No doubt there was a great deal of inspiration, as well as experiment, behind the finished lines in that first book. But the notebooks prove that Whitman took a number of years to work out the structure and method of his *Leaves*. Visions? Not likely.

Some biographers, such as Gay Wilson Allen, neglect to a certain extent another part of that "long foreground": Whitman's personal life. For example, even so fumblingly inept and ridiculously naive a biographer as Frances Winwar (in her 1941 *American Giant: Walt Whitman and His Times*) could recognize the importance of Whitman's months in New Orleans in 1848. Whitman had gone there to work on the newspaper *The Crescent*. It was the first time he had left the New York area; the first time he had really traveled; the first time he had put distance between himself and his family. It was there, Whitman was later broadly to hint in verse, that he met and fell in love with someone. (No one has ever discovered the identity of this "woman" - who may well have been a young man - and Whitman's claim to have fathered six illegitimate

children by her or others has been completely discredited.) Yet Allen, in a book which runs to over 500 pages, devotes only six pages to these mysterious months in New Orleans. In fact, the chief defect of *The Solitary Singer* is that Allen, in his headlong rush to get to the poems (which, make no mistake about it, he dissects with plentiful insight and good sense) ignores a lot about the poet's personality, about Whitman's private life. It may well have been during the poet's months in free and easy New Orleans that he was initiated into sexuality of some kind.

Which brings us to the major obstacle for Whitman's biographers: the poet's sexuality. It should be noted that prior to these "enlightened" times, biographers of homosexual figures - such as Tchaikovski - often chose simply to subtract the sex life of their subject from the book; to pretend that it didn't exist. In fact, those biographers who have chosen to present the homosexual aspect of their subject's personality in a frank way have been maligned, as was the case in 1969 when John Unterecker's aforementioned life of Hart Crane was greeted with deep gasps of horror for dealing straightforwardly with Crane's homosexuality.

Most of Whitman's biographers, thus far at least, have dealt with the poet's sexuality either by ignoring it or by denying its essentially homosexual nature. It would seem difficult for them to do this: they are confronted with the "Calamus" poems ("We Two Boys Together Clinging," etc.), the fact that Whitman not only never married, but avoided the sexual companionship of women altogether; and the additional fact of his many warm friendships with younger men, such as Peter Doyle and Harry Stafford. To put it bluntly, Whitman was likely as gay as pink ink. He was also well aware of the stupid prejudices of his times and thus never came forward as openly homosexual. That leaves many of his biographers in the lurch. Many have been victims of their own prejudices and

homophobia. Eager to cover Whitman's tracks, they dissolve the hardest evidence into literary or psychological theory or simply evade the issue altogether. They cluck about the poet's "universal" message and go on to other matters. In short, they want the poems without the poet. But clearly homosexuality was at the very center of Whitman's celebrated world outlook.

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In *Walt Whitman: A Life*, Justin Kaplan has largely overcome the problems and difficulties which have plagued the Whitman biographer. Kaplan, whose *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain* earned both a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award, has gotten as close to the spirit of Whitman as anyone yet.

To begin with, Kaplan ignores the traditional structure of biography, whereby the biographer begins with an exhaustive geneological report, marks the birth of his subject, notes assorted contemporary historical events, and takes it from there. Kaplan opens his book with a chapter entitled "Mickle Street" - a carefully crafted picture of Walt in his last, happy years - which not only presents us with the graven image of the bard, but summarizes Whitman's own feelings about his life's work ("But the fact remained: despite the skillfully managed publicity of martyrdom and neglect, Whitman's great poem of joy and liberation - his gospel for the century of democracy, science, and steam - had come nowhere near being affectionately absorbed."). Thus the events of that life which follow - and they include geneology, historical context, etc. - are placed in perspective from the very start. We are plunged at once into the great man's life, rather than having to disinterestedly make our way through what is often times a lot of padding.

On the "long foreground," too, Kaplan's work is more exhaustive than that of his predecessors. For example, Whitman's interest in Italian opera - which was something like a mania - was clearly one of his intellectual component parts. Yet few previous biographers understood this sufficiently to trouble themselves to tell us what operas Whitman heard and which singers he was enamored of. Kaplan also elaborates on the idea of some sort of spiritual awakening. He writes: "Unlike many of his contemporaries, for whom the 'vision' was a useful literary convention, Whitman was being quite literal when he spoke of ecstasies and illuminations. He may have experienced them in adolescence...and in all probability he experienced them again during 1853-1854." However, he acknowledges that Whitman's world outlook - especially the poet's involvement in the madcap political squabbles of his period - was a major impetus for *Leaves of Grass*. While Kaplan can discuss "illuminations," he has also given us a better picture of Whitman's long preparation for writing *Leaves of Grass* than anyone.

The one issue where there is room for disagreement is sexuality. Kaplan is far too close to his subject to want to cover up Whitman's homosexuality. But he, like some others, maintains that Whitman's sexuality remained always on the level of "desire rather than fulfillment." He writes that "it is Whitman's poetry, and not any overt act that one can point to, that defines his nature."

Certainly there is ample evidence of Whitman's sexual longings for men in *Leaves*; evidence unearthed by Kaplan himself, who argues convincingly for passages concerning anal intercourse, fellatio, and masturbation. However, just because there isn't documentary evidence of Whitman's ever having had a male lover, are we to assume that his was a lifetime of frustrated chastity? In his later years, the poet consigned a number of personal papers to the fire. Why?

This thorniest of problems remains a problem even after the publication of *Walt Whitman: A Life*, not because Kaplan is afraid to discuss the poet's sexuality, but because he too readily gives us the familiar Whitman as a passive and sexually repressed individual. Isn't there evidence enough in the poet's notebooks that he was sexually active? Could those "long kisses" planted on soldiers in Washington have been dispensed without a certain long foreground of their own?

Walt Whitman: A Life is the best book to date on the bard. There are several reasons for saying so, aside even from its general frankness on the matter of Whitman's sexuality. For one thing, Kaplan is a writer and - in stinging contrast to *The Solitary Singer* (up to now considered THE biography to read) - it is written with all the grace and style of good fiction. Kaplan has also managed to address himself at length to the poems without the endless critical nitpicking that can exasperate readers to the point of a double martini. Best of all, he has succeeded far more than anyone to date in drawing us close to the personality and temperament of Whitman: an accomplishment which must have required reservoirs of shrewdness and skill.

Seated briefly astride the non-fiction best seller list, *Walt Whitman: A Life* will send many in the direction of Whitman's writings. Thus, Justin Kaplan has done us a double service and I, for one, am grateful.