

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO: HARPER'S ASKS A QUESTION

Whitman included in his small 1891 book, *Good-Bye My Fancy*, an odd prose piece called "Two Questions." One of the two questions considered by Whitman had been raised by George William Curtis in his "Editor's Easy Chair" column in *Harper's Monthly* (July, 1890); the other question was raised by Whitman himself. Whitman begins his brief piece by (mis)quoting Curtis's question:

An editor of (or in) a leading monthly magazine . . . asks: "A hundred years from now will W. W. be popularly rated a great poet—or will he be forgotten?" . . . A mighty ticklish question—which can only be left for a hundred years hence—perhaps more than that. But whether W. W. has been mainly rejected by his own times is an easier question to answer.¹

Whitman goes on to answer his own question—about his rejection by "his own times"—in the affirmative, of course, and he cites examples of his work being turned down by various "publishers and magazine editors." Part of Whitman's self-construction involved his continual representation of himself as a writer repudiated by the orthodox authorities and ignored by the literary establishment, so his question and answer are not surprising. But, as we approach the centennial of Whitman's death, Curtis's question is worth noting, for it was by no means obvious in 1890 that Whitman's work would outlive the aged and infirm poet himself.

The July 1890 *Harper's* was a typically wide-ranging issue, exploring topics not altogether irrelevant to national and international concerns today. There were essays on everything from social life at Oxford to the "picturesque" characteristics of "Texo-Mexicans," from the history of "Baltic Russia" to the possibilities of democratic architecture. It contained a serial novel by Alphonse Daudet, translated by Henry James; there was a story by Mary E. Wilkins and a poem by Thomas Bailey Aldrich. In his popular "Editor's Easy Chair" column, Curtis worried about—among other things—the decline of the Fourth of July as a truly significant national holiday. And he set out to put critics in their place, concerned that unqualified critics now occupied book-reviewing posts on many influential newspapers and capriciously determined the success or failure of new books. Curtis could offer abused authors one "consolation": "there is an invisible higher tribunal—a court of appeals—which passes upon all the lower judgments, and awards the final decision." This higher tribunal is the court of "permanent literature," where critics no longer rule, where the "bright moths of an hour" never arrive, where long-forgotten great works finally enter an eternity of regard. No one can know who will eventually enter this realm of the immortals:

There is no critic living who can foretell whether a hundred years hence our good friend Walt Whitman will be accepted as a great poet or have fallen into the limbo where the vast throng of Kettell's poets lie. The critics are a needlessly awful host to the novice in art and letters. They make the present moment disagreeable, and prejudice the newspaper judgment. But they cannot bribe or coerce the tribunal of time.²

Curtis's phrasing of the question is significantly different in tone from Whitman's recasting of it in his "Two Questions" piece. We can sense that Curtis is probably being a bit ironic in his choice of "our good friend Walt Whitman" as the example of a poet who might be accepted a century hence as great or who might just as easily fall into the void of anonymity where most of the poets who had appeared in Samuel Kettell's 1829 *Specimens of American Poetry* now resided. While Curtis admired Whitman's character and shared many of Whitman's reform sentiments, he also did not believe Whitman had demonstrated much poetic genius.³ But it is to Curtis's credit that he left the question open and left the judgment to the "tribunal of time." We can only imagine that Curtis and Whitman (who both died in 1892) would have been staggered by the answer that the passing of a century has settled on by consensus—that Whitman is not only a great poet, but the greatest of all American poets.

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NOTES

1 Floyd Stovall, ed., *Prose Works 1892* (New York: New York University Press, 1964), 2:688-689.

2 *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 81 (July 1890), 311.

3 See Daniel A. Wells, "Whitman Allusions in *Harper's Monthly*," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 4 (Summer 1986), 16-23.