

ANOTHER WALT WHITMAN

NOT SINCE the British discovered Walt Whitman for America and blamed us for our inappreciation has an American literary sensation struck England with the impact of the "Spoon River Anthology." Indeed, a writer in the London *Nation* sets out to prove that this work is "the most remarkable product of America since Whitman first published his unnoticed 'Leaves of Grass.'" The British critic's initials point to his identity as C. G. F. Masterman, and the spirit of Whitman seems to guide his appreciation. He discerns that, like Whitman's, Mr. Masters's work is neither prose nor poetry, but "this fact is irrelevant." His enthusiasm is matched by the Manchester *Guardian*, which declares that "Mr. Edgar Lee Masters will become a classic," and the London *Times* calls the book "a masterpiece of self-denial rather than self-expression." Mr. Masters fails in one point of resemblance to Whitman—a point probably not yet observed by his English readers. He has been duly appreciated by his American contemporaries even to the extent of being profusely imitated. Mr. Bliss Carman, in a recent number of *The Forum*, treats the Anthology in terms of its own measure, proves how easy it is to do, and dismisses it as not worth doing at all.

Mr. Masterman takes three columns of *The Nation* to show that "while Whitman is almost 'Gott getrunken' in 'forever corroborating the praising of things,' Mr. Masters sees a different world in America—the world of which Whitman prophesied, at the end! And as, by his method, the members of this world, stript of illusion, talk the truth, the result is not wholly encouraging." Mr. Masterman gives a brief and vivid analysis of the book:

"The people of Spoon River here lie 'all, all, sleeping on the hill'—in the cemetery of the 'little one-horse town' which is typical of all that is developing in the Middle West of America. They tell the truth. In some cases this truth coincides with the record of their lives; in most, otherwise. '*Il faut parler françois,*' said Montaigne about death. They 'speak French' in the cemetery of Spoon River. There are no great heroes. There are few unspeakable criminals. Most are men and women who have refused to face life, or those whom life has terrified out of unknown possibilities, or who have settled down into acquiescence in a pretty sordid, substantial, semisuccessful life: as in the suburbs of all cities, as in the gigantic suburb which makes up America. Here are evil and good alike, the hypocrite, the

adulterer, the man who called public swindle a public service, and induced all his neighbors to believe it. They have their queer standard of Puritanism, money-making, and what they are pleased to call the 'moral law'—'Republicans, Calvinists, Merchants, Bankers'—which warps and twists hereditary, ill-comprehended emotions and passions, and searchings after sacrifice for ideal ends. They have been driven by the furnace-machine of time through the 'so little' in their little lives; and now, silent forever, proclaim to the world the thing they found life was.

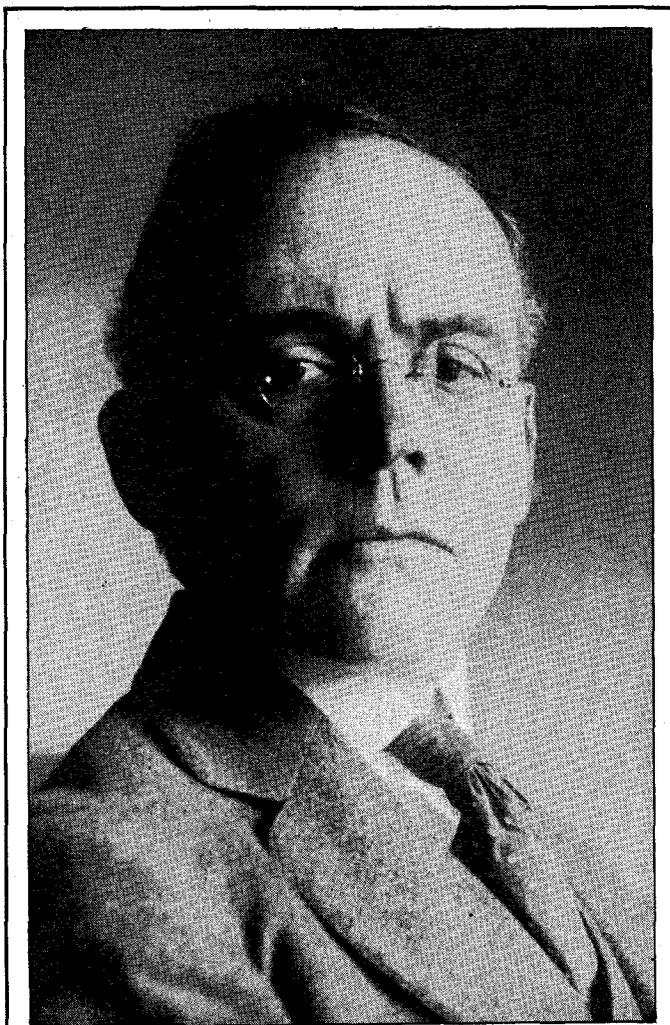
"'Lift not the painted veil that men called life,' cried Shelley, and described something of the revelation behind. Mr. Masters has lifted the 'painted veil,' with no optimistic results. He shows the selling of the franchises by the 'good citizen,' politicians, the frauds of the bankers, the pursuit of 'non-justice' by the lawyers. He shows young love too much or too little satisfied. The rogue triumphs in his villainy, mocking his unsuccessful opponents, from the cemetery-dust. Only occasionally one who wishes to know what life is, or one who has tried to ennoble life, or one who in some mystic fashion has realized that there is an existence which Spoon River and all Spoon Rivers can not altogether torture and tear to pieces, protests from the grave that things might have been better, that things shall be better. In the main, they rest under tablets and tombs grotesquely un-descriptive of their virtues or follies—hurried through a life feeble and transitory, into the eternal darkness of the grave."

