CHAPTER - V

REVIEWS AND CRITICISMS

[1]

The first edition of Leaves of Grass -- a thin, ninety-five page quarto, bound in green cloth, stamped with the Victorian design of flowers and foliage -- appeared on the fourth of July, 1855, a day coinciding with the national Independence Day. There was no ~~xxxxxx~~ author's name on the title page, which only had on it printed, "Brooklyn, New York, 1855." Excepting the small type of the copyright notice on the next page, the author's name did not appear till page 29, where he announced himself in a line as:

"walt whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a Kosmos". Facing the title page there was an engraved portrait of the author, his broadbrimmed hat tilted at a slightly rakish slant; coatless, with his shirt-collar open at the throat; standing casually with his left hand in his trousers' pocket and the right on his hip.

About a thousand copies of the book were printed, partly by Whitman himself, but few were sold. Its copies were sent to prominent men of letters as Whittier and Emerson. The latter read the book carefully and with

interest, and wrote generously to the author that it was "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed."[1] Getting this letter, Whitman felt greatly encouraged, and brought out another edition of the book in 1856 along with the letter of Emerson, together with an effusive answer in which he addressed Emerson as "Master".[2]

In all, there were some nine editions of Leaves of Grass, all published during Whitman's life time, the last being published in 1892, the year of the poet's death. All these subsequent editions of the book were the result of the poet's contemplation and pruning, additions and subtractions and were published over a period of thirty-seven years. Each edition represented a stage in the growth of the poet's mind that sent forth its own individual fruit and seeds. Seldom in the history of art have the readers been so privileged with such an intimate view of the creation of a masterpiece.

In 1860 a new edition of Leaves of Grass appeared. It contained the self-reviews by the poet who considered that freedom was essential for the growth of a healthy nation and an equally healthy individual that the poet was expected to be. In the meantime, the Civil War broke out. It inspired the poet to compose a series of poems entitled Drum Taps. To these were

1. Vide H. W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley, (ed.) Leaves of Grass, p. 729.

2. Ibid., p. 730.

added later the poems on Lincoln. The year 1867 saw the publication of the fourth edition of the Leaves, which included both Drum-Taps and Sequel to Drum-Taps.

In 1871 appeared the fifth edition of the book. The same year witnessed the publication of Democratic Vistas and Passage to India. The poet faced great domestic and personal troubles in the years to follow. In 1873, he suffered from a severe paralytic stroke and in May of the same year his mother died. In a mood of deep gloom and dejection, the poet moved to Camden. The sixth edition of Leaves of Grass came out in 1876 in two volumes and contained such famous compositions as Passage to India, Democratic Vistas, After All Not to Create Only, and, As A Strong Bird on Pinions Free. Meanwhile, the poet's English friend Anne Gilchrist, arrived in America and relieved to some extent his loneliness and depression.

The seventh edition of the Leaves of Grass was published in 1881 and included the poet's tour experiences of the western part of the country. This tour strengthened the poet's belief in the efficacy of the land of vigour and charm. The eighth edition came out in 1888 -- 1889 and incorporated the famous November Boughs. The ninth or the death-bed edition was published in 1891-92. It contained Good-bye My Fancy, which was meant to serve as the poet's farewell to the world of poetry. This last edition presents the final shape and size of the poem as it came to grow through sustained efforts of long

thirty-seven years. Each edition represents a stage in the growth of the Leaves. Emerson in his famous letter, already mentioned, had suggested that Whitman's career must have had "a long forground some where." Emerson was here crystallizing the critical problem pertaining to the growth of the poet's genius culminating in the publication of the Leaves of Grass.

This is a difficult problem indeed, because it can not be solved by arranging a catalogue of all the external facts and events of Whitman's life and amplifying those that touch upon literature. Whitman wrote a lot during the thirty-seven years of formation of his poetic genius, but nothing is more memorable than the Leaves of Grass. No doubt, it is the preparatory time for the poet, then seething and simmering and bubbling for the torrential outburst of the 1855 Leaves.

There are for us some glimpses into this long, deep-down preparation in the poet in his note-book jottings made during the late 1840's and early 1850's. In these personal, private notebooks, Whitman wrote some of the most revealing lines and passages which he later developed in Leaves of Grass. It is really surprising to think that the poet carried on a kind of double creative activity at the sametime -- carrying on his journalistic writing and secretly testing on paper the daring, profoundly-felt passages of the as yet uncreated Leaves.

In his note-book sketches Whitman is seen as a

visionary whose dreams are to be realised in the days to come. As time passed, the lines multiplied and the passages swelled, until, by 1855, the poet could hold it back no longer, and cried out: "Unclench your floodgates, you are too much for me." In Specimen Days, Whitman went over the foreground of his life. Here he made clear some of the situations and events that had powerful impact upon him. Although Whitman probably concealed, xxxxx consciously or unconsciously, as much as he revealed, his suggestions are worthy of note. In naming the three main sources of his character, he listed his "maternal nativity stock" from the Netherlands, "paternal English elements", the most tangible of all, "the combination of my Long Island birthe spot, sea-shores, childhood's scenes, absorptions, with teeming Brooklyn, and New York ..." Thus, some of the influences that inspired Whitman's genius during the creative period of his songs are : (1) the sea, the country, the city and the pavements; (2) the brooding upon human body and soul; (3) the new-born, healthy, Democracy or the en-masse; (4) the American Civil War and its after-effects; and (5) the American people.

There is hardly any reason to doubt that many of the most powerful as well as complex lines of Whitman were written directly out of his own experience, particularly those about the sea, the waves, the tide and the many paradoxes of life. The crowds, the teeming city, the noisy pavement as also the

solitude of life and nature -- all these, paradoxical though at times they may sound, were, beyond doubt, dominant influences on Whitman. He found in his own experiences the kind of paradox or contradiction that revolved itself in his own soul, could frankly admit that contradiction and which he meant to set forth in his characteristic way that was to thread all through the Leaves of Grass. He speaks of the "convulsive breaths" of the sea and the "blab of the pave." In doing so, he is noting a music of the natural world and of the city that cut deeply into his imagination. As he observed in Democratic Vistas (1871), he was still calling for an American literature "Vitalized by national, original arch types." The metropolis Manhatta drew his attention more than once in the course of writing his poetry. Again, his was a day of evangelism and oratory. In the Leaves one may sense both the influences at work.

Of all the formative influences upon Leaves of Grass mention has to be made of the opera and the theatre. The opera especially was the poet's passion, and the music, the structure, the libretto -- all were absorbed in the gestation of the Leaves. More prominent among the influences working upon Whitman were those of the notion of Democracy, of the Civil War and its gloomy effects, and of Transcendentalism, all of which have been elaborately discussed in earlier chapters. Whitman was bent upon fulfilling precisely Emerson's ideas about the Oversoul and expressing in poetry of the infinite possibilities of the people,

society, and country.

