

AN AFTERTHOUGHT

When Whitman died, on March 26, 1892, he was already a legend. He had so fully assumed the role he created for himself that Whitman the man and Whitman the poet of democracy and transcendentalism are one and inseparable. During his lifetime he knew that he was ahead of his time and accepted the fact of both enthusiasm and sneer among his readers and critics on their first acquaintance with his poetry. He was absolutely certain of the fulfilment of his prophetic function as poet of 'the Body and the Soul'. In 1968, poetry lovers all over the world celebrated the 150th birthday of Whitman. Some fourteen years earlier, in 1955, the hundredth anniversary of the appearance of Leaves of Grass was also quite widely observed. Both these dates left an indelible imprint on the minds of thousands -- many, many thousands - of men and women in lands far and near. These anniversaries certainly testify to the enduring quality of Whitman's work as a poet.

Whitman's voice rings out to-day as clearly as ever. His poetry is so full of freedom and light that one thing is sure : it will maintain its vitality in times to come : this despite the fact that some literary critics refer to Whitman's verses with open or scarcely concealed scorn.

We should not be surprised that reactionaries reject Walt Whitman. Was he not convinced that humanity would live on for ever and not die an inglorious and pitiful death; was he not

sicken'd by everything that impoverishes the human spirit and destroys what is best in men and women; did he not believe that real unity of peoples of all races is possible; did he not see the world as boundless in extent and as blindingly beautiful? He spoke of it in words that are simple and eternally fresh, for he wanted poetry, joy and communion with nature to be accessible to everyman and woman.

It is precisely those qualities of Whitman's, which are resented by the narrow-minded, that will continue to endear him to the human beings of the future. The indestructible charm of his poetry is sure to shine ever more brilliantly as years go by and win its way into the hearts of many millions of people. Whitman belongs to the not so distant past of world literature, and also to the present day. When we read Whitman nowadays, we feel the warmth and inimitable originality of a poetry which will be claimed as their own by our grandchildren, and perhaps by their grandchildren too.

Whitman's art is very subtle and exceedingly suggestive. It demands a greater collaboration with the reader. Though some of his greatest poems contain carols of simple lyrical beauty, read as a whole, they reveal the fascinating intricacy of a sonata. More often, however, especially in his early work, Whitman merely gives out poetic hints for any reader who has the skill to use them -- daring thoughts, stimulating phrases, the

rough sketch for a picture, a haunting rhythm. This determination to provoke a creative reaction in the reader accounts, also, for his constant employment of the second person, as though he wrote, not to exhibit himself, but to enter into an intimate conversation with the reader. He is the answerer, but first there must be questions. Much is thus left for the reader to do --- suggestions must be followed, subdued music must be heard, unaccustomed attitudes must be adopted; but in doing these things the reader becomes himself a poet. Therein lies the real success of Whitman's poetry.

Walt Whitman lives through his poetry exx to-day and will continue to live on in the future, for he has given expression to many of our most intimate thoughts, feelings and hopes. How is it possible to remain indifferent to a generous heart? How is it possible not to answer a ~~xxxx~~ smile with a smile, joy with joy, trust with trust, and brotherly feelings with the warmth of comradeship?

Whitman is dear to millions because he was in love with life, a full, healthy, joyous life of freedom and equality. His poetry attracts people because of its free unfettered form, its stream of images, its endless variety of rhythms and its verses, now broad, free, and unhurried like the fields and prairies of America, now tense, as though gathered into a fist in order to answer blow for blow. All his life Whitman was an-

scious that the masses be given the opportunity to live a truly full life. "I want", he declared, "the people; most of the people : the crowd, the mass, the whole body of the people : men, women, children : I want them to have what belongs to them : not a part of it, not most of it, but all¹ of it."

During his lifetime, the great and immediate power of the man and his poems made any ordered assessment of his work virtually impossible. To read Whitman was to know a man who made himself out to be now visionary, now sage, now prophet, often all three at once. His poetry will give and has so long given the indelible impression that he is inseparably bound up as one with all men, and, therefore, one with God. In short, Whitman demanded and to-day also his poetry demands, despite all multifarious critical analyses, of his readers, not just the willing suspension of disbelief, but wholehearted, absolute belief itself. In the background of present-day political and ~~spiritual~~ spiritual unrest and ~~many~~ dilemma, Whitman's poetry is timely and relevant. It will continue to encourage and inspire troubled souls in social, political, and spiritual spheres for a long time to come, unless the world is over⁽night destroyed through the senseless actions of crazy maniacs.

There can be no grave for Whitman ... Shall he not

1. H. Canby, Walt Whitman, p. 245.

always live in the broad, brilliant, sunlit world of poetry? Is he not there this moment, singing the glory of the 'Handkerchief of God', as one writes? ... So he still lives for all that love him well : in a romantic chamber of the heart, in a nostalgic country of the mind, where it is always 1866.