

Sidney Bernard

WALK ON THE WHITMAN SIDE

Picture an oblong of, roughly, four downtown streets by two, with Nassau the central mall, and the St. Paul's street (Vesey) and City Hall Plaza, the southern and northern boundaries respectively. Looming high over which, just a little to the west, the remarkable generation-gap duo, gothic Woolworth Building and cubelike Twin Towers "skychasers." Picture that and you'd have, on the occasion of a recent Walt Whitman walk, the kind of literary "dig" that matched--at least for the 200 or more who showed up--the rarest find of the most confirmed pyramid-watcher in all the valley of the Nile.

In the packed oblong of gray, grime-covered buildings, several of which are 100 years old and more, the crowd touring the traffic-empty streets, on a cloudy, warm summer Sunday afternoon, stopped at various points, as the tour leaders--Whitman biographer Gay Wilson Allen, and Majorie Pearson of Landmarks Preservation, among others--gave short capsule talks relating to WW's newspaper "experiences," his prowls along the narrow, single-block Theatre Alley (which housed the Broadway "hits" of that day), his "coverage" of the then "uptown and super chic" Astor Hotel, which stood just across from St. Paul's graveyard. There were more such incidents from out of a short three-year span--1840-1842--in Whitman's newspaper writing and editing days.

Whitman came alive--the sense of echoing footsteps and tapping cane was both spooky and "real"--in biographer Allen's short, crisp rundown of anecdotes over a hand-held bullhorn. There was the time Whitman visited, in a building just off Nassau, fellow poet and newspaper editor Edgar Allan Poe, who had bought some of Whitman's pieces for use in his Broadway

Journal. Whitman had come by--and how familiar it all sounds for then or now--to pick up a check for the work, only to be told by the journal's editor that he'd have to wait "just a little while longer." Poe, Allen said, was fond of Whitman and must have been "pained and embarrassed" to have had to dismiss him empty-handed.

And then there was Whitman's visit to Fowler's Phrenological Center, publishers of the popular (and quick-selling) "head charts," with offices at 131 Nassau, where proprietor Fowler--according to Allen--upon giving Whitman a routine "reading" for unusual headbumps and the like, declared the poet "an unmistakable genius." The two became friends, Fowler putting up the money for the second edition of *Leaves of Grass*. But, added Allen, Fowler did the good deed anonymously: for "business reasons" he didn't want to associate himself with Whitman's "barbaric yawp" reputation.

The main points of the itinerary over, the tour next gathered at City Hall Plaza, where the walkers eased down on the first four or five rows of stone steps leading to the hall's sweeping portico. Dress in the main was jeans or summer cottons, and there were a couple of prams standing empty for the moment on the periphery of the crowd. A lectern with goose-neck mike was placed 20 feet or so back from the steps, and two flags, one national, the other city, billowed out now and then in the intermittent breeze. Two policemen stood at the open doors of their prowl car, parked another 20 feet back. They seemed, with the others, to be waiting for the readings to begin. Marjorie Pearson of Landmarks gave some background on City Hall--started in 1802, completed in 1811--and then pointed in the direction of what she called the "Boss Tweed Court House just north of the hall, an expensive boondoggle and a beautiful building even with the over-charges."

The first reader--doing several of Whitman's shorter poems--was poet Paul Zweig, a slim-bodied man in his mid-30s, medium height, dark thinning

hair, wearing an open-neck shirt and rough-textured tan cord trousers. The poems, read mostly in unaccented tone, were trademark Whitman: on brotherhood, on familial love, one or two "nature" pieces. Not much "yawp" in these.

Next was, again, biographer Allen, 60-ish, with tufts of gray hair sticking over his ears and out from the back of his head, jacketless and almost string-bean tall, six-two or so. His manner and locution was an odd mixture of harrumphing academese and off-the-cuff. Yankee-infected, homey detail. Allen spoke about and then read from what he called "Whitman's 'Speciman Days' genre." Allen is extremely knowledgeable on the subject of WW; one wasn't always sure where comment ended and text began. And when it finally became clear, there was the realization that the Whitman extract, with its aura of random violence and assassination threat, spoke sharply to our own times. At any rate, Whitman describes Abe Lincoln's afternoon stop at the Astor, en route to Washington for the 1861 inaugural ceremony. It is a vividly detailed portrait: Lincoln, tall and stove-pipe-hatted, sandwiched out of one of the three barouches of the presidential party, stopped for a moment or two as he surveyed the huge crowd--estimated at "10,000 or more"--and, looking over their heads, greeted them casually with a slightly raised hand, before disappearing into the Astor lobby. And there's the brevity of Whitman's description: the tense, ominously speechless crowd, at least half of which is "anti-Abolitionist," and Whitman speculating on how many--and who among them--might be secreting an assassination weapon, a knife ready to flash and thrust, a pistol to pump.

A kind of radar chill from another time. The City Hall audience listening raptly to the all-too-familiar "overtone" of this Whitman text, this very early-on new journalism. Which indeed fleshed out Allen's earlier comment, or reminder, that Whitman was as much the working journalist as ever he was the journeyman poet.

The last reader was poet Galway Kinnell, looking not so much lean and hungry as country squire down for an afternoon visit to the city, in woodsy jacket. Kinnell has sharp features and hazel-blue eyes, and a cowlick of thinning brown hair, which he kept brushing back with his hand. He offered, in modulated middle-register, and the more pointed for that, Whitman's great Lincoln ode--not the complete text, but random stanzas that built powerfully as he moved along. A sort of chanting, painterly mosaic--soft touch of bright color in hermit thrush lines, the "lustrous and drooping" star in western sky, the iridescent purple of lilac incantation, the "rich green" of heart-shaped leaves, and, finally, the mournful gray-black of the Lincoln cortege.

The mood of the crowd was somber as Kinnell ended his read. Some few on the top steps weaved their heads and shoulders--like the moving surface of a lake--to the ode's cadences. "When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd..." He's not so much the national poet, as bardic singer of universal, hence deathless, love lines.

It was over. On the way back to my office I stopped for a short exchange with the two cops by their prowl car.

Me: "What did you think of the reading?"

First Cop: "Sure thing, that Whitman guy said it all."

Second Cop: "Better the poetry than the crazy demos we've been getting down here lately."