

WHAT WHITMAN TAUGHT O'CASEY

It is a happy coincidence that the 125th anniversary of the publication of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* should fall in the same year as Sean O'Casey's centenary. Both occasions have been and will be widely celebrated, and both men's writings have influenced countless people. It might be instructive, however, to look at the effect Whitman had on O'Casey.

We do not know when or where O'Casey first heard of Whitman. Perhaps it was in his limited schooling in some obscure grammar book, or perhaps in his voracious reading and self-education. Whitman was always a popular poet in Ireland, and the great labor leader, James Larkin, used to quote extensively from *Leaves of Grass* in his speeches, thereby endearing himself to O'Casey for a lifetime. Regardless of the origins, we do know that for all his life, O'Casey had a love affair with the writings of America's greatest poet.

O'Casey's debt to Whitman is a matter of record. In nearly all of the playwright's works are found references to the poet. These references generally allude to Whitman's joyous spirit, his position as a champion of democracy, and his vibrant and lyrical words of beauty. In one book, for instance, O'Casey refers to Whitman's "expansive vision of brotherhood." In another, he characterizes *Leaves of Grass* as "a book in which the whole world danced."

Whitman pervaded the consciousness of O'Casey, even to the extent of finding his way into the dramatist's personal letters. When, for example, the playwright was cited as subversive by the California House Committee on Un-American Activities, chaired by Congressman Jack Tenny, O'Casey replied to a friend:

Tenny is right; I am a subversive writer; always have been, and I hope, always will be. I take my place with the other subversive writers -- Dickens, Milton, Shelley, Byron, Joyce, Shaw, and a shining host of others, not forgetting Tenny's own Walt Whitman.

O'Casey then went on to blast the McCarthyism of the period:

Even Shakespeare would be cited to appear as a dangerous person, and would be silenced by the McCarthys of the day; and Walt Whitman wouldn't be allowed to ask a question, for he would stand condemned as a self-confessed democrat, hailing and applauding the ideals of man.

For O'Casey, Whitman was the personification of America. "If I had the choice tomorrow of Europe or America," he once wrote, "I'd choose America without delay, for Whitman's more to me than Virgil." In the winter of 1934, O'Casey journeyed to the United States to help in the American premiere of his poetic play, *Within the Gates*. And here he saw the spirit of Whitman everywhere. "Bound for New York, the Manhattan of Whitman," he wrote as he climbed aboard a large ocean liner, divided, he said, like the world at large -- into classes: steerage, tourist, and cabin. As the ship arrived in New York harbor, O'Casey gazed upon the familiar Statue of Liberty, and he knew he had arrived, not as a stranger but as a guest:

Sweet Miss Liberty, Belle of New York, and Man of Manhattan, hear my prayer, and let my cry come unto thee! A new land, honored nowhere with a Greek temple or a Roman road; no medieval monastery showing itself off as a tasty heap of ruins; no

Norman castle to let us fancy seeing bowmen from the walls shooting arrows into the bowels of people living around it; no Ides of March, or anything else like them, to remember. Here, instead, were the cloisters of Emerson, the limitless habitat of Walt Whitman, the battlefields of Washington, and the rush and rendezvous of modern mechanics; all the lure of freshness and of power. They were enough, and had in them many miracles for the future .... for the first time he would set foot on foreign soil, though for him no land was a foreign one, since all were peopled by the same human family.

In New York, O'Casey stood aghast at the rushing of millions of people to and from their jobs or the theater, the playgrounds or the parks. Of particular interest were the streetcars, which brought an unusual picture to the playwright's vivid imagination:

Long and low, solidly framed, doorway and body, dull-colored, borne along on cumbersome swivel and wheel. It might almost be that, out of this one, clumsily clanking around the corner, Walt Whitman would step down jauntily, lilted one of his many songs of Manhattan.

In Whitman, O'Casey saw a man of peace -- not a peaceful man, but a man whose dreams of peace, of brother and sisterhood, of an end to racism, poverty and exploitation were manifested in all his works. Like Whitman, O'Casey had those dreams. In the 1950s, O'Casey paid Whitman the supreme compliment by writing a poem about him. The poem is in the context of O'Casey's essay on the menace of the military mind and on all of our fears of nuclear holocaust:

Walt Whitman, one of the world's good  
wishes  
Is the one that wishes you here today,  
To sing Shake Hands to the world's  
peoples;  
To listen, cock-eared, in a way of  
wonder,  
To all that others have got to say;  
Then with your own embracing  
message,  
Lead all correctly, or lead astray,  
For either is goodness with God, and  
gay.  
Like song of a thrush or screech from  
a jay;  
They'll mingle miles on, from each  
other learning  
That life's delightful at work or play.  
So enter in spirit the sharp contentions  
Of brothers belling each other at bay,  
And soften the snout of the menacing  
cannon  
With the scent and bloom of a lilac  
spray.

The scent and bloom of a lilac spray is being threatened today, just as it was in O'Casey's days and by the same forces. Today, the atom is as much in our own backyards as it is in the bomb bays of airplanes. Today, the lilac sprays in Vietnam have not recovered from the sprays of the deadly Agent Orange, which now claims the lives of its users. Today, we hear the drum beats of Whitman and the bugle calls of O'Casey, and we say, America still has need of them.