

the time was ripe by 1955 for something like a definitive work.

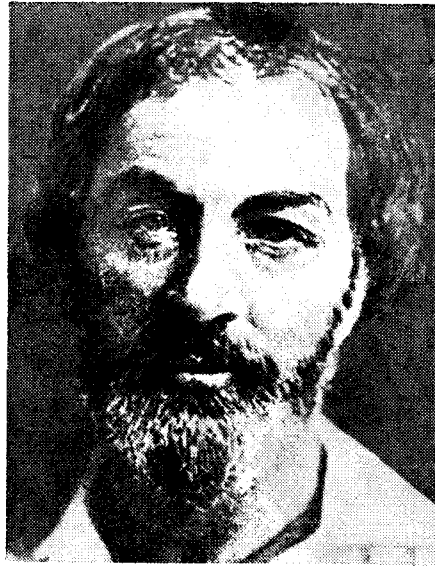
Professor Gay Wilson Allen is well qualified to produce a biography suited to the needs of students and scholars. His "Walt Whitman Handbook" has for nearly ten years been an indispensable tool for all serious students. "The Solitary Singer" is by far the most detailed and thorough biography of Whitman so far published, a straightforward narrative of events, personal and literary, in the life of the poet from birth to death. It seems unlikely that future discoveries will alter the story materially. It does not settle all questions, nor does it pretend to do so, but it suggests clues, wherever they are known to exist, that may lead to solutions.

**W**HITMAN'S publications are discussed in their chronological order and individual pieces are briefly interpreted, but few evaluative judgments are advanced. The emphasis is on the narrative, as it should be, and criticism is introduced chiefly for the light it throws on biography. Professor Allen has in general, though not always, avoided the trap into which some recent biographers have fallen: citing the poems as autobiographical statements of fact.

The most knotty problem in Whitman biography is the question of his alleged homosexuality. The poems grouped under the subtitle "Calamus" have been interpreted by European critics, and some Americans, as confessions by the poet of a passionate erotic attachment to another man, or perhaps to more than one, and they have been cited in support of certain inconclusive evidence from the letters and notebooks that Whitman was "perturbed" from time to time by homosexual tendencies, which he struggled to overcome. Professor Allen's handling of this tricky subject is in the main objective, and yet it seems to me that he often intimates a stronger belief in the homosexual theory than he is willing to affirm.

If the reader is looking for anything sensational, however, he will be disappointed. The style is unimaginative but adequate; there are no flourishes, yet the book is readable and well balanced. Whitman's life is properly set against the social and political events of his time, and the relationship of these events to the poet's work is clearly represented. One sees Whitman as a man of his time, dedicated to the writing of poetry, but participating fully in the life about him. It is safe to say that this book comes as near to being a definitive biography as any that is likely to be written in the immediate future.

## New Looks at Walt Whitman



The young poet—"a prophetic blessing."

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Around July 4, 1855 (critics never have been able to pin down the exact day), there went on sale in New York an anonymous book of poems which was destined to become one of the most controversial and widely-admired works of American art. Walt Whitman, an author who was still to grow the great beard by which he is remembered today, helped set type for his own book and paid for most of the printing himself. To celebrate the centennial of "Leaves of Grass" SR prints excerpts from two new books on the Good Gray Poet: "The Solitary Singer," by Gay Wilson Allen (see page 9; excerpts in italics); and "Leaves of Grass—One Hundred Years After," edited by Milton Hindus, with essays by William Carlos Williams, Richard Chase, Leslie A. Fiedler, Kenneth Burke, David Daiches, and J. Middleton Murry (Stanford University Press, \$5; excerpts in Roman).

