Kate Britt

TO WALT WHITMAN

"I announce what comes after me."

Whitman, So Long! IG 1892

Has America done what was promis'd?
This century of loss brought forth consummations?
We heard your song, Camerado;
Your challenge rang out in a little old print
shop in Brooklyn.
While your music was acclaimed in England,
Perhaps it was proximity that deafened us.
Or fear.
Your melody wasted when the ship went down,
Leaving words to be read on dust covered stages,
In silent auditoriums, under tattered American
flags.

We denied you, made you notorious,
But do not abandon us.
The men, the women, the largest oak, and tiny
ant,
I, too, tremble at the faith you discourse.
And, you know, I've never even been to
Camden . . .
Perhaps I fear to arrive and not find you on
the littered streets, my gay friend,
Selling the latest edition of Leaves to a few
warm-blooded Jerseylites.
I hear they've erected a monument to you in that
city:
Celebrating the muse across the Delaware.

Sing to me, Walt Whitman!
Is there not beauty to be found here?
Is there not truth or good accessible?
Bring forth birth and death triumphant.
Kind sir, with your touch teach me to live,
Teach me to raise my voice in song.

Robert Creeley

from the INTRODUCTION TO THE
PENGUIN LEAVES OF GRASS

My own senses of Whitman were curiously numb
until I was thirty. In the forties, when I was
in college, it was considered literally bad taste
to have an active interest in his writing. In
that sense he suffered the same fate as Wordsworth,
also condemned as overly prolix and generalizing.
There was a persistent embarrassment that this
naively affirmative poet might affect one's own
somewhat cynical wisdoms. Too, in so far as this
was a time of intensively didactic criticism,
what was one to do with Whitman, even if one read
him? He went on and on, he seemed to lack
'true structure', he yielded to no 'critical apparatus'
then to hand. So, as students, we were herded
past him as quickly as possible, and our teachers
used him only as an example of 'the America of that
period' which, we were told, was a vast swamp of
idealistic expansion and corruption. Whitman,
the dupe, the dumb-bell, the pathetically regrettable
instance of this country's dream and despair,
the self-taught man.

That summation of Whitman and his work was a
very comfortable one for all concerned. If I
felt at times awkward with it, I had only to turn
to Ezra Pound, whom the university also condemned,
to find that he too disapproved despite the be-
grudging 'Pact'. At least he spoke of having
'detestable' Whitman, only publicly altering the
implications of that opinion in a series of BBC
interviews made in the late fifties. William
Carlos Williams also seemed to dislike him,
decrying the looseness of the writing, as he felt
it, and the lack of a coherent prosody. He as
well seemed to change his mind in age in so far
as he referred to Whitman as the greatest of
American poets in a public lecture on American