The strength of the book, Mr. Masterman says by way of characterization, "is its indifference; its impartiality; its tolerance; its refusal to label sheep and goats; its determination that their men and

women shall tell their own story, confess their own crime and conviction, assert without approval or blame." "The author knows that the truth is never known, or never told, unless the dead can speak—speak when 'far too naked to be 'shamed.'" The English critic continues:

"So their speeches are recorded with something of the indifference of the stone-mason himself who from the grave affirms his method of constructing the graves ordered 'as per contract.' When he first came to Spoon River, he 'did not know whether what they told me was true or false,' and they would stand round where he worked and say—

'He was so kind.' 'He was wonderful.'
'She was the sweetest woman.' 'He was a consistent Christian.'
And I chiseled for them whatever they wished,
All in ignorance of its truth.



EDGAR LEE MASTERS,

While looked upon by some English writers as a new Whitman, he has also been called by one writer an American Masefield, "with more sense than Mr. Masefield, but a smaller poetic gift."

But, later, as I lived among the people here
 I knew how near to the life
 Were the epitaphs that were ordered for them as they died.
 But still I chiseled whatever they paid me to chisel
 And made myself a party to the false chronicles
 Of the stones.
 Even as the historian does who writes
 Without knowing the truth
 Or because he is influenced to hide it.

"Sometimes the 'chiseling' produces savage satisfaction and contempt, as that of the politician who 'looked like Abraham Lincoln,' stood for the rights of property and for order, a regular church attendant, denounced discontent among the poor, was elected as a legislator, and prevented raids upon railways:

Moving quietly through the world, rich and courted,
 Dying, of course, but lying here
 Under a stone with an open book carved upon it
 And the words 'Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.'

"But there are some to whom the irony of the inscription (and the reputation of the inscription) increases even the bitterness of the grave; as one on whose stone they chiseled 'His life was gentle, and the elements so mixed in him that Nature might stand up and say, 'This was a man.'" "Those who know me, smile," he says:

My epitaph should have been
 'Life was not gentle to him,
 And the elements so mixed in him
 That he made warfare on life,
 In the which he was slain.'
 While I lived I could not cope with slanderous tongues
 Now that I am dead I must submit to an epitaph
 Graven by a fool.

The reviewer gives several specimens of the book's "epitaphs" that serve to illustrate its quality. He goes on to show how "Mr. Masters tears and hacks at the very blood and bones of humanity as it is." How—

"He sees life as a monstrous ogre—with a giant hand laying traps and laughing when the trap closes, and ending you 'when your misery bores him.' 'In the morning of soul,' says Spoon River, 'I knew aspiration, I saw glory.' By middle age it is pursuing sex or success. In old age it is repenting rejected temptations or regretting lost opportunities. Only the fiddler, who has abandoned his property and ended with a broken fiddle, and a broken laugh, and a thousand memories and not a single regret, can protest the excellence of it all. The village blasphemer, who has been 'beaten to death by a Catholic guard,' can only surmise as a clue to the meaning, 'The reason I believe God crucified his own Son, to get out of the wretched tangle, is because it sounds just like him.' The lawyers (and lawyers and bankers come specially under the fierce diagnosis of the writer) are estimated in examples of their lives: the judge 'deciding cases on the points the lawyers scored, not on the rights of the matter,' and after the end confessing himself a worse villain than the men he hanged: the attorney, paid by the great companies to swindle the widows and orphans:

I was attorney for the 'Q.'
 And the indemnity company which insured
 The owners of the mine.
 I pulled the wires with judge and jury
 And the upper Courts, to beat the claims
 Of the crippled, the widow, and orphan,
 And made a fortune thereat.
 The Bar Association sang my praises
 In a high-flown resolution,
 And the floral tributes were many—
 But the rats devoured my heart
 And a snake made a nest in my skull.

