

MICKLE STREET REVIEW #7: "WHITMAN AND THE EARTH"

"I say the question of Nature, largely considered, involves the questions of the esthetic, the emotional, and the religious — and involves happiness." Though resident and singer of cities, Walt Whitman looked all his life to Nature as teacher and healer, the source of what he called primal sanity. He boasted that each passage of *Leaves of Grass* had been tried in the presence of the elements, "the rude air, the salt sea, the fire, the woods, and the rocky ground," before he released his songs to his human public. Accepting himself as a part of Nature, it was to the elements he turned for regeneration in 1876, having suffered in the several years preceding from paralytic strokes and severe depression. At Timber Creek, twelve miles in the country beyond Camden, Whitman found the woods, stream, pond, and spring waters that restored him in body and spirit. He spent two summers in retreat there, healing and strengthening himself, making a ritual of rolling in the mud, rinsing himself in the spring, and walking and singing in the sun and air until the echoes rang.

It is curious today to come upon the springhouse that stands near Timber Creek. Its shape suggests the shape of Whitman's tomb, which Walt designed himself. The hint of rebirth is there. But a hundred odd years after Whitman recovered vital energy at Timber Creek, the turbid stream seems barely able to sustain its own life, and the ground between the creek and the springhouse gives off a sickening, sweetish odor unlike any natural smell. We live in a time whose ruling spirit regards the natural world as raw material to be developed, processed, and consumed for profit and then used as a holding tank for toxic wastes. We have bought the industrial and hi-tech revolutions at the deceptively low cost of denying the sacredness of Nature. But our life is now radically out of balance with the carrying power of the earth.

In this issue of *The Mickle Street Review*, essays by Michael W. Fox, Jeff Poniewaz, and Roger Dunsmore explore the historical, political, and spiritual roots of our current desecration of Planet Earth and our destruction of non-human creatures. Comparing Whitman and Thoreau in their attitudes toward industry and Nature, Poniewaz discusses Whitman's great ecological blindspot. In a different spirit, noted Whitman scholar Harold Aspiz contributes an essay on Whitman's

philosophical idealism and finds that the source of regeneration for Whitman is as likely to be in the heavens as under his bootsoles. Norma Wilson's essay presents Whitman as the first visionary writer in American Literature and the first "Ameropean" to come close to the Native American conception of the union of the spiritual and the commonplace.

The poems in this issue celebrate the human-earth and human-animal connection. Some accomplish an imaginative deconstruction of industrial reality, turning industrial wastelands, corrupt human orders, and rigidified religious structures back to the "divine materials" from which they began. Others turn away from cancerous cities and military madness to the consolation and wholeness of wild nature. Most of the literary works included here affirm in some way the possibility of a vital reintegration of the human and the natural worlds. Many poets and writers of deep ecology come together here, strong women and men of good will, activists as well as quietists who open themselves to earth's wisdom. The voices in "Whitman and the Earth" encourage imaginative participation in the healing and nourishing power of Nature, believing with Walt that "primal sanity" still dwells here, in the balance between the seen and the unseen.

Paul Peter Piech, guest artist for this issue, has completed a limited edition of Whitman poem posters in full color linocuts. He offers copies to members of the Walt Whitman Association for the modest price of £10 and may be reached c/o 2 Willow Dene/Bushey Heath, Herts/WD 2 IPS England.

The Doris Kellogg Neale/Walt Whitman Prize of \$100 is awarded each year to the author whose contribution best reveals the continuing presence of Walt Whitman in American poetry. We are happy to announce the award of this year's prize to Anler, whose poems of wilderness and freedom, as well as of factories, embody in a contemporary idiom Whitman's cosmic, egalitarian vision of humanity and nature. His poems make audible the words of the earth, without shame or the need of shame, with original energy, insouciance, and undaunted, affectionate comradeship toward all beings.