Even after this summing up of the major influences on Whitman's poetic development, there still remains something more to be mentioned. Biographers have long sought for the love-affair or the comradeship that set off the spark. In his old age Whitman replied to a query from The British classical scholar J. A. Symonds : "My life, young manhood, doubtless opens to criticism. Though unmarried, I have six children, two are dead -- one living Southern grandchild -- fine boy writes to me occasionally -- circumstances (connected with their benefit and fortune) have separated me from intimate relations."[3] This curious 'confession', together with the Children of Adam sex poems like A woman waits for me and We Two, How Long We Were Fool'd, have inspired the biographers to create out of their fantasy a romance or a secret love-affair that, though perhaps briefly and ecstatically fulfilled, could not be sustained -- and that provided the tensions that compelled the Leaves of Grass to grow. However, it is not proper to explain a literary masterpiece in terms of a single sexual experience or a passing human relationship. The growth of Leaves of Grass is perhaps not so much accountable for external facts or events as for those internal that bring out the genius of the poet. A work of art cannot be explained otherwise. We have to take

---

3. Whitman's letter to Symonds quoted by Gay Wilson Allen: vide The Solitary Singer (New York, 1955), p. 536.

things as they are and strive more towards the enjoyment of the final product which should be our only concern -- namely, how much pleasure and satisfaction we can derive from it to the maximum. Personal events do give shape to a work of art -- especially to its subjectmatter, -- but they do not tell the whole story and any attempt at probing into them should be dropped for the sake of better artistic appraisal.

* * *

[2]

The first edition (1855) of Leaves of Grass began with a long Preface in unconventional and strangely punctuated prose, followed by twelve untitled poems in a loose, unrhymed, unmetrical verse which must have seemed strange to the average reader in a year which also saw the publication of Tennyson's Maud, Long fellow's Hiawatha, and Whittier's Blessings on Thee, Little Man. In the Preface, Whitman gives his own views about the functions of the poets and poetry of the future. The poet, according to him, is a seer "in whom his own age is transfigured."[4] The Preface epitomizes, better than any other single poem, Whitman's philosophy and his aims in literature. Parts of the Preface were later incorporated, with only minor changes in the poems like By Blue Ontario's Shore (1970), To a Foil'd

4. Floyd Stovall : Whitman: (New York, 1939), p. XIV.

European Revolutionaries (1870), and Song of Prudence (1881).

The poem which later on came to be known as Song of Myself contained the promise of all that ~~and with which~~ Leaves of Grass was to become after long years of expansion and revision. It was the heart of Whitman, though by no means Whitman at his best. But to the average reader of 1855, the poem would certainly have seemed "a bizarre medley or arogant self-assertion, prophetic incantation and confession, interspersed with pictorial descriptions and catalogues of people, things and sensations."[5] Of the remaining eleven poems of the edition, a few were more unified, but hardly any one which was, in form or in content comfortably familiar. The unifying purpose of Leaves of Grass throughout, though perhaps mostly unconscious at first, was to show how man might achieve for himself the most complete freedom, possible within the limits of natural law. As Floyd Stovall has pointed out, Whitman's plan provides "three channels for the consumation of this purpose : Democracy, Love, and Relation."[6] These become the dominant theme of all the poems. The book, therefore, is a trilogy, celebrating the Body, Democracy, and Religion, as William Sloane Kennedy calls it.[7] It shows how freedom may be secured for the body through democracy, for the heart through love, and for the soul through religion. By such

5. John Kouwenhoven : "Introduction" to Leaves of Grass (New York, 1950) p. VI.
6. Stovall, Ibid., p. XXV.
7. W.S. Kennedy, : Reminiscences of Walt Whitman (London, 1896) pp. 100-102.

channels Whitman's egotism, sensuousness, and sentiment found a natural and easy outlet in Leaves of Grass. Sentiment, which appeared in his early writing as sentimentality, eventually developed into a deep sense of the spiritual and the ideal.

The moment one opens the Leaves of Grass and glances at the first page, one becomes aware of and acquainted with the fact that one is looking at a kind of poetry different from all what it was before. Whitman was the first poet in American history to exploit the possibilities of free verse to the maximum. There is a rare compatibility between his form and themes; the long unrestrained line in its free flow captures in the very form the spirit of democracy and freedom that Whitman breathed into his verses. But Whitman did not throw away completely the past poetic traditions. A casual glance at any page of the book reveals the use of such standard devices as assonance, alliteration, repetition, inverse word-order, parallelism and many such others. Although Whitman freed himself from the measured foot, his poetry is filled with a rhythm of its own, strong in the ear even if elusive to the eye. Whitman's revision of Out of the Rocked Cradle to Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking indicates his genius for achieving the inherently musical line. Looking at a number of the major poems of Leaves of Grass, the serious reader will invariably feel inclined to the whole work with a favourable attitude as constituting a sustained

and integrated poetic vision. Whitman himself wanted his poems to have a unity in the same sense that the earth, or the human body, or a perfect musical composition is. This presentation by the book of an undeniable unity of poetic vision is indeed admirable. Nothing is off-the-track here; there is a definite sense of a beginning, a middle, and an end through the whole course of poetic vision and its expression through suitable terms and gradually developing stages.

According to James E. Miller, a recapitulation of the structure of the Leaves of Grass suggests the emotional logic in the ordering of its parts. He suggests that in effect the structure of the whole work is pyramidal,[8] which can be divided into three clear parts, starting from a broad, flat base, and gradually ascending upward to a pin-pointed conical apex. These divisions or parts are : (1) The Modern Man I Sing or the New World Personality; (2) The Threes of Democracy; and, (3) The Way from Life to Death or the so-called stage of transcendentalism.

The pyramid not only suggests the relative dependence of the various parts -- the personality must be created before the poet or the man can be engaged in a particular time and space, and his being and existence and engagement must pre-

---

8. James E. Miller, Jr., "Introduction" to Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of Walt Whitman (Boston, 1959) p. 11.

cede his envelopment in the World of spirituality -- but it also suggests the proportionate pre-occupations of Modern Man :Mostly personal and involved with the identity of self in life, but maturely concerned for the society and the state, and with profound moments of spiritual meditation on the bridges leading from life to death.

This outline of structure is not meant to impose a rigid scheme on the book but rather to suggest the breadth of the poet's vision and the impressive measure of his achievement. The structure is not a mere grouping of poems in accordance with subject-matter. Miller thinks:

> The groups defined by the outline are not independent entities, to be shuffled around at will, but exist in an appropriate order, embodying a complex net-work of relationships. It is necessary that 'the gigantic embryo skeleton of personality' (Whitman's phrase) be first introduced, defined, and related to the world and time in general before it is plunged into this specific 'Time and Land we swim in' (again, the poet's phrase). And it is inevitable that this prototype personality be given birth, identity, and relationships with a certain century and country before primary attention is focused on his relation to death and immortality.

