

“WHITMAN AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF AMERICA”

What role does a poet play in a democracy? For Walt Whitman, the poet was the visionary who dreamed the dream of the brotherhood of man and articulated its possibilities. Drawing alike on the radical literature of the 1830s and 40s and on Emersonian idealism, Whitman created in his poetry the song of the American self, and in his prose an idea of constitutional liberty such as the world had never known before. The meaning of America as a bold experiment in human freedom was always present in his work, lending significance even to his most trivial poems.

In celebration of the bicentennial of the Constitution of the United States, a group of scholars and poets met in Camden, New Jersey, on May Day, 1987, to examine Whitman's contribution to the still-developing idea of America. Billed as “Whitman and the Foundations of America,” the conference presented several ways in which Walt Whitman played a foundational role in American democracy. The critic Daniel Aaron noted Whitman's “mythologizing” use of Revolutionary War heroes and the Civil War to construct a historical and almost reverential idea of the Union. Alan Trachtenberg identified Whitman's uses of the notion of “vision” in Whitman, and showed that it helps explain Whitman's highly personal, yet radically inclusive sense of the body politic. David Reynolds identified Whitman's debts to and improvements on the radical voices he picked up in his youth. Ed Folsom explained the democratic implications that Whitman found in photography and documented the effects of that new medium on Whitman's work. Peter Balakian spoke as both critic and poet, seeing Whitman's radicalism as a continuation of the ranting form of the “jeremiad,” while the poet Antler commented on Whitman's effect on his own beginnings as a writer, and read extensively from his work to demonstrate the connection. Allen Ginsberg closed the conference by reading excerpts from Whitman that supported the view of Whitman's politics as a personal, radical, and often sexual statement of human liberty. The conference, organized by Dr. David Reynolds, the Director of the Whitman Studies Program, was co-sponsored by Rutgers, the Walt Whitman Association, and the New Jersey Department of Higher Education.

This issue presents the proceedings of that conference, along with a selection of outstanding poems, each of which adds in some way to the definition of America and the poet's place in its political body. The same theme was chosen for the first annual Walt Whitman Association High School Poetry Contest, whose winners were announced at the conference and were invited to read their poems at the Walt Whitman Birthday Celebration on May 31, 1987. The money for the prizes was provided by the Eve Deininger Memorial Poetry Award fund, established in memory of a former member of the Association. A gathering of reviews of new books relevant to Whitman Studies rounds out this issue of *The Mickle Street Review*.

G.M.S.

