

A FORGOTTEN POET

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THE vagaries of the public attitude towards literature are truly amazing. The weathercock of the American literary world has within comparatively recent times veered to almost every point of the compass, and the weather chart of the reading classes presents an astounding range of tastes in the book-lovers. But nothing is more remarkable in the sphere of letters than the way in which poetry has lately come into its own again. The great publishing Houses are constantly issuing volumes of verse; and, if the figures obtainable from prominent salesmen are a reliable gauge of the public favoritisms, then our poets have no need to complain of being consigned to the lumber heap of books. We have poets galore, and volumes of rhyming words almost *ad nauseam*; whether we have poetry, may be quite another question. Of compositions, both rhymed and otherwise, which shelter themselves under the name of poetry, there is much that we are compelled to characterize as soulless and insipid verse, nerve-racking jingles, formless prose. No doubt it is generally hall-marked with the stamp of modernity—a frequently dubious honour, in that if it does reflect the modern valuation of life, it appeals to moods which are wholly contemporary and evanescent. Not infrequently the passions which it gilds with glory are hot and fleeting as the vapours from the seething bed of some active crater. It is perfectly honest in disclaiming any indebtedness to the masters of a past age, and it takes upon its own head the responsibility for whatever virtues or vices it may display. It is, indeed, brazen and unashamed in vaunting its ultra-modernity; yet with a sublime self-satisfaction it blazons abroad its superiority to the works of poets dead and gone.

But—oh, shades of departed masters—what would ye say to the verse which gained the public ear in the year of grace 1938? We tremble as we await their reply. But from the grave of one at least of the forgotten poets of the past there rises a haunting ghost to charge us with cruel neglect and criminal delinquency—the spirit representative of an outgrown and depreciated school. It is the shade of the New England poet who sang of the mystic wonder of faith and the majesty of the invisible—who stripped the veil that hid the spiritual world from the gaze of men blinded by the glare of the arelights of secular-

ism. John Greenleaf Whittier appeals, as it were, for a new vindication of his forgotten message, in face of the cold indifference meted out to him by his countrymen, who have consigned his works to the rubbish heap within a century of his rise to the pinnacle of national fame. The fair name of Whittier calls for rehabilitation, and his verse appeals for an unbiassed hearing.

It may be a thankless task that we have taken in hand, for Whittier is generally regarded by the average critic of verse as a negligible classic with a mere passing interest for the student. Others have usurped the throne which once he occupied unchallenged amongst American readers. Yet a reconsideration of his message cannot fail to be of value to a strenuous and purposeful age which is not wholly indifferent to the inherited wealth from out of the past.

What, then, is the situation?—Who are our poets to-day?

One of the major publishing Houses of the States declares that—apart from the works of such popular poets as Eddie Guest and Robert Service, who make no claim to literary eminence—the largest sale of any American poets within the last decade falls to the lot of Edna Millay, of Robert Frost and Sara Teasdale, while Stephen Vincent Benet's *John Brown's Body* had a tremendous sale, as had Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* and Joyce Kilmer's volume containing *Trees*. A high degree of popularity, moreover, belonged formerly to the work of Vachel Lindsay and in a lesser degree to Carl Sandberg. Whittier, however, they are forced to class amongst the literary classics of America, scarcely read nowadays, except for one of two well known poems.

I turn to the information of another House of publishers, to whose courtesy I am under no slight obligation, and I learn that the best selling of America's poets within the past decade rank in order as Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Ogden Nash, Robert P. Tristram Coffin, Edwin Arlington Robinson, T. S. Eliot and Stephen Vincent Benet; while they add that the sale of Whittier in all editions does not exceed fifty copies a year, compared with hundreds of copies of Frost during the same period of time.

A third authority which I venture to cite declares that there is practically no call whatever for Whittier, whereas the popular poets may be classed in the order—Edna Millay, Elinor Wylie, Robert Frost, Sara Teasdale, Emily Dickinson, Edwin Robinson, Edgar Masters, Archibald MacLeish, Carl Sandberg.

No need to proceed further! The facts are stated clearly in these statements to hand. The explanation is to seek. Let us consider the situation.

Half a century ago, amid the flaming woods of the Massachusetts village, there passed away in the person of John Greenleaf Whittier one than whom no greater soul was ever produced on this continent—the gifted singer, advocate of lofty principles, enthusiast for noble causes, a visionary seer, incontestably the greatest man of letters within the galaxy of writers and thinkers which New England gave to the literary world of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Throughout well-nigh his entire literary career he had carried his public by storm, and when at length he passed from the scenes of his strenuous leadership and contemplative vision, it was amid the affection and admiration of two continents. But amid the vicissitudes of political and intellectual life the times have rapidly changed, and the measure of appreciation for the poet of Amesbury has varied with the years. Numerous biographies and countless journalistic estimates of the work of the Quaker poet have been issued; but it may be questioned whether full justice has even yet been meted out to Whittier's contribution to our literature, or due heed been paid to the unique message so persistently emphasised in his strangely luring verse. The early decades of the present century have been alike in manifesting a condescending indifference towards the poet of the inner life—an indifference so unwarranted that we deem it high time to call the attention of the cultured world back to the unique phases of thought and the peculiar qualities of verse which signalised Whittier as a thinker and a prophet of higher things, with a spiritual dynamic that the modern world can scarcely afford to neglect.

