1955

The Whitman Centenary: A Publisher's View

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THE WHITMAN CENTENARY: A PUBLISHER'S VIEW

Nineteen fifty-five has been a moment of widespread festivals, library displays, public lectures, radio and television programs, and special issues of magazines commemorating the Whitman centennial. Several publishers have joined the festivity by launching a number of books on the life, reputation, and literary merit of Whitman. The publishers have on the whole enthusiastically promoted their wares and the books themselves have been favorably reviewed. But not one publisher is expecting much financial reward, and several anticipate loss. This is not an encouraging fact, not only for the publishers, but for literary scholars and the body politic. It is, indeed, an alarming situation when a publisher — under the most favorable publicity circumstances — cannot make a little money on a good book about an important literary figure.

Here, briefly, is the financial record of several books published during the past centennial year.

George Brett, the president of Macmillan's, sums up his wistful and cagey publisher's view of Gay Wilson Allen's distinguished Solitary Singer (640 pp., $8.00) by remarking: "I do not think that we are going to lose any money on Allen's The Solitary Singer; but, alas, I don't think we are going to make much either." This critical biography, acclaimed as a definitive work, was published in an edition of 5000. It is almost sold out, and the problem is now whether Macmillan can afford to reprint. "Certainly the market would not absorb another 5000 copies in the foreseeable future," says Mr. Brett. And so, one gazes at the spectacle of an important book — generously promoted, widely and favorably reviewed — but incapable of doing much more than paying its own way. One wonders how much might have
been lost on the same book had it appeared in an ordinary, non-
Whitman year.

Three other significant works are stubbornly refusing to make
their authors and publishers wealthy. Fredson Bower’s \textit{The
Whitman Manuscripts} in an edition of 1,200 copies will just pay
for itself—provided the entire edition can be sold at the stiff
price of $12.50. “It is highly unlikely that there will be a second
printing,” says Roger W. Shugg, director of the University of
Chicago Press. \textit{Leaves of Grass 100 Years After}, edited by Milton
Hindus and published in an edition of 2,500 by Stanford Univer-
sity Press (149 pp., $5.00) will lose about $400. The Syracuse Uni-
versity Press volume is \textit{Walt Whitman Abroad} (288 pp., $4.00), a
collection of European, Asiatic, and South American essays, ed-
ited by Gay Wilson Allen. It is piously hoped that the 2,500 edi-
tion will sell out and not lose any money.

The two Library of Congress brochures are sponsored by “a
government agency whose interest is in making available to the
public useful information without any consideration of profit,”
according to Henry J. Dubester, Chief of the Reference Depart-
ment. These works are \textit{Walt Whitman: A Catalogue Based Upon
the Collections of the Library of Congress, with an Essay on
Whitman Collections and Collectors}, by Charles E. Feinberg; and
\textit{Walt Whitman: Man, Poet, Philosopher} (53 pp.), three lectures
given in January 1955, at the Library by Gay Wilson Allen, Mark
Van Doren, and David Daiches.

A refreshingly candid letter from Thayer Hobson, president of
William Sloane Associates, the publisher of Richard Chase’s
\textit{Walt Whitman Reconsidered} (191 pp., $3.75), gives a concise and
lucid insight into the bitter economics and sometimes cheerful
philosophy involved in the publication of American literary
opinion. “For an edition of 2,700 copies,” Mr. Hobson writes,
“the total cost of composition, plates, and manufacturing was
$2,333.

“As for the possibility of a second printing, your guess is as
good as mine. The book may very well have to be reprinted even-
tually, but my guess is the cost of reprinting a small edition may be so high that there will be no profit in the operation.

"You're quite right. The publication of this sort of book makes no sense whatsoever from the point of view of dollars and cents, but we always have published a good many books in this category, and I suppose we always will when we think they're really fine or pro bono publico."

Sloane Associates' heartening altruism is, I think, more common among commercial and university publishers than many scholars are willing to grant. Reputable commercial houses do indulge themselves as often as possible with the luxury of publishing literary studies. But if they cannot make money from a "really fine" work, written by a famous author, and published in a year of presumed extraordinary interest in the subject, one cannot reasonably expect them to publish scholarship in just any year that may appear on the calendar, especially if the work is by a relatively unknown author.

Could not the various publishers have done a little better with this year's reappraisals of Whitman's life, reputation, and literary value? Could not the books have cost less? Could not more books have been sold if the volumes had been priced at $3.00 rather than $3.75, $5.00, $8.50, or $12.50? Could not they have been advertised more extensively and have captured a wider audience? Experience over the past quarter of a century would indicate a resounding no to all of these questions excepting one. By using paper covers rather than hard-bound cloth, manufacturing expenses could have been lowered, a saving which would have been more than offset by the objection, especially the library objection, against soft covers.

There is one hard and irrefutable fact which answers the above questions. The potential buyers for a good work of literary fact or opinion are few — rarely over 2500, including the two or three hundred well-heeled public and university libraries. No amount of promotion and advertising can entice the millions who live beyond this village of specialized interest. Nor could the millions
be attracted if the book were sold for $1.00, or even given away. The small audience is the cause of the discomfort which the buyer feels when he pays $5.00 for a 75,000 word book — and the discomfort that the publisher feels in gambling on making the book financially self-sustaining.

