

WALT WHITMAN, MY CONTEMPORARY

Leaves of Grass falls like the discovery of a new planet into the orbit of every poet's life once the initial contact has been made. It then becomes like a celestial illumination to every poetic inspiration thereafter. You can't escape it, for it seeps through your eyes and your ears until it becomes a soluble ingredient in your bloodflow.

It is not the ghost of Whitman which shines through the best poetry being written today, but the man himself who is inside the writing hand of every true poet. I refuse to dissect my own work to discover him. He cannot be imitated or duplicated without the most disastrous results, yet he is there within me as invisible as I am unconscious of his presence when I sit down or stand up to write. He is in the air I breathe, the grass I roll in, the water I leap into. He makes me want to shed all my clothes and run as fast as I can into a headwind until I reach the ends of the earth, that is, until I return to the very same square foot of green sward from which I started. His is the best and truest salve for all the miserable negations that irk the flesh and gnaw the soul of the man-mammal.

But not everyone admires Whitman. A certain widely used textbook anthology edited by a certain professor of poetry has this to say about "*When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*:" "This elegy on the death of Lincoln lacks the concentration and distinction of language that characterizes the greatest poetry...Diffuse though it is, some degree of organization and unity is attained through the thematic use of certain images, particularly the lilac and the bird." Admittedly less offensive by

several degrees than the charge of "Cockney poetry" levelled against Keats' efforts by *The Quarterly Review*, it nevertheless manifests the same impression of insensitivity that the earlier chastisement carried.

Now it so happens that as a lecturer on the good grey bard for several uninterrupted weeks at a university where the above mentioned compendium is the primary source of poetic nourishment offered the hungry sensibilities of the young and eager, I found the professor's comment totally without influence (in the same paragraph the popularity of the poem among American readers is granted, but at the same time it is implied that this is due more to the limited capacity of the readers than to any merit in the poem itself.)

It was a droughty spring beckoning us to take our poet out into the open air where he belonged. We squeezed ourselves between two newly planted maples, which together contributed hardly more than a few isolated leaf-shapes of shade, and with the sun descending upon our heads each morning and the cool leaves of grass beneath us read and discussed "*Song of Myself*," "*I Sing the Body Electric*," "*Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*," the 1855 Preface, and even "*When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*," while numerous student bystanders edged closer to listen in until the size of the class almost doubled.

On each of the three mornings of every week for four consecutive weeks I was besieged by a deluge of intelligent and appreciative responses which frequently did not simmer down until an extra non-credit hour had passed. Not a single other poet in the language had meant so much to them. His aspirations were the stuff out of which dreams were made. His senses were in touch with the things of this world that really counted most for them. He was their bard. Where Tennyson, Pope, Milton, Donne,

and even Shakespeare had failed he, Walt Whitman, a kosmos incarnate, had succeeded. And they on their side represented a fraction of that great audience which he so enthusiastically envisioned. In this respect the same could be said of him as George Bernard Shaw once wrote of Oscar Wilde: "He is the only playwright in London who makes his critics sound ridiculous."

Robert Sargent

EZRA'S PACT

I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman
--Ezra Pound

My my! Ezra has grown up.
Now he no longer detests his pig-headed father.
He sees that at least the old man could break
things up,
And Ezra will clean up the mess that the old
guy left.
He will pick up the tools and make something
beautiful.
Ezra is even able to feel a kinship,
And isn't ashamed of him any more.
Isn't that nice of Ezra?
Ezra has made a pact with his father.
He comes to him now as a friend, oh good!
Such nobility! Such magnanimity!
My, my,
My!