

REVIEWS

WALT WHITMAN: THE MEASURE OF HIS SONG. Edited by Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom, and Dan Champion. Holy Cow! Press, P.O. Box 618, Minneapolis, Minn. 55440. 456 pages, \$20 (cloth), \$10 (paper).

The Walt Whitman Association had its beginning in the small circle of friends who made Walt Whitman, toward the end of his life, the object of their adulation. These supporters--E.C. Stedman, W.S. Kennedy, Horace Traubel and others--sometimes embarrassed Whitman by their uncritical elevation of the poet into the ranks of the gods, but they also helped to keep him alive and provide the first assurances that his poetry would not be utterly buried by his many detractors. Annually, they gathered to observe the poet's birthday--a rite which the Whitman Association still preserves--and plan the next stages of their campaign to obtain for Whitman the critical attention he deserved.

Happily, they prevailed, and Whitman's poetry got the chance to be read on its own merits. But Whitman was never a "critic's poet"; even those critics who initially liked his work, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau, seemed to be reacting to the largeness and power of Whitman's American voice, not to any real affection for the poetry itself. The poetry, said Thoreau, made him feel both exhilarated and imposed upon. Most critics, right up through T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, gave Whitman this kind of heavily qualified praise, recognizing him as the father of American poetry while lamenting the poetry he wrote and to which he opened the doors.

Whitman fared much better among his fellow poets. Even those like Algernon Charles Swinburne, whose poetic forms were already too well established to admit any change, recognized in Whitman a kindred soul who was doing what they did not dare to do: Swinburne

called him the "Heart of their hearts who are free" and asked him "to be for us/more than our singing can be." Joaquin Miller advised him to "Ascend! nor care where thy traducers creep." Gradually, a generation of younger poets, such as Hart Crane, began to pay homage to Whitman not by addressing him in verse, but by adopting his themes and his techniques--the sense of personal discovery, the revelation of beauty in common men and women, the mission of the poet as the conscience of a people, the adaptation of poetic form to the outlines of the subject matter. The founding of such a "race of poets" based on, but not slavishly imitative of his work had been forecast in the preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, and was the kind of success that Whitman most desired.

Now, one hundred years after the publication of the 1881 edition of *Leaves of Grass* which established the final form of the book, we can begin to measure the degree to which Whitman succeeded in founding a poetic tradition. That measurement has been taken for us in this anthology of poems, letters, and essays drawn from that period. The anthology is divided into historical segments: the first fifty years after 1855, in which Whitman's book struggled for recognition; the second half-century, 1905-55, in which a profound re-evaluation of Whitman took place, and he was championed by such different writers as Allen Ginsberg, Richard Eberhart, Jorge Luis Borges, and Charles Olson; and the 1980s, in which a new generation of poets, struggling with new realities, still finds that Whitman is out ahead of them somewhere, opening the way. The selections are preceded by a perceptive introduction by Ed Folsom, who describes the ways poets have invented for "talking back" to Whitman, and are followed by a bibliography of over four hundred items that fit this description.

The special importance of this anthology is that

it documents the *living* tradition of Whitman's poetry. In the case of far too many poets, the corpus of their work falls upon their death into the hands of a small circle of anatomists, much as the condemned felons of an earlier age fell from the gallows onto the dissection table. Whitman's work has not, of course, escaped that fate, but there is also a persistent and unashamed willingness on the part of most contemporary poets to acknowledge that they owe at least their freedom to choose from an unlimited number of forms of expression--if nothing else--to Whitman. The publication of this anthology, together with the continuing success of the two journals which have the same mission it does--*West Hills Review* and the *Mickle Street Review*--should make it a great deal easier for younger poets to get their bearings in this continuing tradition and to make their own contributions to it.

Geoffrey Sill