> There is not only a 'poetic' sense to this order; but throughout the basic poetic intent is gradually but designedly fulfilled: the articulation of the archetypal New World 'hero'.[9]

* * *

[3]

On the publication of Emerson's letter[10] with the 1856 edition of Leaves of Grass, the greatness of the book was immediately recognized and Whitman leapt into fame as a poet, worthy of serious attention and interest. It is doubtful if any subsequent critic of Whitman's work has so succinctly stated the chief merits of Leaves of Grass. The book is decidedly a work of great poetic art -- "sometimes turgid and muddy, sometimes flatulent, often rhetorically moving and occasionally of the most concentrated and flawless imaginative precision."[11] The book should be read and understood as a whole. The additions made in new editions only increase the richness of the thing and do not mar it in any way.

It is quite interesting and instructive to note the various comments from different quarters about Leaves of Grass and its author on the first publication of the book. They show

9. Miller, ibid.
10. 21 July 1855.
11. Kouwenhoven, p. XVI.

the impression and reaction that the book created among readers and critics in the press. Some of these went in favour of the poet, eulogising him and admitting his great contribution to ~~xxxxx~~ poetry, while others criticized him in the strongest terms, at times in the most objectionable and irrational language.

In his introduction to the English edition of Leaves of Grass (1867), W. M. Rossetti described the book as the great poem of American democracy and remarked about Whitman that he was profoundly in sympathy with the predominant temper and aims of the predominant nation to which he belonged; he brought a glowing mind into contact with his own time and people and the flame from which it caught fire was Americanism.

Emerson, in his already mentioned letter, spoke highly of the intrinsic merit of the book and greeted Whitman in the most inspiring terms at the beginning of a great career. But later on Whitman's frank treatment of sex displeased him quite a lot and he wrote to Carlyle[12] about it as a non-descript monster with terrible eyes and buffalo strength and although indisputably American, was wanting in good moral very much and was only an auctioneer's inventory of a warehouse and could be used to light one's pipe with it.

To Thoreau[13] the book sounded very brave and American. He did not believe that all the sermons that had been prea-

12. Vide Emerson's letter dated May 6, 1856.
13. Vide Thoreau's letter to Harrison Blake, December 7, 1856.

ched in America put together were equal to the book for the preaching. He thought that all Americans ought to rejoice in him, though they must shudder when they read him and it was beyond doubt that the poet was awfully good.

The New York Times, in November 1865, considered the book as a centaur, half-man, half-beast, neighbouring defiance to the world. The book was looked upon as a strange conglomerate of thought, with insolence, philosophy, blasphemy, beauty, and gross indecency tumbling in drunken confusion through the pages. The poet was described as an arrogant young man who rooted like a pig among a rotten garbage of licentious thoughts.

In England, Anne Gilchrist was of the opinion[14] that since she had Leaves of Grass, she could read no other book. It held her entirely spell-bound, and she read it again and again with deepening delight and wonder. For her, the reading of the poems was truly a new birth of the soul and the words in them became like electric streams. In some of them there was such a tension of the heart that she could not at times bear it. She considered America as a happy land that had Whitman as her son, the young giant of a nation that could produce his kind of greatness, so full of the ardour, the elasticity, the inexhaustible vigour and freshness, the joyousness, the audacity of youth.

---

14. Vide An English woman's Estimate of Whitman (1870).

R.M. Bucke, a desciple of Whitman, commented[15] that Leaves of Grass was the initiative of a marked rise in moral nature, the preface and creator of a new era. What the Vedas were to Brahmanism, the Law and the Prophets to Judaism, the Avests and Zend to Zoroastrianism, the Kings to Confucianism and Taoism, the Pitakas to Buddhism, the Gospels and Pauline writings to Christianity, the Quran to Mohammadanism, Leaves of Grass would be, in his opinion, to the future of American civilisation.

Swinburne hailed Whitman as a new force in his Songs Before Sunrise. In the obituary, on the other hand, published after Whitman's death by The London Times,[16] the editor remarked that most of the readers never cared for Walt Whitman or read his poems, because of his discarding rhyme and metre, as most readers still thought these essential to poetry. The prejudice against Whitman's unpoetical style was so great and persistent, that on account of this many critics refused to acknowledge him as a poet at all. The article of Porf. Dowden[17] was refused by many literary journals because their editors were allergic to Whitman's unpoetic verse and wanted to be saved from Whitmanism. Even Swinburne, in a letter to W.D. O'connor, the greatest champion of Whitman's poetry in America, remarked that Whitman's was indeed a Titanic voice, but it

15. Vide Walt Whitman (1883)
16. March 27, 1892.
17. 'The Poetry of Democracy : Walt Whitman', Studies in Literature 1789-1877 (1892)

seemed to be the voice of the giant beneath the volcano, -- half-stifled, half-uttered, -- roaring betimes because the articulation was impossible. The poetic style of Whitman, in his view, was uncouth and rough.

W.D. O'Connor worked like a crusader to give Whitman his rightful place as the true American poet and thought that the whole American nation was represented by and reflected in Whitman's Leaves of Grass.[18] He was of the opinion that the whole gigantic epic of the American continent was most remarkably depicted in all its magnificent reality in those pages. One could behold in it the immense and absolute sunrise which was all America's own.

John Burroughs, a disciple of Whitman, remarked[19] that the poet personified in Leaves of Grass the spirit of universal brotherhood. What would seem colossal egotism, shameless confessions, or unworthy affiliations with low, rude persons, what would seem confounding good and bad, virtue and vice, etc. in Whitman the man, would only serve to illustrate the boundless compassion and saving power of Whitman as the spokesman of ideal democracy.

As late as 1900, George Santyana called Whitman's poetry the poetry of barbarism.[20] In his opinion the

18. Vide The Good Gray Poet (1866).
19. Vide Whitman, A Study (1896)
20. Vide 'The Poetry of Barbarism', Interpretations of Poetry and Religion (1900)

order of Whitman's words, the procession of his images, reproduce the method of a rich, spontaneous, absolutely lazy fancy. He thought that Whitman had gone back to the innocent style of Adam, when the animals filed before him one by one and he called each of them by name.

The impression and opinion of a writer of D. H. Lawrence's standing is worth-noting. He expressed the opinion[21] that Whitman was the first to break the mental allegiance, to smash the old conceptions of the superiority of the soul to the body, a tiresome moral approach. Whitman was the first heroic seer to plot soul down among the potsherds. It was a new great doctrine of life, of morality of actual living, not of salvation. Lawrence placed Whitman as the greatest and the first and the only American teacher of the open road, and no Saviour preaching the morality of salvation.

Certain literary men in America and in England have helped to surround Whitman with an atmosphere of hostility. It would be wrong to suppose, however, that all American literary critics were opposed to Leaves of Grass. Among the several dozen reviews of Whitman's poetry, which appeared in the United States in mid-century, there were some friendly ones also.

The New York Tribune[22] was ahead of the others in expressing a rather favourable opinion about the first edition of Leaves of Grass. Its reviewer, Charles Dana, was practically the

21. Vide 'Whitman', The Nation and the Athenaeum, July 23, 1921.
22. Vide Maurice Mendelson, Life and Work of Walt Whitman (1976) p. 108.

first to comment publicly on the poet's unusual poetic gift. The review also contained some critical remarks, especially about the indecency of Whitman's language in his love lyrics.

