

Antler

WALT WHITMAN, CAMERADO

The first poems I read by Whitman were "Miracles," "I Hear America Singing," and "O Captain, My Captain" in tenth grade. I'd been writing poetry since I was 14, iambic pentameter inspired by Longfellow, Shelley, Swinburne. I liked the three Whitman poems, but it wasn't till later that I discovered *Leaves of Grass*. I grew up in Wauwatosa, a pastoral suburb of Milwaukee where few children lived, so I never had any close friends. When I was 15 I fell hopelessly in love with a schoolmate my age who rejected me. The more he rejected me the more I fell in love with him. There seemed no way out. Deeper and deeper I plunged into unrequited loveache culminating in an attempt to take my life. Then, the summer before I went to college, exploring an old used bookstore in downtown Milwaukee, I opened a beat-up copy of *Leaves of Grass*. My eyes fell on these lines from "Spontaneous Me"—"The boy's longings, the glow and pressure as he confides to me what he was dreaming." At that instant my life was forever changed. I bought the book for 25 cents, walked to a secluded spot along Lake Michigan's rippling shore and began to read every word. Suddenly my teenage self had found a friend greater than I ever dreamed. Day after day that summer, *Leaves of Grass* and I were inseparable companions. At last I felt I was given the courage and encouragement to live. I remember wondering how many youths' best friend was a dead poet? How many lads had secret summer outdoor trysts thrilling in chanting out loud "Song of Myself," "Children of Adam," and the "Calamus" poems? How many boys kissed copies of *Leaves of Grass*? Ah, how I loved Whitman then!

When I was 19, as a college student at UW-Milwaukee, I took a poetry writing class and happened to sit next to a black-haired green-eyed slender youth named Jeff Poniewaz. During the course of the semester I discovered Whitman was his best friend in the same way and had rescued him too. We could hardly believe we'd met. Overnight Jeff and I became best friends, glorying in the actual living friend we'd dreamed of so long and which Whitman had promised us someday we'd find. Together we walked through parks

and along Lake Michigan reading to each other poems we loved from *Leaves of Grass*. We decided to live together as camerados and devote our lives to poetry. "We Two Boys Together Clinging" was "our song." Twenty-one years later we're still together, writing poems, travelling around America sharing them with people, trying to live up to Whitman's invocation of the poet as "itinerant gladness scatterer." We have Whitman to thank, to thank for our being alive, for bringing us together, for giving us the vision of cosmic friendship and poetry. Thanks, Walt.

As well as inspiring a lifelong friendship, *Leaves of Grass* has had an overwhelming influence on my poetry. It freed me from blank verse to free verse, awakened me to sense the place and praise of sexuality in poetry, directed me to adventure on the Open Road, guided me on my first solitude wilderness visionquests, confirmed my inklings of eros in Nature, taught me how to sculpt a longpoem that could take in a million universes, or try to, how to explore a single subject from every angle, and gifted me with a view of death as "ever returning spring sure to me you bring." From Whitman I first learned the joy of initial parallelistic sequences and extended periodic sentences; the delight in wordsplurgenarl, echoing motif reverberations, cascading catalogues and prophetic pronunciamentos; the distillation of epiphanous archetypal narrative vignettes, the consciousness-expanding power of astronomical and geological realities, the responsibility of *Democratic Vistas*' dream invocation of Utopian potential of America, all countries and peoples, the sense of a giant book of poems as an organic lifework, the love of saying goodbye as whispers of heavenly death whisper nearer, the tender tone of passion and compassion in ecstatic rhapsody. Whitman taught me my poems must be tested outdoors in the open air under the spacious clouds and along the landscape and flowing currents, must be shared in public as the realization of the noble and ennobling role of the poet in society, which he felt was so great that, as he put it, "soon there will be no more priests."

Whitman's influence on American poetry and life is evergrowing. Poets he inspired like D.H. Lawrence, Sandburg, Neruda, Jeffers, Ginsberg and countless others have gone on in their own work

to inspire others in a process of rippling outward—or, as in the Greek races, passing on the torch—contributing to an exuberant aura of hope for the future. Allen Ginsberg's incarnation of the Whitman Spirit alone radiates outward daily touching the lives and hearts of thousands. Although Whitman had no children, he actually did father (and mother) numberless poets to come with "limitless jets of love hot and enormous," "every hour the semen of centuries and still of centuries" and their "seas of bright juice suffuse heaven."

For me Whitman's greatest contribution is a vision of love embracing all: heterosexual love in *Children of Adam*; homosexual love in *Calamus*; self-love in *Song of Myself*, which when we read we sense the self he speaks of is the same as ourself, and sense our own self as if it had existed before our birth. A love of Nature so vast the eros energy spirals outward such that the Kinsey Continuum seems just "step one" in a journey of infinite steps. Earth, Sea, Night, the Sunrise, the Wind become real lovers. In an anonymous review of *Leaves of Grass* he wrote himself, Whitman says:

The Earth receives and returns his affection: he will stay with it as the bridegroom stays with the bride. The cool breath'd ground, the slumbering and liquid trees, the justgone sunset, the vitreous pour of the full moon, the tender and growing night, he salutes and touches, and they touch him. The sea licks him all over with its tongues, the wind's soft tickling genitals brush against him, dazzling and tremendous the sunrise ravishes him.

And finally after celebrating love of family, motherhood and country (he refers to Democracy as his girlfriend), unfolding out of the folds perhaps the profoundest death love vision ever written: "Through me shall be said the words to make death exhilarating." Here was a poet who invoked our cosmic consciousness and ached for our love and friendship before we were born; who, before we were born, invoked our future deaths to come "lovely and soothing undulating round the world serenely arriving to all to each sooner or later delicate death, sure enfolding arms of cool-enfolding death,

dark mother always gliding near with soft feet who we gratefully nestle close to.”

Poignant the thought how many friends and lovers Whitman has now that he's dead, how many friendships and lovers his poetry inspired, when it seems as if, in his own life, he never found a truehearted lifelong camerado or loving womanfriend. So here we are today gathered to celebrate together our separate deep friendships with Walt Whitman. Let's hope Whitman is here now listening in. Before reading from my own work I'll conclude this meditation with the last *Calamus* poem, "Full of Life Now."

Full of life now, compact, visible,
I, forty years old the eighty-third year of the States,
To one a century hence or any number of centuries
 hence,
To you yet unborn these, seeking you.

When you read these I that was visible am become
 invisible,
Now it is you, compact, visible, realizing my poems,
 seeking me,
Fancying how happy you were if I could be with you and
 become your comrade;
Be it as if I were with you. (Be not too certain but I am
 now with you.)

Editor's note: Antler concluded his talk by reading a selection of his poems from his book, Last Words, a number of which had first been published in The Mickle Street Review.