So strongly marked is the contrast between the hectic conditions of contemporary life and the calm seclusion of the American village of a century ago, that there is no necessity for ranging far afield in search of reasons that may excuse our failure to lay our memorial wreaths upon the grass-grown grave at Amesbury. It has become a custom—and an unthinking one at that—to dismiss the name of Whittier from amongst the claimants to the laurels of popular poesy. If we mention his name, it is with the tone of tolerance and the smile of pity. America lends its ears to quite other singers, and responds to influences wholly different. The *Zeitgeist* is too well satisfied with its own self to seek elsewhere for inspiration; it treats

with supine contempt the far-off gaze and spiritual insight of the believer to whom the reality of the Unseen was axiomatic. Harassed by doubts concerning the unseen world, haunted by fears of the hereafter, baffled by a phalanx of scientific problems, none of which the Quaker poet ever knew, our moderns fail to respond to the mighty energies embodied in the verse of the New England singer, and so sure of his own soul was he that it may be questioned whether he was capable of sympathy with the multitudes who stand in suspended judgment on the threshold of the invisible world. We men of the twentieth century breathe the atmosphere of a cold secularism; an atmosphere of other worldliness and inner calm was to the liking of the Quaker poet.

It would be far from the truth, however, to represent Whittier as a mystic and nothing more. A hundred years ago he had fearlessly taken the cold plunge into political strife, and was breasting the stormy breakers of party conflict with bold strokes. The fiery enthusiasms of youth impelled him to forge far ahead, in spite of obloquy and danger, in the cause which stirred to altruistic heroism the heart of a great people and which plunged a whole continent into three years of red civil war. While it was reserved for the author of an historic romance to give to her people a written work which wrung the lives from three million whites in order to liberate nine million blacks, it was the task of the far-sighted poet of the North to assume the rôle of the muse of liberty and devote his brilliant verse to the cause of the coloured toilers of the South. As agitator, propagandist and journalist, he played a part of no mean value in kindling to fever-heat the solemn passions of a nation which knew how to draw the sword when it became the divinely sanctioned path to freedom. That fratricidal struggle closed seventy years ago, and its last echoes have long since ceased to reverberate in the life of a reunited nation. But during those stormy times Whittier gave abundant evidence that he could produce poetic work of a wholly objective quality, thrilling at times with the fervour of the crusader, thence anon turning to picture the simple life of the New England farmstead with a directness worthy of the Ayrshire bard. With all our undisguised admiration for Whittier, however, we are prepared to admit that his objective poetry has grave defects. The critic may in all fairness demur that his verse lacks condensation, fails to rise above monotony of metrical form, and reveals a failing of poetic ear. Yet, in spite of such marks of immaturity and faultiness, this

early work, as may be seen in *Snow Bound*, at times so transcended all limitations as to constitute its author the outstanding bard of the New England states.

The real Whittier, however, the Whittier so dear to the humble and the unsophisticated—the Whittier whose fame will live when the simple life of the past has been lost in the Maelstrom of civil competition—is the Whittier of faith and mysticism. As such, his message possesses something of the perennial and eternal element; it is as pregnant and as pertinent to-day as when it fell fresh from his lips. This is the Whittier who was virtually discovered in 1857, when the *Atlantic Monthly* rescued from political strife the poet of the soul and thenceforth persistently kept him before an appreciative public. That year of 1857 was a *wunderjahr* in the literary world of this continent, with Longfellow and Emerson and Lowell at the height of their brilliant work; when none save a poet of the first rank, a very genius endowed with the Wordsworthian sense of personality, could have emerged as the major singer of the day. Yet it was then that Whittier dazzled the literary world as the foremost spokesman of the mysticism of the restful soul, the supreme poet of the Inner Light. It may be that a comparison between Whittier and the great "Lake poet" is unsatisfactory, and that we are nearer the mark when we admit that the poems which came from his pen subsequent to the discovery of the *Atlantic Monthly* have a closer affinity with the Aufklaerung movement of eighteenth century German religion on the one hand and with the visionary emotionalism of the founder of Herzhut on the other. Almost from the date which marks the beginning of this second period, the most enduring phase of his work, Whittier was well-nigh constantly obsessed by those themes of universal excitement concerning which he wrote at a later day—"What, where, whither?—These questions sometimes hold me breathless." When we speak of his dominantly subjective work, we instinctively recall such masterpieces of penetrative experimentalism as *My Psalm*, *My Triumph*, *My Soul and I*, *The Mirror*, and that amazingly inimitable *Eternal Goodness*; in all of which his muse spoke out clear and sweet, his intellect ranged to widest bounds, his soul projected into verse his most daring ventures of insight into realms from which "no traveller returns". As we read these lines, thrilling with the personal and experimental note, their author seems to rise again from the quiet grave beside the rushing Merrimac and dispel the mocking doubts so harass-