One of the early editions of Leaves of Grass was also appraised highly in a serious journal, the North American Review[23] in which Edward Dale, a well-known literary figure, wrote that Whitman's poetry was outstanding for its freshness, simplicity and veracity.

But these reviews did not affect the attitude of the majority of newspapers and magazines. The appearance of Whitman's book was met in the press with a storm of abuse. The New York Criterion[24] called upon the law to deal with the obscenity in Whitman's poetry.

The Boston Intelligencer[25] declared Whitman's verses to be a heterogeneous mass of bombast, egotism, vulgarity and nonsense, and even suggested that he deserved to be physically punished with ~~xxxxxxxx~~ lashes for his flagrant violation of decency. And the Boston Post declared in 1860 that "both Whitman's Leaves and Emerson's laudation had a common origin in temporary ~~in-temporary~~ insanity."[26]

23. January, 1856.
24. Mendelson, p. 108.
25. May 3, 1856.
26. Vide R. M. Bucke, Walt Whitman (Philadelphia, 1883) p. 201.

Whitman's book was subject to vicious irritation in England as well. Thus, the London Critic for April, 1857 wrote, "Walt Whitman is as unacquainted with art as a hog with mathematics."[27] Another English journal said that Leaves of Grass was a dirty book.[28] And the London Literary Gazette simply announced that "of the writers we have ever perused, Walt Whitman is the most silly, the most blasphemous, and the mos disgusting."[29] It is no wonder that shortly before his death the poet said to his friend Traubel, "The world now can have no idea of the bitterness of the feeling against me in those early days."[30] It is also interesting to note that the first comments on the author of Leaves of Grass to appear in the Russian press in 1861, the reference being based on English sources, raised emphatic doubts about his moral ~~principlhm~~ principles.

In his self-review in the United States Review[31] Whitman declared in a challenging voice that Leaves of Grass was the creation of one of the roughs, large, proud, affectionate, eating, drinking and breeding, thereby introducing the reader into the atmosphere of Leaves of Grass as it were.

There is evidence that shortly after the appearance of the first edition of Leaves of Grass. Abraham Lincoln read

27. Vide H.S. Canby, Walt Whitman (New York, 1943) p. 123.
28. Canby, p. 123.
29. Bucke, p. 202.
30. E. L. Masters, Whitman (New York, 1968) p. 99.
31. Vide 'Walt Whitman and His Poems', Anonymous, United States Review, Sept. 1855.

the book. Henry Rankin, one of Lincoln's junior partners in legal practice, stated in memoirs, published after the poet's death, that Lincoln was already attracted to Whitman's verse when he was living in Springfield. Rankin wrote that Whitman's Leaves of Grass was one of the few new collections of poetry which interested Lincoln. According to Rankin, Lincoln commended the new poet's verses, for their virility, freshness, unconventional sentiments, and unique forms of expression. If we are to believe the author of these memoirs, Lincoln even "claimed that Whitman gave promise of a new school of poetry."[32]

* * *

[4]

The form of Whitman's verse in the Leaves is far from casual, far from lawless rhythmical pattern of the lines and the thematically developed structure of the poems as individual organic units. Some of the main themes of Whitman are : democracy, science, life, death, sexuality, and reconciliation of contradictions. Though the poet appears to be self-centred, he comes with a prophetic chant and is highly spiritual. Whitman gives to his reader the impression of a deep love for life and energy. He asks him to grasp life with a poet's faith and sympathy.

32. G. W. Allen, The Solitary Singer p. 175.

Leaves of Grass offered to the nation a new and vibrating voice. In the words of another American poet, William Carlos Williams:

> Leaves of Grass ! It was a good title for a book of poems, especially for a new book of American poems. It was a challenge to the entire concept of the poetic idea, and from a new view-point, a rebel view point, an American view-point. In a word and at the beginning it enunciated a shocking truth, that the common ground is of itself a poetic source. There had been inklings before this that such was the case in the works of Robert Burns and the poet Wordsworth, but in this instance the very forms of the writing had been altered; it had gone over to the style of the words as they appeared on the page. Whitman's so-called 'Free Verse' was an assault on the very citadel of the poem itself; it constituted a direct challenge to all living poets to show cause why they should not do likewise. It is a challenge that still holds good after a century of vigorous life during which it has been practically continuously under fire but never defeated.[33]

33. William Carlos Williams, "An Essay on Leaves of Grass" in Whitman (Twentieth Century Views, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce, New York, 1962) p. 145.

To express it in a nutshell the book marks the beginning of a new poetic era and principle.

Many readers may think that Leaves of Grass is merely a collection of lyric poetry, some good, some bad. Others will defend the book as the embodiment of the American reality and ideal, as a superb fulfilment of all the genuine requirements of the national epic. The pertinent questions may be asked : Did Whitman write in the Leaves of Grass the epic for modern America? Did he believe so?

The answer may be found in a number of his prose works, beginning with the 1855 Preface. It is evident from here that Whitman desired Leaves of Grass to have a unique relationship with America. The entire Preface can be regarded as a veiled account of Whitman's concept of his own role as a poet. Surely he includes himself in the category when he says : "The poets of the Kosmos advance through all interpositions and covering and turmoils and stratagems to first principle." Though Whitman does not use the term, it is obvious and quite apparent from the 1855 Preface that Whitman believes his book to have the basic nature and general scope of the traditional epic.

In Democratic Vistas, Whitman again reveals his concept of the nature of his poetry when he said : "Never was anything more wanted than, to-day, and here in the States, the

poet of the modern is wanted, or the great literates of the modern ... Perhaps the central point in any nation ... is its national literature, especially its archetypal poems."[34] Whitman wanted his poetic work, as represented by Leaves of Grass, to serve as and be recognised as that kind of archetypal poem, the great epic of America.

In A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads (1888), Whitman, summarizing the contribution of his own work, again stresses the need of the nation for a commensurate poetry. But he is no longer indirect in what he means to say and his claim this time is direct : "As America fully and fairly construed is the legitimate result and evolutionary outcome of the past, so I would dare to claim for my verse." According to the poet, the Old World "has had the poems of myths, fictions, feudalism, conquest, caste, dynastic wars, and splendid exceptional characters," but the "New World needs the poems of realities and science of the democratic average and basic equality." As against the "splendid exceptional characters" of the old world epics, the New World epic will dipict simply -- man : "In the centre of all, and object of all, stands the Human Being, towards whose heroic and spiritual evolution poems and everything directly or indirectly tend, Old World or New."