"This bitterness does not do full justice to Mr. Masters's work, for he has depicted character and scenes of extraordinary beauty, the death of 'Pauline Barrett,' the child wondering if the children still wandered in and enjoyed the blue autumn evenings, the 'Pioneers' taking the Sacrament, with the 'Coming of the Comforter, and the consolation of tongues of flame.' But normally his attitude is that of one who 'prayed for another birth in the world, with all of Spoon River rooted out of my soul.' And Spoon River is not merely a Yankee hamlet, but a condition and state of being which extend through all that which man is pleased to call civilization. The appeal is a universal and not a limited appeal. And this astonishing, ruthless analysis of the life which there festers, aspires, and dies is one of the greatest books of the present century."

WAGNER, BEFORE AND AFTER THE WAR

SO FAR AS MUSICIANS GO the questions raised by the war concern none so intimately as they do Wagner. How has he affected the war and how will the war affect him? It will be remembered that the musical conductor of the *ballet russe*, Mr. Ansermet, who by the way is a Swiss, is reported to have declared soon after his arrival that Wagner was to blame for the whole *mêlée*, that his music had so wrought upon the German consciousness as to produce the war. The same thing has been said in other words by others, by Frenchmen in particular, and notably by Rodin, the sculptor. When the Paris journal *La Renaissance* asked Rodin whether the works of German composers should be given in Paris after the war, he replied: "Beethoven, yes; but Wagner is too near our time." The answer will have to wait for the conclusion of hostilities, thinks the *Springfield Republican*, which observes: "If French military bands play in Alsace-Lorraine, 'Lohengrin' will be heard in Paris. If Germany wins, Paris may be no more cordial to Wagner's music than after 1870." There are current, however, some interesting speculations on the first half of the query—how Wagner has affected the war. *The Republican* says this:

"Wagner's egoistic desire to make his music the center of the hugest possible mass led him into a grotesquely exaggerated Teutonism. He was to create the music of the future by drawing upon the glorious legendary past of Germany. He would do everything afresh, create a purely Germanic art, even to reviving the obsolete alliterative verse.

"With Wagner to have such a mission was to disparage everything else. He divided the world into those who were for him and those who were against him. He assailed the favorite composers of the day who had his place in the sun, and made enemies of their admirers. His Teutonism made him a bitter anti-Semite—all the more because Mendelssohn and Meyerbeer were Jews. He adopted the extravagant race-theories of Gobineau, expounded in our day by Wagner's son-in-law, Houston Stewart Chamberlain. It can easily be seen that a man of this stamp would not be well received in France, either during the tension preceding the war of 1870-71 or in the years following. Not Treitschke, nor Bernhardt, embodies more of the spirit from which the Pan-German propaganda has sprung.

"Thus it can readily be seen that if Wagner's music is boycotted in Paris after the war, it is not wholly without a reason. The very fact that he has been the center of former controversies and demonstrations might make it imprudent to try to give his music. This will pass in time, but how long it will be before the French can regain their taste for the Wagner music-dramas will depend in great part on which side wins the war."

A French writer who goes under the name of Le Sar Péladan has written an article to show that Richard Wagner in "The Ring" prefigured to the world what was to come in 1914. His ingenious interpretation of Wagner's symbolistic work in terms of the present war is given in this abbreviated form by *The New Music Review*:

"The Sar narrates with gusto the outrageous meanness and baseness of the gods, giants, dwarfs, and the whole *Lumpengesinde* of the tetralogy. *Alberich*, 'bristling with hairs and raucous-voiced,' pursuing the Rhine daughters for their treasure, is the primitive *Boche*. As he renounces love, he is necessarily inhuman. *Wotan*, the breaker of an agreement with the giants, is the Emperor William. *Loge* is the prototype of the German Chancellor, on whom the Kaiser relies to extricate him from his quandary. His descent into Nibelheim is the modern craving of the German for world-power. *Alberich* is a truculent Prussian in the treatment of his gnomes. *Siegfried*, conceived by Wagner as a superhero, is incredibly brutal. 'It is true, he is fearless, but he knows nothing about anything. When his father (the *Emperor*, disguised as a traveler) approaches him, he reviles him and his gray hairs, and threatens to deprive him of his one eye and slay him as he slew Mime and the Dragon.' He is the *Boche* of the primeval forests. Mr. Péladan spares *Siegmond* and *Sieglinde*, in whom he finds no Teutonic trait. Yet Mr. Péladan might have made unpleasant remarks about the two.