

GATHER THE ASHES by Kenneth Lumpkin. Hug the Earth Publications, 1984, no set price.

The majority of humans take little responsibility for the state of the Earth. The dictum at the end of Voltaire's *Candide*, that the purpose of life is to cultivate one's garden, is taken figuratively by all but a few. Until this century, mankind kept its fields up only as a matter of agricultural economy; when it came, the Industrial Revolution was welcomed as release from the Earth. People of that time expected that, eventually, with the exhaustion of natural resources, mankind would escape to the stars, as a soul leaves its dying body to ascend to the cosmos. Such anti-ecological opportunism led people to turn away from the Earth, to regard it as dirty, outgrown waste...as real estate to be converted to concrete at best. At the time, even earth-lovers like Whitman spent many words in praise of intercontinental communication, transportation, and industrialization, even though such advances would poison the waters under the Brooklyn Ferry and deplete vast fields of grass.

Today, no technological answers emerge to the compounded problems that began in manifest destiny. The modern American poet cannot share in the dream that brought things to this impasse: the reverse image, first sounded in Ginsberg's *Howl* as Moloch, excommunicates the poet from the Earth, now a trash-heap of perversity. The new voices must synthesize from these ruins a sincere approach to the work at hand, to make personal the dangers of our time in a way that will lead to action. Kenneth Lumpkin, in his first book, exhorts mankind to "gather the ashes/and hold them close/to our bosom./Let our hearts/fall back to Earth;/dispel the doom."

From first poem to last, Lumpkin's *Gather the Ashes* pleads Earth's cause with humanity, offering his idea of ecological commitment as a personal choice. He begins, in "Evolution, with apologies," with the world of men groping for "the meaning of their/own particular/mythology."

Every child will
squeeze all of
basic human
evolutionary

pattern into
a lifetime...

Each life is part of the whole, a meaningful "prototype/for the next/generation." In this way, the individual is brought back into the community, and can no longer be separate from the environment. As with native American tribes, the culture of man comes to include the natural surroundings, to feel the familial love and protection of the Earth, the sky, and the water.

Elsewhere, in "Powderhorn Mill Inn," Lumpkin regrets the opposed cultural attitude:

as if an Indian
thought he was selling
what he didn't own anyway
but shared equally
with his white brother,
Watt: "If you want to see
the failures of socialism
go to any Indian reservation today."

The breakdown of the egalitarian spirit in America, starting with the betrayal of the red man's trust by white men and ending in this contemporary example of continuing injustice, is then compared to the decline of natural forces, as "the Pequannock roaring by/once turning the mill/now a mere trickle." The river, once exploited "by enterprising Dutch," can no longer support the Powderhorn Mill, which in turn must be converted to a roadside restaurant, another loss of power in the general decline.

Segregated from the land and from each other, the people become powerless to slow down the decay. Lumpkin likens the process to snow in "fait accompli." First, reminded of sin, he asks, "Who will cover/the Earth?" It will not be the big corporations, but the local municipalities that will be ultimately responsible. Rather than take an active part in decisions that affect their lives, "now people simply fuck off/their government literally/tells them to/and they happily do." The anger here is properly at home.

Meanwhile, corrective measures are in progress to reintroduce us to the Earth. "For Eliezer Stolzenberg" shows how Lumpkin as a teacher tells his students how to estimate the Earth's age:

Sit down
on the ancient stone
only 5,744 years old
and begin a new mythology...

and be not persecuted
for your need
to carry the tribe's story
with you as you leave,
but when you go
hide your history
from the hater
to be found
sometime later,
let them remember you
round the fire
when it's cold.

In creating a new past, his students may also take part in creating a new future. This two-sided legacy of sowing and reaping brings about, or is brought about, by a closer connection to the Earth. The age of a rock leads one to think also of the age of man, and of the part of both in the Earth. "It is not without consequence," Lumpkin insists in "To him, before the flood," "that we do come together/to make this statement, being franchised/citizens of the polis..."

Our backyards not dumps
for politicians to shove
their thing through...

Do we not feel the pain of a trench
dug in our side?
Ask the electorate, by God.

The hope that the community will come together, becoming one with the ecosystem, is not yet dead.

Gather the Ashes is illustrated by three sketches of vividly imagined flora, done by Nancy Eisen. The clean production of the book was funded by the Louis Ginsberg Memorial Scholarship, awarded by the Chaucer Guild. It is a first book, small and modest, and not without technical difficulties, but the poetry itself is strong and has heart. This may be the planting of a seed that will sprout healthy fruit, from the wasteland's ashes, "turning this nothing/into something."

— Michael Alexander



CRITICAL ESSAYS ON WALT WHITMAN. Edited by James Woodress. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1983. ix, 338 pp. \$35.00.

Of intense interest to Whitman and the group of comrades in arms who gathered in his little house on Mickle Street was the sometimes acrimonious warfare in the literary world provoked by *Leaves of Grass*. Particularly galling were writers like Lanier and Swinburne who at first praised *Leaves of Grass* only to recant later. How can such treachery be explained? Whitman detected a pattern: "The young fellows seem rather bowled over by me: then they get respectable or something and I will no longer do." There were others equally puzzling who, like Bayard Taylor, lauded Whitman in private letters and attacked him in public. "It would be easy to quote one Taylor against the other," Whitman declared. Of great comfort were critics like Frank Williams ("loyal to the bone") and Clarence E. Stedman (always "sane" in the "general madness"). Thus Whitman and his devoted followers parcelled out the world into enemies, backsliders, hypocrites, and friends.

Today, the critical triumph of *Leaves of Grass* has become so massive that even the most vehement "Whitmaniac," to use Swinburne's term—let's say Horace Traubel or Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke—would surely be satisfied that the war has been won. James Woodress in his "Introduction" to *Critical Essays on Walt Whitman*