In the very opening poem, Whitman uses the construction,

34. The complete Writings of Walt Whitman, ed. Richard M. Bucke, et. al. (New York, 1902) V, pp. 54-55.

"I sing", characteristic of the epic in introducing the themes -- "One's Self I sing", "The female equally with the male I sing", "The Modern Man I sing". In this first poem, the Muse is mentioned -- "Not physiognomy alone nor brain ~~strongx~~ alone is worthy for the Muse, I say the form complete is worthier far"; but it is not until the second poem, As I Ponder'd in Silence, the Muse is invoked, addressed, and reassured. As the poet considers his work, he is visited by the Old World Muse:

> A phantom arose before me with distrustful aspect,
> Terrible in beauty, age, and power,
> The genius of poets of old lands.

This Muse is skeptical, for all past epics have had as their subject the "theme of war, the fortune of battles,/The making of perfect soldiers". The poet welcomes the challenge and assures the Muse that he, too, sings of "War, and a longer and greater one than any." In the poet's war, the ~~field~~ field is the world, the battle "for life and death for the Body and for the eternal Soul." The central point of this key-poem is that the ~~poetx~~ poet's book qualifies as an epic, even under the Old World definition, if sufficient freedom is allowed to interpret the terms.

There are other instances in Leaves of Grass in which Whitman calls attention to the epic nature of his book. In

Starting from Paumanok, he outlines his plan for encompassing in his poetry the entire nation -- "Solitary, singing in the West, I strike up for a New World." The poems of Leaves of Grass are to constitute "a programme of chants for Americans." The poet's insistence on an intimate and unique relation between his book and his country also appears quite frequently as his appeal to the Muse. In Song of the Exposition, the form is epic if the tone is comic:

> Come Muse from Greece and Ionia,
> Cross out please these immensely overpaid accounts.

If in this poem the Muse loses some of her dignity as the poet instals her amid the drainpipes, artificial fertilizers and the kitchen ware, in By Blue Ontario's Shore, the Muse is transfigured into a "Phantom gigantic, superb, with stern visage" who commands the poet:

> Chant me the poem ... that comes from the soul of
> America, chant me the carols of victory, ...
> And sing me before you go the song of the throes of
> Democracy.

It is characteristic of Whitman not to invoke the Muse, as the Old World did, for help, but to make her plead with the poet to continue his writing so that vital themes would not go unsung. It is evident that Whitman thought of his work in epic terms.

The extent to which he fulfilled his epic ambitions, however, may be measured only in terms of his final achievement and the great admiration and applause that the book has enjoyed till today.

[6]

Now, something need be said in greater details about the opinions of critics and men of letters on Whitman's poetic performance, mentioned already in the previous ~~chapter~~ section. In 1855, Charles Eliot Norton reported to James Russel Lowell on his summer reading. The high-lights consisted of Longfellow's Hiawatha, just about to appear, and Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass,. He reviewed the book in Putnam's Monthly[35] where he pointed out that Whitman combined in the book the characteristics of a concord philosopher with a New York fireman. He also commented that there was little original thought but much original expression in it. He praised the book for some of its superbly graphic descriptions, and great stretches of imagination, and also spoke ill of passages of disgusting and intolerable coarseness.

Lowell did not of course find anything in the book which he could praise much. Yet his response was not as horrifying as Whittier's, who threw his copy of the book into the

35. Sept. 1855.

fire. But evidently he was annoyed by the upstart poet. There is little evidence that Lowell actually read Whitman. He was one of the first American men of letters to be less offended by the book than by Whitman's advertisements for himself.

Given the extraordinary circumstances surrounding its publication -- the fact that it bore no author's name, nor publisher's imprint, and that it was distributed by a firm primarily interested in phrenology -- it is remarkable that Whitman's book was noticed at all. Whitman's decision to send a copy to Emerson was very intelligent indeed. Emerson's letter of ~~xxx~~ 21st July, written two weeks after the book was published, set Whitman crowing. No writer in America could have asked for a more heartening response. Emerson's letter assured Whitman of his vocation and confirmed his daring treatment of sex. Emerson was taken aback when he learned that Whitman printed his letter in the New York Tribune but he forgave Whitman and made his enthusiasm known in Boston. Without Emerson's endorsement, it is doubtful that Whitman's book would have been reviewed. In the immediate silence that followed publication, Whitman set about writing three 'anonymous' reviews himself. He must have known that his book would offend many readers, and it did. But the reviews were actually more favourable than not -- in general the book was better xxxx received in ~~Boston than~~ New York -- and no self-educated printer who found himself the friend of Emerson,

Thoreau, and Alcott, praised by Edward Hale in the North American Review,[36] Putnam's Monthly,[37] and the London Weekly Dispatch[38] could consider his book a failure.

With the publication of Drum Taps in 1865, Whitman had every reason to suppose that he would be acknowledged as the representative American poet. The sales of the third edition of Leaves of Grass in 1860 approached five thousand copies, and if the book was often parodied, it was widely reviewed and more favourably than not. Henry James's suggestion that Whitman would capitalize on his role during the Civil War seems rather callous, but it is true that Whitman could not help but profit from the notoriety he achieved.

No volume of Whitman's was more ignored than Drum-Taps. His literary reputation in the sixties was so low that, in the opinion of Gay Wilson Allen, nothing could have reconciled the countless admirers of Longfellow and Lowell to anything published under Whitman's name. Both Henry James and William Dean Howells, representing the voice of the younger generation, treated Whitman in their respective reviews in the Nation[39] and the Round Table[40] as a man who had acquired a largely undeserved reputation. Although Howells never seemed to have recovered from the revulsion he felt upon reading Leaves of Grass, he did

36. Op.cit.
37. Op.cit.
38. Dec. 7, 1866.

39. Mr. Walt Whitman, The Nation, Nov. 1865.

40. Review of Drum-Taps, The Round-Table, Nov. 1865.

grant Whitman a few poetic moments. James, however, granted Whitman nothing, and attacked him not because of his improprieties, but because of his insensitiveness to language. James thought that it was the work of a man who had an ear for neither music nor words : it began like verse and turned out to be pnose, but prose, in order to be good poetry, must first be good prose. James also had accused him of having disregarded all the literary criteria of an artist. James's attack must have hurt the most; for, inspite of whitman's public role as the spokesman for the spontaneous in art, his letter to O'connor proves that he respected sincerely the literary criteria that James had accused him of disregarding.

In concluding, in his review of Drum-Taps[41] that Whitman's readers will find no pleasure in any particular word or metaphor, but rather in the 'atmosphere' of his poems, the most judicious member of Whitman's circle, John Burroughs, might seem to provide only more ammunition for the enemy. In suggesting, however, that in reading whitman we take our pleasure from forms which are closer to the xxxxxix repetitive and associative forms of music, Burroughs offered an alternative to the criticism of James and Howells, and anticipated a much later response by reminding his readers that Whitman is often closer to the psalmist than to the conventional lyric poet.