ing in the age of spurious materialism, singing once more those songs of calm ecstasy that express the deepest conviction of the soul that had made trial of the invisible and had found it real:—

Nothing before, nothing behind,
The steps of faith
Fall on the seeming void, and find
The rock beneath.

Well, what is that, if it is not mysticism?—It is just because Whittier was the outstanding poetic mystic that his message has been allowed to lapse into the obscurity of things outgrown, and that at the same time its recovery is a supreme desideratum of the present age. For what is mysticism, and what is its function in the life-currents of a strenuous and progressive period of human history? William James—that fine analytical philosopher—has told us that mysticism may be detected by four salient marks, which he designates thus: ineffability, a poetic quality, passivity and transiency—all of which Whittier may fairly be said to have displayed in the second period of his creative work. But the eminent philosopher reminds us of a fact of which we must not lose sight—that mysticism has shewn itself essential to vital Christianity ever since the day of Dionysius the Areopagite. Mysticism is inseparably bound up with the Christian evangel; it reveals itself in the constructive thought of the apostle who exclaimed, “Great is the mystery of godliness”; and it pervades the sublime reasoning of the author of the fourth gospel. Through succeeding ages it persisted, rising and falling with the tides of faith and worldliness, animating the ascetics of the desert, inspiring the saints of Assisi, breaking through in the monastic poets of the Rhineland, bursting forth in the writings of an à Kempis. Mysticism dominated the quietism of the Quaker apostles and, after the blight of Deism had spent its paralysing force, it found expression in the evangelical revival. It has been a dynamic within every movement for the deepening of spiritual life of believers, from the devotional emotionalism of Keswick to the “listening-in” of the Oxford Group. When mysticism languishes, the faith dies; when mysticism excludes reason, it sinks into fanaticism. A sane and reasoned mysticism is an essential element of all religion worthy of the Nazarene Prophet.

Now this is the quality which is uniquely displayed in the poetic works of the New England quietist. The songs of this visionary poet rise, throbbing with restrained emotionalism,

vibrant with the passion of deep experience of spiritual things—foolishness to the philosophic materialist, divine wisdom to the quickened soul. Whittier was gifted above the ordinary mortal with the power to penetrate deep into types of experience reserved for the few, to gaze beyond the bourne of common things and pierce the veil that hangs over eternal verities. Yet, precisely as the well-tuned piano will give back the note struck by the tuning-fork, so the hearts of countless thousands have responded to the music of the heavenly spheres which pulsed and throbbed through the muse of Whittier. The tears of a myriad mourners have been stayed as they have heard the pregnant phrases of his *At Last*—that sublime treatment of the final struggle, in which the Quaker poet stands on a plane as lofty as that of Browning in his *Prospice* in poetic grasp of a conscious life beyond the grave. Why, then, has the fame of the New England mystic suffered so total an eclipse?

Disparaging criticism can scarcely be justified on the score of defects in his versification, for similar defects—and far more glaring characterize our moderns. Rather must we seek the explanation in the temper and the theme of his muse. The times have radically changed. The poets of to-day sing for different listeners, and interpret movements far other than those of the mid-nineteenth century. The trend of life and thought in 1860 found expression in terms wholly incommensurable with those that reflect the life of 1930. Our modern poets, whatever else they may be, are not mystics; and the listeners to modern verse have no use for quietism. Utilitarianism, strenuousness, abounding activity, ruthless competition, consuming secularism—these are the prominent features of our day; it is to the men possessed by the hard and superficial spirit of modernism that our contemporary singers must attune their lyres. Compared with the temperament of a century ago, we come short in many lamentable respects. We have more sight; we have less insight, and therefore little foresight. No doubt it was a grave handicap for Whittier that he suffered from physical color-blindness; far more serious is the loss for those of us who are so addicted to spiritual color-blindness that we can scarcely recognise the glory streaming from the unseen world.

Where, then, are we to-day in the realm of poetry?