If commercial publishers should be expected to make money and university publishers to be self-sustaining, how could half of the organizations, excluding the Library of Congress, afford to embark on projects which they knew in advance would fail to support themselves? One or two of the houses may have been able to sacrifice to the public good. Some may have felt that their books would make good institutional advertising, would help sell other books on the list, would placate faculty ill tempers, or would help win administrative friends and influence possible donors. Other organizations may have been under the pressure of keeping their printing plants working at capacity, or their selling organizations, etc.; the loss of a few hundred dollars on a book might not look as forbidding as the loss of a few thousand caused by idle men and machines. But whatever the realities or the rationalizations, it is apparent that these eight books just barely managed to find their way into print.

Ordinarily — without the support of special circumstances such as a Whitman year — most of these useful works would not have been published, at least in book form. For ordinarily any of these books would have lost its publisher anywhere from one to three thousand dollars. During the past three years at Stanford, an excellent biographical and critical study of an important and renowned European writer of fiction has sold a little under 1000 copies of its 2500 edition. Another book on a nineteenth century American literary subject has done no better. Both books are as significant and as readable as Leaves of Grass 100 Years After. They, too, have been widely and favorably reviewed in this country and abroad. Probably half of each edition ultimately will have to be remaindered or ground into pulp. The financial loss will be about two thousand dollars for each title.
These, then are the bleak facts which confront both the scholarly author and his publisher. Publication in book form of scholarship must become more infrequent, perhaps must be discontinued, unless relief from the financial plight is discovered. One cannot expect aid from decreasing manufacturing and publishing costs or from an increasing market. And someone besides the impecunious publishers must increasingly assume the responsibility of paying for scholarly books if such books are to remain a part of the culture. This is the only realistic solution.

There have been, of course, several unrealistic proposals. It has been suggested that the scholar should content himself with the ancient and honorable procedure of lecturing his wife, children, and classroom. It has been suggested that he tape record, that he microfilm, that he typewrite his work and deposit a half-dozen copies in libraries. Still another piece of condescending advice advocates piecemeal publication of one's chapters in the learned journals and other periodicals; yet, as one recalls, the magazines also have limited finances and are so overwhelmed with offerings that they resort to printed rejection slips. Book publication remains a necessity.

These bleak publishing facts and unrealistic proposals must have a connection with the low opinion held by our society of the so-called non-practical disciplines. Although the humanities and the other pursuits aimed towards an understanding of the human mind have never flourished in America in comparison with those subjects which promise an immediate benefit to material welfare, there is evidence that the liberal arts are ebbing in popular esteem. This evidence has little relationship, let us hope, to the value of the subjects or to the competence of the faculties. It is probably an emblem of weakness in our culture.

If this diagnosis is correct, one can find cause for hope as well as despair. For, although a culture as heavily committed to pragmatic materialism as the American is not easily modified in its fundamental drive, the findings of the social scientists (and even of some humanists) would suggest that modification is possible.
There may come a time when even two or three Cadillacs will fail to completely satisfy the needs of the human heart.

And so, in this present crisis, perhaps the first obligation of the liberal artist, whether he be professor or publisher, is to survive. He can hope to prevail in the future. But survival will require more than stoical fortitude. It will require fighting, fighting for one's right and duty to publish scholarly books. Perhaps one can most effectively fight by persistently and loudly demanding that society finance his books. By society I mean state and federal governments, foundations, businesses, universities.

Of course such groups have for many years given financial assistance. During the past five years the Stanford Press has received for publication purposes about $200,000 from individuals, foundations, governmental, and business organizations. During the same five-year period the University has given about $225,000 to help subsidize scholarly publications; yet this total of $225,000 for a five-year period is not impressive. The manufacturing cost alone for the average Stanford-book has recently been running about $140. If we assume that total cost is approximately four times this amount, then the Stanford Press, which has been publishing an average of thirty-nine books a year for the last five years, has received financial aid for about 18 per cent of its yearly output. In spite of this aid the Press usually shows a deficit in its publishing division.

What publishers of scholarship need — beyond the help that they can obtain from business, foundations, and government — is for every university in the land to subsidize the manufacturing and publication costs of editorially approved manuscripts by any member of its faculty. I think that scholars are going to have to loudly and persistently demand financial aid for publication as well as research. Such undignified lobbying would seem to me our best hope. University officials must come to realize the necessity of providing more financial support for scholarly publication. And as Professor Gay Wilson Allen remarked in a letter to me, “University presses should not be expected to be self-supporting any more than a hospital attached to a medical school.”
SOME NOTES ON SOURCES

Currents in the Literary Volga

The principal sources are discussions carried on in the most important Soviet journals: Pravda, Izvestia, Literaturnaya Gazeta, Znamya, Sovetskaya Kultura, Novy Mir, Komsomolskaya Pravda, and Soviet Literature (an English language publication); as well as speeches over Radio Moscow.

The New Canadian Potash Discoveries


In Quest of the Spadefoots