To counter-act the disenchantment of the literary establishment Whitman needed a criticism which would be suscep-

41. Galaxy, Dec. 1866.

tible to his virtues without excusing his faults. Ardent admirers like William O'connor, who saw Whitman as a christ-figure suffering from Romans in places of high office, and Whitman's Canadian friend R. M. Bucke who proposed Whitman as an example of cosmic consciousness and thought Whitman either actually a god or in some sense preter-human, did whitman more harm than good. W.M. Rossetti's selection of the Poems of Whitman, published in London in 1868, brought Whitman an honest fame. Although it has been observed that whitman's English enthusiasts were primarily those men who admired his sexual boldness, readers like Symonds, Swinburne, Rossetti, Stevenson and Hopkins were perfectly capable of recognising a good poem when they saw one. Swinburne's admiration in his letters for Song of Myself and The Sleepers suggests that from the beginning he was alert to both the best and the worst in Whitman. The extraordinary outpouring of invective he directed at Whitman in his essay Whitmania, can only be explained by the personal animosity Swinburne felt toward some of whitman's friends. In his earlier writings on Whitman, Swinburne could balance his hatred for Whitman the rhetorician, with his admiration of Whitman the poet.[42] Edward Dowden, the best of Whitman's English critics,[43] is one of the first to acknowledge a shifting, dilating Whitman, one who, to anticipate Yeats's criticism, is not ignorant of the darker side of democratic life.

---

42. Under the Microscope (1872).
43. Dowden, op.cit.

Whitman died an international celebrity more honoured abroad than at home. In America some of his earliest detractors now spoke more favourably of him. Edith Wharton recalled how James took pleasure in reading Whitman aloud, and James, in his review of Calamus,[44] spoke of the joy he found in reading Whitman. The review of November Boughs by Howells is cited sometimes as another instance of reconciliation with Whitman. But if Howells conceded that Whitman enlarged the range of literary experience and emancipated poetry from the conventions of the day, he took with one hand what he gave with the other. In making literature more direct and natural, Howells declared that Whitman was celebrating that which did not need celebration. He hoped that one day an editor would 'clean up' Walt Whitman, but in the meantime no reader would be offended by November Boughs. Whitman would have had every right to complain of the patronizing manner of his contemporaries. In 1873, when Emerson published an anthology, Parnassus, he omitted Walt Whitman entirely.

The reception of Leaves of Grass in 1855 is a subject worth its own study. Whitman appended a selection of reviews to the edition of 1856 and prepared a collection of reviews to promote the edition of 1860. These essays are sometimes more interesting than anything else as indicators of the moral climate than criticism. The best critic of the edition

44. April 16, 1898, Walt Whitman's Letters to Peter Doyle, Vol.2

of 1855 is Whitman himself. Readers of the Preface of 1855 should have recognised Whitman's voice in the essay which appeared in United States Review[45] the more daring essay is ~~whitman~~ Whitman's review of his own work and that of Tennyson's, an essay in which he adopts the pose of the shocked first reader of Leaves of Grass. Such essays can be well taken by a reader as interesting comments of the author himself on his first attempts at poetry and written anonymously in order to publicize his poetic work in the beginning.

Most of the writing about Whitman during his lifetime was biographical rather than critical. Whitman encouraged his friends to describe him as the figure he wished to become, and whitman himself was responsible for much that was factually untrue in O'connor's The Good Gay Poet, John Burroughs's Notes on Walt Whitman as Poet and Person, both published in 1867, and R. M. Bucke's Walt Whitman of 1883. In England, William Rossetti, Anne Gilchrist, and J. A. Symonds did much to make Whitman famous. Symonds's book, published the year after Whitman's death, is still readable and raised a plea for the ~~objective~~ objective study of whitman, but it is, in essence, a summary of Whitman's views. In the essays by Dowden, Swinburne, Burroughs, and Santayana,[46] whitman's work received that kind of balanced

45. Op.cit.
46. G. Santayana, Walt Whitman : A Dialogue, Harvard Monthly, Vol. 10, No. 3, May, 1890.

critical appraisal which has proved the only adequate assessment of his worth in general, and more particularly during the period 1855 - 1892, which forms the first phase of Whitman criticism in America and abroad by contemporaneous critics.

Now, to come to the next phase of Whitman criticism, or rather the period which can be termed as the period of the developing debate on Whitman that started roughly around 1898 with Henry James's review of Calamus, and ending with D. Mirsky's Russian interpretation of the poet.[47]

In spite of the remarkable serenity with which Whitman suffered criticism, he was not indifferent to the kind of attack levelled at him by Howells and James. With his best friends assuring him that they loved him whether he wrote in something called verse or prose, it is no wonder that Whitman would conclude A Backward Glance by telling his audience that his work offered a 'Person' rather than 'literature' and that no one would get at his verses who insisted upon viewing them as a literary performance. But if Whitman was rejected by America's men of letters, he found himself a hero nevertheless, as the poet of 'high-mindedness', as William James calls him, the emancipator of sexual freedom, 'the natural affirmer', as Van Wyck Brooks pronounces him, the optimistic spokesman for fresh air and democratic

47. The Poet of American Democracy (Tr. by Samuel Putnam, 1955).

culture, the representative poet of the New World Democracy. For twenty years testaments were written by men and women for whom reading Whitman was a religious experience, in spite of the fact that, like G. K. Chesterton,[48] they were often unsympathetic to both Whitman's language and his form. Such statements are really a part of the history of morals rather than criticism, but they account for Whitman's popularity during these years. Paul Elmer More's essay[49] stands out on that it acknowledges Whitman's total commitment to literary experience and, without condescension, tests his work against his contemporaries, Tennyson and Browning.

It is sometimes difficult, from amongst the Whitman critics of this phase, to distinguish Whitman's admirers from his detractors; but all are in opposition to the 'cosmic' Whitman whom Lawrence tears so relentlessly in his essay,[50] the Whitman who 'aches with amorous love' and who in 'embracing All', leaves nothing of himself.[51] In the opinion of George Santayana, Whitman's insight into man did not go beyond a sensuous sympathy; it consisted in a vicarious satisfaction in their pleasures, and instinctive love of their persons. It never approached a scientific or imaginative knowledge of their hearts. Santayana's accusation anticipates Lawrence's condemnation of Whitman's failure of nerve, his reluctance to pursue as a writer as well as a human being, the logic of the 'individual soul'. Both Santayana and

48. Vide Conventions and the Hero (1904)
49. Vide Walt Whitman, Shelburne Essays (1906)
50. Studies in Classic American Literature (1923)
51. Op.cit.

John Jay Chapman, the latter in his essay on Whitman,[52] acknowledge Whitman's power, but in describing Whitman as a poet who offered an abundance of detail without organisation, and a wealth of perception without intelligence, they were only confirming the deep-rooted prejudices of a younger generation about to admire Joyce and Eliot. Pound, extending his hand to Whitman, could admire the spirit of his defiance, but not his craft. Pound's essay[53] suggests that he had many thoughts to express about Whitman. It is unfortunate that Pound took no further occasion to write on Whitman's poetry, since Pound acknowledged the 'deliberate artistry' behind the apparent freedom in Whitman's line and caught his insinuating rhythms. To the followers of Pound and Eliot, Whitman's verse seemed antithetical to all that was ironic, impersonal, allusive, and well-wrought. As Amy Lowell smugly put it, the moderns were positively trying to do something. In his essay[54] he remarked that Whitman was negatively trying not to do something else.