• [IN 1825 GENERAL LAFAYETTE visited Brooklyn and took part in the cornerstone ceremonies of the Apprentices' Library.] It is not certain whether little Walt [at age six] had yet begun to attend public school, but he was a Sunday-school pupil, and he marched with the children [in the procession]. At the location of the projected library the stone and dirt excavated for the foundation walls and basement had been piled high on all sides, and many of the men in the crowd volunteered

to lift the smaller children down the banks of the cellar in order to place them in positions where they could hear and see in safety. Lafayette joined in this assistance of the children, and Walt had the good luck to be picked up and carried by "the old companion of Washington." The experience lingered in the boy's memory, and as he grew older it took on symbolical significance. After he became a poet he wrote three separate versions of it, in the later version adding a kiss from the general as prophetic blessing.

• LIKE OTHER MODERN WRITERS, Whitman found it temperamentally pleasurable as well as strategically necessary to interpose a half-ironic image of himself between the world and the profound part of his personality which hated figure and likeness—the unconscious mind with its spontaneous, lawless, poetic impulses. He invented none but several public personalities—the worldly, dandified young metropolitan journalist of the 1840s; the homely, Christlike carpenter and radical of the early 1850s; the full-bearded, sunburned, clean-limbed, vigorously sexed, burly common man of the later Fifties and early Sixties; the malnourished and good gray poet of the Washington period; the sage of Camden in the late years. —RICHARD CHASE.

• ONE EVENING [at his Springfield law office] Lincoln took the book ["Leaves of Grass"] home with him, and when he returned it next morning he remarked that he "had barely saved from being purified by fire by the women." (Probably Whittier's copy was not the only one that did perish in that fashion.) At Lincoln's request the book was left on a table in the office, and we are told that he frequently picked it up and read aloud from it.

• AT THE PRESENT MOMENT many Western Europeans, who have a emotional and intellectual loyalty to the ideal of the free society, are tempted to be a little dubious toward America's claim to be its prototype. To them the activities of Senator McCarthy loom large and ominous. They should remember that Whitman himself passed through many moments of despondence in the days of the carpetbaggers and afterwards. He cried: "These savage, wolfish parti-

alarm me—owning no law but their own will, more and more combative, less and less tolerant of the idea of ensemble and equal brotherhood, the perfect equality of the States, the ever overarching American ideas." Nevertheless, Whitman held to his faith that these ugly and depressing manifestations were like the grim growing pains of the ideal, inseparable from the process of the working out of a high destiny in a mass of common humanity.

—J. MIDDLETON MURRY.

• THOREAU AND WHITMAN were temperamentally so different that it is surprising they got along as well as they did. But, despite Alcott's impression that they did not trust each other, each had a simplicity and frankness that the other respected. Whitman told Traubel that once Thoreau "got to the house while I was out—went straight to the kitchen where my dear mother was baking some cakes—took the cakes hot from the oven. He was always doing things of the plain sort—without fuss." Whitman also remembered that "several times" (perhaps there were more visits than those recorded) Thoreau walked with him the two miles from the Whitman home to the ferry and this made a favorable impression on Walt. Thoreau, however, was outspoken and caustic. On his first visit to the poet he called the unfavorable critics of "Leaves of Grass" "reprobates," and Walt thought this too severe.

• UNTIL THE FINAL pattern becomes clear to all and the self-confident sterilities of this cynical age are overcome, each defender of Whitman must resign himself to being a part of the garrison of a besieged stronghold with dwindling resources and no sign of relief. He will need something that Napoleon referred to as "three o'clock



—Illustrations from Culver.

Whitman's Camden (N.J.) home—"... 'I know the Amplitude of time'."

in the morning courage." Those alone will remain steadfast to the end who feel as Whitman did that the future belongs to them and who have that rocklike reassurance from which alone can spring the invincible accents heard in every syllable of the lines from "Song of Myself":

My foothold is tennoned and mortised in granite,  
I laugh at what you call dissolution,  
And I know the Amplitude of time.  
—MILTON HINDUS.

• WHITMAN'S LANGUAGE and his thinking were awkward, partly because he was pioneering and partly because he was not naturally facile with logic; but with sustained originality and insight he was in his writings on Democracy exploring problems and presenting empirical answers that actually gave a preview of the main course of American philosophy for the next century, for what was this theory of "Democracy" but the forerunner of William James's "Pluralism" and John Dewey's "Pragmatism"?

