

Ulrich Troubetzkoy

WAITING FOR WALT WHITMAN

In Camden, New Jersey

I sat on your front steps today
stroked by the cool shade fingers of your tree
in the hot noon of Mickle Street,
staring at the "W W" in the stone curb.
Out of the heat and the glare and the waiting
I would not have been overly surprised
to have seen you, Walt, ride up here and alight
or to have met Mrs. Davis at your door.
In this workingmen's neighborhood,
this was the only house you ever owned.

(Row houses of America,
what painters and poets and revolutionaries,
what singers of individuality do you conceal
behind your repetitious facades?)

The workers live here still.
There is an apartment for rent next door.
A young black man and a child
are coming to look at it.
These workers speak languages, foreign and yet familiar.
You will recognize
the intonation of your brother
who has nailed a flyer to the Bell System pole—

*i Pa' los boricuas
aqui y alla!
CLARIDAD
El Diario De Los Trabajadores*

— *Clarity*, the newspaper of the workers.

You and I, Walt, both printers, poets, journalists,
are kin to these people who might find us strange
unless they read our poetry. They'd see
that you wrote for "Americanos," for "Camderados,"
and all about "Libertad." "Claridad" was your metier.

At last it is one o'clock.

The magic door opens, but it is not you
nor Mrs. Davis, nor your nurse, who beckons me,
but a young black woman who invites the soul
as you did, Walt.

She lives with your artifacts all day, except on Wednesday:
your hat, your metal bath, your steel pens, your wills,
your letters and photographs that look from every wall;
with Mrs. Davis' prickly horsehair furniture;
but, above all, with your poetry.

She tells me how you went
back and forth on the ferry, a study in idleness
your relatives found hard to understand,
that you wore your hat indoors if you wanted to,
and planned a tomb that cost much more
than your house—but your friends paid for it.
All of the Whitmans lie, the lazy and the industrious,
there together, in the glow of your name.
She tells how Mrs. Davis had moved in
with her prim Victorian chairs, cut glass and painted china,
to keep your house—and how the neighbors talked.
She is most eloquent of you who wrote:

I see ranks, colors, barbarisms, civilizations,
—I go among them—I mix indiscriminately,
And I salute all the inhabitants of the earth.

Each of us inevitable;
Each of us limitless. . . .

Your house is too tidy, of course.
You had papers and books all over the bedroom floor.
Neatness took over after the tourists came.
The books are locked up in their cases;
the wills are framed, the letters, under glass.
A poet's clutter is too much reality
for all who want passion tidied in printed books.

No matter, we tourists who are also poets know
how different it was when you were working here.
I look at the type you set for *Leaves of Grass*
and feel a kinship, not just to lines recalled,
but to the typeface I have set myself.
Though now we use computers, I know very well
what you were driving at in "A Font of Type":

This latent mine—these unlaunched voices—passionate
powers within the pallid slivers slumbering

until awakened into poetry, the subliminal power of words,
page after page locked in the metal chase
and then unlocked upon a startled world.