A glance at the work of the outstanding American poets affords an index to contemporary tastes and mental trends which gives us furiously to think. America has no dearth of

poets, though it shares the world-wide poverty in respect to poets of the first degree. Perhaps unique amongst modern claimants to the laurels of poet there is T. S. Eliot—if it be lawful to class amongst American poets one who has found his level in British citizenship—a writer of qualities that are extraordinarily arresting, extraordinarily repellent, which combine to give him a position of undeniable eminence as a writer of unique verse. But certainly T. S. Eliot is no mystic. We are more inclined to turn to Robert Frost as almost the only contemporary American poet whom we dare—and that with no little reservation—to style a mystic; but assuredly beneath his descriptions of New England life, with their appealing grace and beauty of a genuine realism, there lies a subtle and restrained mysticism. What, however, shall we say of other versifiers? This at least: that E. A. Robinson has given us fine work, such as his “Man against the Sky”, not very unlike the verse of that restless singer, Ezra Pound—and that Carl Sandberg has made the industrial life of his adopted country live again in verse; yet none of these can by any stretch of charity be termed mystics. If we turn to the really fine verse of Amy Lowell, the imagist, we may here and there catch faint echoes of the mystic; but none of her competitors speak with the clear accent of the seer. Everywhere the objective note drowns the subjective. Contemporary verse has been caught in the restless currents of a great age of external competition and superficiality. We listen in vain for any who catch the “impulse from a vernal wood”; we scan the interminable lines of poetasters and nowhere hear the “first fine fearless rapture” of singers of a past generation. Nowadays men scarcely have time to think, much less to heed the things of the soul. Realism is the order of the day. The modern singer is so often a shameless materialist, if he be not a hopeless pessimist of the “coffin worm school”. Such poets have their audiences—witness the large sale of their works. But they serve merely as the dark background to throw into prominence the earlier singer whose voice, now silent, once poured forth the melodies of an unclouded faith in the unseen. What marvel, then, that when we read—and indeed admire—these later writers, we lament the absence of the intellectual courage of him who dared to sing—*Oh, why and whither? God knows all?*

I only know that He is good,
And that whatever may befall
Or here or there must be the best that could.

What wonder if we lament the loud mockery of modern secularism, and turn for inspiration to the healing ministries of one who could write:—

I walk with bare hushed feet the ground
 Ye tread with boldness shod,
 I dare not fix with mete and bound
 The love and power of God.

Indeed, can you marvel if we sometimes repeat the reasoned appeal:—

Hush every lip, close every book,
 The strife of tongues forbear;
 Why forward reach, or backward look,
 For love that clasps like air?

Undoubtedly it is a far cry from Plymouth Rock to Wall Street, from New England to Fifth Avenue, from the Quaker poet to the modern versifier. And herein lies one of the most serious charges that can be brought against the diseased public life of our generation, one of the gravest warnings of coming national decline. The ancient sage said truly that—"Where there is no vision, the people perish". Little need, then, to apologise for the fears which will encroach upon our serenity, reminding us of the danger involved in the headlong drift of a democracy which has long ago lost its efficiency and sincerity, away from the ancient moorings of the faith, with ever increasing momentum towards the "militant godlessness" of ultra-Communism. Few will gainsay the statement that when a nation discards the faith, then the national character declines; and that when national character is at stake, then the future is dark with doom. And not only in the realm of religion do we mark the drift. It is apparent on every hand—in music and art and architecture and literature. Jazz takes the place of music, cubism usurps the place of Rubens, cement skyscrapers replace Gothic cathedrals, pornographic fiction ousts Shakespeare. We are losing "soul". And with lingering regret we look back to an age when a sane and reasoned mysticism moved the hearts of men.

Would that a poet might arise capable of awakening some long silent echo, to touch some faintly vibrating chord in the human heart, with a theme trembling with reverence and instinct with spirituality, bringing heaven down to earth and lifting man nearer heaven!

Whittier sleeps in his forgotten grave, and few do reverence to the deathless instincts that stirred his songs of the soul.

But the dead still speak; and when, therefore, we estimate at full value all that is worth while, all that is of lasting value in human life, we are constrained to plead for the recovery of the quiet spirit, the cultivation of the penetrative vision, the care of soul. These are the qualities which appeal to us from out of the works of the New England poet.

Whittier has never yet been appraised at his full worth, but his message is still potent and exceedingly pertinent. High time, therefore, that the sons of New England sires rescue their greatest seer and mystic from an unwarranted oblivion! The barrier must be raised high against a suicidal national drift towards a soulless secularism. Back to Whittier!

GRIEF

ANNE MARRIOTT

The last leaves drip from the walnut tree
To a lawn made yellow and dank with rain;
The sky is the roof of a granite tomb
Where my weak prayers bruise themselves in vain.

“Never more spring!” sneers the wind, “Nor summer!
Even autumn is dead!” Do I not know?
Here by the bare tree I kneel to winter,
Pleading the silence and peace of snow.