• WHITMAN WAS A rhetorician and a poseur, and these are bad words in modern criticism. But there are good and bad ways of being rhetorical, and good and bad ways of posing. In his best poetry Whitman's rhetoric was a device for expanding lyrical impressionism into epic design, and his posing was a means of giving moral scope to his observations.

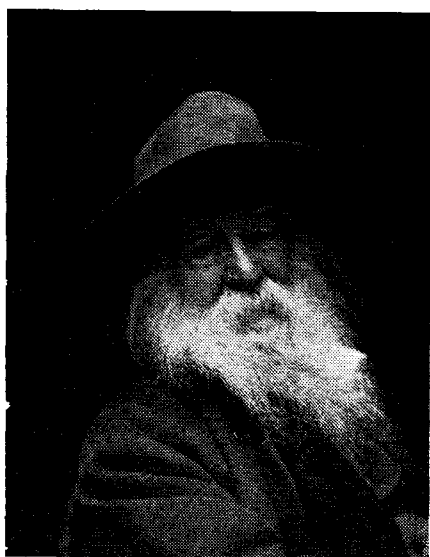
—DAVID DAICHES.

• IN JANUARY [1892] Whitman rallied, and he lingered until March 26. Most of this time he suffered excruciating

pain, but the doctors, his nurse, and his few visitors marveled that he did not complain, though towards the last he expressed the wish that death would soon relieve him. Throughout these weeks of pain and waiting letters and cables arrived almost every day from Europe and various parts of the United States. These were read to Whitman, and sometimes he dictated messages in reply. Traubel kept Dr. Johnston and J. W. Wallace informed. Wallace closed his record of these communications with this summary: "On the evening of Saturday, March 26—the daylight fading and a gentle rain falling outside—the end came, simply and peacefully—Whitman conscious to the last, calm and undisturbed, his right hand resting in that of Horace Traubel."

• HIS DUPLICITY IS, I feel, a peculiarly American duplicity, that doubleness of our self-consciousness which our enemies too easily call hypocrisy, but which arises from our belief that what we dream rather than what we are is our essential truth. The Booster and the Pharisee are the standard caricatures of the American double man, and Whitman was both Booster and Pharisee. Condemned to play the Lusty Innocent, the Noble Savage, by a literary tradition that had invented his country before he inhabited it, Whitman had no defenses. The whole Western world demanded of him the lie in which we have been catching him out, the image of America in which we no longer believe; the whole world cried to him, "Be the Bard we can only dream! Chant the freedom we have imagined as if it were real!"

—LESLIE A. FIEDLER.



In old age—"held to his faith."



## Beloved Colossus

"*Alexandre Dumas*," by **Andre Maurois** (translated by Jack Palmer White. Alfred A. Knopf. 198 pp. \$2.50), a volume in the *Great Lives in Brief Series*, tells the story of the French writer who fathered five to six hundred volumes. Henri Peyre, who reviews it here, is professor of French literature at Yale University.

By Henri Peyre

**T**HERE was a time when the French romantics could appear as languid and effeminate decadents, as emasculate weaklings powerless to stand up to the great classical masters and resorting, *faute de mieux*, to the imitation of foreign models. A saner and more enlightened view of the French writers born around 1800 depicts them today as colossi endowed with a prodigious vitality. Lamartine certainly never was a whining quire boy; love letters recently published show proud Vigny entering into a liaison after the age of sixty; Hugo's notebooks, in which he cryptically recorded every one of his amorous feats, deciphered last year in Paris, show him to have remained a "sur-mâle" up to the age of eighty-three. Balzac, Gautier, Michelet were just as indefatigable. But Alexandre Dumas, the grandson of a marquis and of a Negro slave, the son of one of Napoleon's generals, was truly a force of nature. He is probably the most prolific of French writers (with five to six hundred volumes to his credit) and he remains the most lovable character in his century.

