

Richard Eberhart

CENTENNIAL FOR WHITMAN

*(Amimetobion, not Synapothanumenon)*

I

What shall I say to Walt Whitman tonight?  
Reading him here in the springtime of bursting  
    green,  
Foreign from him, held by the same air he breathed  
    of the world,  
Looking at night to the same stars, white and  
    radiant,  
Obsessed with a kindred obsession, at a dark depth,  
Inheritor of his America maybe at its great height,

I praise him not in a loose form, not in outpouring,  
Not in a positive acclamation of frenetic belief,  
Not in the simplicity of a brotherhood, such peace,  
And not in the dawn of an original compulsion,  
But speak to him in the universe of birth and death.

By a Spring meadow I lay down by a river  
And felt the wind play on my cheek. By the sunlight  
On the water I felt the strangeness of the world.  
Prone in the meadow by the side of the fast brook  
I saw the trout shooting his shadow under the  
    willow.

I sank into the mystical nature of memory  
And became my beginning. I was one with strong  
    nature,  
At the heart of the world, with no need to penetrate  
    her.  
In the sheerness and the elegance of this feeling  
I destroyed time and dwelled in eternal pleasure.

The vastness of the aim of human nature  
Yielded to ease and immediacy of comprehension,  
Such is the rarity of the mastery of existence

In the ethereal realm of pure intuition,  
Within the subtlety of perfected spiritual balance.

## II

What shall I say to Walt Whitman tonight?  
Nothing that is not myself. Nothing for himself,  
Who spoke the golden chords of a rough soul  
Deep below the meeting of the mind  
With reality; his words were a mask of the true  
soul.

I grew up among animal pleasures, hot in sense,  
And fought off the lofty reaches of the intellect  
As one knowing the soft touches of the night,  
Running on the Spring freshets in delight,  
Joyful and serene, not to be overcome or quelled.

Then dramatic evil like a blight overcame me,  
The dream-like character of eternal knowledge  
Was brought in earthly bondage; knowledge of death,  
Our old enemy, appeared with his powerful will  
And laid waste the garden of my green seeming.

The years began to whirl in a worldly ecstasy  
Fulfilling some dark purpose confronting the  
heart  
Of things, and I was loosened to flesh and mind,  
Torn asunder from essential unity  
And would wander the world in fateful duality.

This was the knowledge of good and evil,  
This was the certainty of actual death,  
The powerful hold of an ancient, fallen state,  
The battering ram of time on the bones and eyes,  
The new reality of the unredeemed mankind.

## III

What shall I say to Walt Whitman tonight?  
I look not upon the world of facts and figures  
But in the heart of man. Ineradicable evil  
Sits enthroned there, jealously guarding the place  
Only held at arm's length by a comic attitude.

Laughter at the sun and the moon, at the tides,  
Laughter at the comedy of the eternal struggle,  
And at the institutions and society of mankind  
Laughter, I celebrate this tonic attitude,  
And go as far as that for the sake of intellect.

And run on bitterness and corrosive pessimism  
Standing under the glaring eye of antique satire  
And range the fields of powerful condemnation  
As one who allows himself such pleasures,  
A beast engaged, knowing the gates of escape.

New bombs, new wars, new hatreds, new insecurities!  
Man has become the victim of delusions  
Thrashing his brains in energies of misaction,  
Lost in tribal sin, ready to destroy himself,  
Defenceless against all natures of monstrosity.

What shall I say to Walt Whitman tonight?  
Give us a share of your love, your simplicity,  
The large scope, the strong health of the soul,  
Love be our guide, and love be our redemption,  
Love make miracle, animate us now.

## IV

Love come upon us when the willow bends,  
Love come upon us at the child's upturned face,  
Love recapture us in the market-place,  
In churches, slums, on mountains, in the fog,  
Love be with us in the hour of death.

Love be with us in the pang of birth,  
And throw out hatred, envy, pride, despair,  
Be joyful at the time of the tall daffodil,  
Be rampant as the legendary lion,  
Be meek and sweet, and sure, so love be here.

Love that is swift creator and saviour  
Bless all the infants and the old men,  
Bless the middle kingdom of the workers,  
Love come in the soft night, in the sensual day,  
Let our airs be soft flower-lofts of love.

What would you say to me, Walt Whitman, today?  
Is there anything you can give me but your love,  
That total devotion to comprehension of the word?  
It is not the forms you evoked, these are changed,  
But the force you spoke with, the heart's holy  
    rapture,

Your knowledge of the changeless in birth and death,  
The merit of man in his eternal suffering,  
Your love of the stars, of valour, and of doom  
That I would say to you, Walt Whitman, tonight,  
That you could say to me, Walt Whitman, today.