For long after the shock of Whitman's subject were off, there still remained the problem of his form. Perhaps Eliot's confusion reflects most dramatically the difficulty his generation had with Whitman's line. In his essay[55] T.S. Eliot remarked that Whitman was a great master of versification, though

52. Walt Whitman, Emerson and Other Essays (1898).
53. What I Feel About Walt Whitman (1909)
54. Walt Whitman and the New Poetry, Yale Review, Vol. 16 (1926-27).
55. Whitman and Tennyson, The Nation and the Athenaeum, Dec.18, 1926.

much less reliable than Tennyson. It is, in fact, as a verse maker that he deserved to be remembered, Eliot thought, for his intellect was decidedly inferior to that of Tennyson. In his Introduction to the Selected Poems of Ezra Pound (1928), Eliot reversed himself by remarking that Whitman's originality was both genuine and spurious; genuine, in so far as it was a logical development of certain English prose and Whitman was a great prose writer. It is spurious in so far as Whitman wrote in a way that asserted that his great prose was a new form of verse. Whitman's indebtedness to the parallelism of Biblical poetry, to the rhetoric of Oratory and to the prose of Emerson had been pointed out almost from the beginning. The real question, as Bliss Perry[56] and Basil de Selincourt[57] noted, was not how much Whitman's verse resembled prose, but exactly in what ways it differed from prose. Selincourt shows us how we are asked by the speaker in Whitman's poetry to stray upon the borderland of prose and poetry by a guide confident of his power to keep us on the right side of the border.

Thirty years after Whitman's death a new generation of poets wrote him off as a magnificent failure. Like William Carlos Williams, whose opinion of Whitman[58] was never to change, younger poets wanted to separate their own poetry from those fitful rising and falling they felt characterized Whitman's verse. In the opinion of Willams, free verse -- if ever it existed -- is met.

56. Vide Walt Whitman (1906)
57. Vide Walt Whitman : A Critical Study (1914)
58. An Essay on Leaves of Grass in M. Hindus (ed.) Leaves of Grass One Hundred Years After (1955)

The central claims of Whitman's reputation -- his contribution to the poetic line and his role as the poet of democracy -- come under careful scrutiny in the two essays of Amy Lowell and D. Mirsky. If the Whitman who emerges from the pages of Mirsky and Amy Lowell is less revolutionary than the figure who went before -- making poetry out of a system of prosody to which he was in principle opposed and speaking a language of the newspaper rather than that of colloquial speech -- he emerges as a poet and not something else. Both essays remind us that the only way to get at Whitman is to look at particular poems.

In the thirty years which followed his death, Whitman acquired an international reputation, but much of the interest in his work continued to remain biographical rather than critical. Edward Carpenter's was the first book[59] to reprint Whitman's letter to Symonds denying homoerotic love in Leaves of Grass. Carpenter is one of many critics writing during these years who try to penetrate the mask of Whitman's normality. The best biography to appear was by Emory Holloway[60] which, in its turn, was reviewed by T. S. Eliot in his essay 'Whitman and Tennyson' in 1926. Holloway's book remained the standard biography until Gay Wilson Allen's The Solitary Singer (1955).

59. Days with Walt Whitman (1906).
60. Walt Whitman (1926)

While wrong on some factual counts, Holloway was nevertheless to write a persuasive account of a working poet and to save the human from the prophetic Whitman. Of the major figures writing during these years, only Lawrence could openly admire Whitman's ability to prune away the cliché of rhythm as well as of phrase, but two critical studies of Whitman need no apology. In thw work of Bliss Perry and Selincourt, Whitman acquired two readers who were adept at both explication and the analysis of style.

The work of some European critics deserves special mention. In 1933 the Danish Critic Frederic Schyberg in his writing on Whitman[61] furthered the pioneering psychological studies of Jean Catel, and undertook a penetrating analysis of the successive editions of Leaves of Grass. Some sections from his chapter on the Calamus poems are perhaps the best analyses of the emotions expressed in those poems and the most reasonable statement that can be made concerning the erotic in Whitman's verse. The essay by Dimitry Mirsky, is an admirable survey of Whitman's verse. It originally served as the introduction to the 1935 translation of Leaves of Grass by K. I. Chukovsky. Mirsky's essay is all the more remarkable for being the work of a famous convert to Marxism who is able to cut through the political cant and to see Whitman as a thoroughly bourgeois poet. Thus he introduces the line of study that was afterwards taken up by Maurice Mendelson in a book which, among its many treasures of

61. Walt Whitman (1933) (Translated from the Danish by E.A.Allen, 1951).

critical opinion, also contains a pretty full list of the Whitman study in Russian, a veritable gold mine indeed !

Let us now see, last of all, what the modern views are and what the critics of modern times have to say about Whitman's performances in the field of poetry. As far as the thirties are concerned, it might be more instructive to report on who did not write on Whitman. An inquisitive reader of Whitman will look in vain for critical essays by Blackmur, Tate, Eliot, Leavis, Ransom, or Penn Warren. In the warfare between Henry James, 'the organised paleface', and Walt Whitman, 'the formless redskin', Walt Whitman was bound to be treated more as a portent than a poet. Whitman was not read by the major literary critics; he was used. He became a straw man in critical attacks against transcendental individualism, one more of the followers of the 'Lucifer of Concord', to use Allen Tate's phrase, whose programme, when pursued in opposition to tradition, supposedly made poetry impossible. These wars have certain 'strategic value', as Leslie Fiedler has remarked, so long as we remember that the causes for which they are fought are not really the poets who bear the same names, but merely their images, tricked out to horrify or allure. Whitman is no more devil than messiah. He is a poet whom we must begin now to rescue from parody as well as apotheosis. Fiedler's essay[62] appeared in a volume celebrating the one hundredth anniversary of Leaves of Grass. His urgency, and the general tone of the

62. Images of Walt Whitman (1955)

volume, suggests how much Whitman's reputation needed shoring up.

Whitman required the kind of criticism that would cut through both the aesthetic and political propaganda, propaganda which prompted Rahv to assert, à propos Whitman, that the political counterpart of a literary redskin is a mindless democrat, a vulgar anti-intellectual, combining ~~xxxxx~~ aggression with conformity and reverting to the crudest forms of frontier psychology. Whitman may have left himself open to such charges but there was clearly another side to his nature. In the opinion of Lionel Trilling,[63] Whitman was always showing himself as a more complex intelligence than perhaps he wanted to be, or than many of his readers want him to be. Writers like Trilling, Newton Arvin[64] and F.O. Matthiessen[65] established a precedent for the useful study of Whitman. Arvin's work is usually described as politically -- minded, but it would be perhaps more accurate to characterise it as a study of the 'long foreground' about which Emerson was so curious. By setting Whitman apart from the Transcendentalists, both Arvin and Matthiessen touch upon that peculiar blend of the concrete and the ideal which is a quality of Whitman's mind and style.