His adventurous life has often been told, but never with the concise skill, the adroitness, and the vividness displayed here by André Maurois. Maurois was never at his best in his biographies of truly great writers, such as Shelley, Hugo, or Proust, whose life could not be divorced from the analysis of their works. On the contrary, George Sand, whose unorthodox life holds more fascination for us than her novels, offered a splendid opportunity to the author of "Lélia." This biography of Dumas is much briefer and even more entertaining. Relevant or significant details and revealing anecdotes are selected with much tact. The biographer has ransacked scholarly works and contemporary documents to elucidate some episodes, to discover an entertaining love letter, a witticism, a rejoinder in an imaginary dialogue. The moot problem of what share of originality is to be granted Dumas after justice is done to his "factory"

of collaborators, is wisely settled, in favor of Dumas, who alone had the naturalness of tone, the colorful touch, and the naivete to make his dramas and novels spring to life and move a naive public. The book is written with gusto, as becomes a book on the author of "The Three Musketeers," and is excellently translated. If Dumas' life is a novel out of Dumas, this entertaining biography reads like an abridged Dumas story.

Dumas suffered from a serious literary fault, which French critics have unforgivingly denounced: shallow analysis of character. Mature readers, conditioned by Dostoevsky and Proust, require today more psychological complexity than "Monte Cristo" and "The Black Tulip" ever laid claim to. The man himself was not complex. "My father is a great big baby that I had when I was very young," said of him his own son, who never forgave his father, or society, for his own illegitimacy and atoned for his father's sins through writing preaching and reforming dramas. Dumas père, the legendary prodigal father, summarily educated, childish and inordinately conceited, extravagant, vulgar, kindly, unaware of the tortuous intricacies of the human heart, was an eminently sympathetic hero. Indeed, none of his 120 successive (and occasionally syncope) mistresses ever bore him a grudge for his legendary infidelities.

But, in spite of the French critics' reluctance to admit it, Dumas also had a form of genius. He succeeded, even better than Walter Scott and Balzac, in incorporating history into the drama and into fiction. Millions of children and of adults owe him their sense, and even their knowledge, of history. He may well have been, after all, as the British historian D. W. Brogan asserted, "Alexander the Great," the most powerful force ever to make France loved by the youth of fifty countries and to this day her most effective propaganda agent.



—By Doug Anderson for "An Encyclopedia of Modern American Humor."

"... a whale of a book."



"... flatfooted for the belly laugh."

## Four-Square Boff

**ALL KINDS OF LAUGHS:** In his preface to his "An Encyclopedia of Modern American Humor" (Hanover House \$3.95), the workingest tycoon extant grows ecstatic and glows like a 500-watt glo-worm about the beauties, the soul-satisfying qualities of the belly laugh. Bennett Cerf rhapsodizes that the belly laugh (he apparently takes his plain without the pratfall for a chaser) is the most heart-warming libido-lilting sound in the world.

It is apparent, while laughing your way through his anthology, that Mr. Cerf is a man who has the fortitude to rise above principles. He comes out flatfooted and four-square for the belly laugh in the preface but a perusal of the pieces makes one conclude that many, if not most, are ticklers of the risibilities that lie above the neck.

Just a few of those who have encyclopedized or anthologized o chrestomathied here: Thurber, E. E. White, Will Rogers, S. J. Perelman, Ring Lardner, John O'Hara (who clinched his reputation as a humorist when he touted Hemingway's "Over the River and Into the Trees" as the book of the half century), Clarence Day, Damon Runyon, and H. Allen Smith.

Mr. Cerf has a great respect for American light versifiers, and right fully so, and includes some of his favorites—Dorothy Parker, Ogden (Candy is dandy, but liquor is quicker) Nash, Samuel Hoffenstein, and Arthur Guiterman, whose well known metered razz of anthologists is selected for this anthology, but Mr. Cerf can reprint it, saying in surprise "WHO, ME?" because his anthology is an encyclopedia.

Some readers of this 700-page book would have omitted a few piece