---

63. Vide Sermon on a Text from Whitman, Nation, Vol. 160 (1946).
64. Vide Walt Whitman (1938)
65. Vide American Renaissance (1941)

The most redent criticism of Whitman begins in ~~xxxxxxxx~~ scepticism and ends in belief. It has taken the whole of Whitman without taking Whitman whole. It has accepted Whitman as a bundle of contradictions -- that powerful, original poet with the disconcerting of the poseur -- and has attempted to sort out not only the facts of Whitman's life, but the best of whitman's poetry. Recent critics of Whitman would be willing to settle for a body of verse both smaller and different from that which Whitman's earliest admirers proposed. They have rejected Whitman the rhetorician, the bard of democratic society, and looked instead at the self-exploring, hesitating poet. R.W.B. Lewis, in his book[66] Characterizes Whitman as the spokesman of the self and the self's swaying motion-outward into a teeming world where objects were strung like beads of glory on his sight; backward into private communion with the "real Me". In the work of Writers like Constance Rourke[67] and Richard Chase[68] criticism has tried to get behind some of those public images Whitman devised for himself and explore the various 'selves' in Whitman's poetry. It has been attracted to a more ironic, detached Whitman, not confusing the hero of Whitman's poems with the Whitman of daily life. Behind the exuberant Whitman of such poems as Song of Myself, Chase has described an alienated, lonely figure who reattaches himself to the world by aggressive poetic assertions; suggesting, in fact, that when Whitman refused to explore

66. Trials of the Word (1965).
67. American Humor (1931)
68. Walt Whitman Reconsidered(1955).

his loneliness and created extra-poetic selves, like the hospital visitor, the sage and master, that his end as a poet was in sight. When Yeats remarked that poets like Emerson and Whitman seemed to him to have become superficial, because they lacked the Vision of Evil, he was saying farewell to some heroes of his youth and not adequately characterizing Walt Whitman. In poems like The Sleepers and Hours Continuing Long, Sore and Heavy Hearted, modern readers have discovered enough anxiety and guilt to satisfy the most anguished taste.

The poems that have most engaged modern critics of Whitman are those written before 1871. In spite of Malcolm Cowley's[69] claim that Song of Myself is Whitman's greatest poem, most readers have preferred the elegiac Whitman, the laureate of death. This is the Whitman that Eliot himself admired, the poet of the lilac and the mocking-bird. It is no coincidence that Whitman's three great odes -- As I Ebb'd With the Ocean of Life, Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking, and When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd -- are meditations on both death and the poetic act. The great love affair of Whitman's life has turned out to be his devotion to his art. Whitman told Emerson that the work of his life was making poems, and modern critics have taken him at his word. In doing so, they have come to feel that like Wordsworth, Emerson or Stevens, Whitman's great subject is the confrontation of the imagination and Nature; that, for Whitman, the poetic

69. Vide Introduction to Leaves of Grass: The First (1855) Edition (1959).

imagination begins in the recognition of loss; that the greatest loss is the separation of the poetic imagination from the self as it is overwhelmed by reality. Few poets would dare to presume, as Whitman did at the end of his career, that heaven is but another step in the imagination's ascent.

It would be false to leave the impression, however, that Whitman is now universally admired. A sceptical response to Whitman and to the criticism that surrounds him, as reflected in the work of Yvor Winters,[70] and Martin Green,[71] is more common than Whitman's readers are likely to admit. The case of Whitman, however, is frequently reopened. As Randall Jarrell discovered,[72] Walt Whitman is a better poet than he ought to be.

Whitman excluded very few poems from Leaves of Grass and his revisions, as Roger Asselineau points out,[73] were not always made to disguise his true feelings. But Whitman did reshuffle his poems, and in doing so, chose to emphasize the prophetic rather than the human in his verse, to present himself, as Leslie Fiedler once remarked, as the poet laureate of America, rather than the self-doubting, troubled writer that he was. The road to Whitman, as Roy Harvey Pearce put it,[74] is not impassable, but working with the edition of 1891-92 is both tedious and misleading. By making the editions of 1855 and 1860 easily

70. In Defense of Reason (1947)
71. Twain and Whitman : Re-appraisals (1936)
72. Vide 'Some Lines from Whitman', Poetry and the Age (1953)
73. Vide The Evolution of Walt Whitman (1962)
74. Vide Walt Whitman Mythified (1961)

available to readers of Whitman, both Malcolm Cowley, who is interested almost exclusively in the expansive poet of Song of Myself, and Pearce, who writes about the more introspective poet that Whitman appeared to him, did much to restore the poet to his poetry.

It is not surprising that some of the best essays on Whitman Written since the thirties served as introductions to anthologies, or that general surveys of whitman's art, like those of Randall Jarrell and Denis Donoghue[75] are written with a sense of discovery. Younger critics, further removed from Eliot's influence, began to look at Whitman again. As the Romantics in general were restored to favour, it no longer seemed necessary to argue so exclusively the case for conventional forms. The more important question was -- did Whitman succeed with the form he chose? That he did succeed is attested to in the essays which treat single poems. Malcolm Cowley provides a guide to the argument of Song of Myself and in doing so answers those critics who have been unable to see any progression of thought in that poem . Richard Chase explores Song of Myself, The Sleepers, Crossing Brooklyn Ferry, and Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking. R.W.B. Lewis continues the discussion of Whitman in the sixties with his explication of As I Ebb'd With the Ocean of Life, and Charles Feidelson in his work[76] discusses Whitman as symbolist,

75. Walt Whitman, Connoisseurs of Chaos (1965)
76. Symbolism in American Literature (1953)

with particular reference to Starting From Paumanok and When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd. In addition to the sympathetic treatment of Whitman's language by F.O. Matthiessen mention should be made of Gay Wilson Allen's study of Whitman's use of Biblical forms, especially parallelism and repetition.[77] Together with Lawrence's essay,[78] they are perhaps the best apologies for Whitman's poetics. We must not also forget and lose sight of the innumerable reviews and critical articles, touching upon the many facets of Whitman's poetic art and personality, as also studying individual poems from various angles, that have been published over the last half-century only in Journals by reputed scholars not only in America but all the world over. To mention their names alone would be encyclopaedic in extent. It would therefore be more sensible to admit that there is God's plenty, endless as the stars in the heavens and grains of sand on sea shore, and thus enjoy Whitman as one personally can.

One could well ask the critics of the past and present in Whitman's language and reply:

> Was some body asking to see the soul ?
> See, your own shape and countenance, ...
>
> (Starting from Paumanok)

---

77. Vide Walt Whitman Handbook (1946)
78. Poetry of the Age, Introduction to the American edition of New Poems (1929)

And Whitman, had he been alive, would perhaps have said to a sensible and sympathetic reader who studied him with a spirit of acceptance and not of critical twist:

O I wish I could impress others as you ...
(As I ebb'd with the Ocean of Life)

Yes, there is infinite beauty, and joy and food for the mind in Whitman. We have to explore and enjoy them all to the full.