

Douglas Morea

Remarks at the Dedication of the Walt Whitman Visitors Center and Library, October 14, 1984.

I wish to thank Dr. Sill and everyone at the Walt Whitman Association for the honor of my having been invited here today. I also want to thank a friend, e. jean lanyon, who also happens to be the Poet Laureate of the state of Delaware, for having pushed and prodded me into writing and submitting "Song of the Sweeper" in the first place. I simply would not have done it without her. Let's see, what's her image for it?—she says she likes to stick pins in people to get them moving. Well, she did a real good pin job on me, and I thank her for it.

Well, what did I do? I wrote a poem on the theme of Walt Whitman and work, and I did not only because jean pushed me, but also because I felt qualified. Now, I did not have the good fortune to be born into money. You'd better believe I wish I had, but no such luck. Also, I was not blessed with the kind of personality that naturally leads one into the arena where are to be found the standard ladders of success. Consequently, I have spent most of my adult life loading and unloading trucks, working in warehouses, being a clerk, a messenger, and of course a sweeper. You might say I've spent an awful lot of time swinging apelike from slob job to slob job through the understories of the economic jungle.

Some years ago, while I held the position of custodian at a university, I was introduced at a social gathering to some professor, who asked me what I did for a living. I told him, and my words came over him almost as a physical blow. He jolted backward, face flushed, eyes darting back and forth so see if anyone else had heard. And it struck me, with some amusement, that he did not merely look down upon me for what I did for a living; he felt mortified at having committed a great *faux pas*. He believed he'd provoked me into revealing publicly a terrible truth, namely that I, among other things, washed toilet bowls for a living.

Now that was an extreme and minor event, but it points out a quality that pervades our culture with regard to labor. Walt Whitman of course held a very different view of labor. Whitman saw labor as inherently respectable, as being downright invigorating, in fact. And

not merely so to the body, but to the spirit and mind as well. How so? It is through labor that we produce all the things and values we need and want and use and share. What truer and deeper way is there to comradeship than labor? That's a great ideal. It makes you feel real good. But you know, something terrible happens whenever this ideal is stated. That terrible thing is a smile that comes creeping up in the back of most people's minds. What does that smile mean? It means that this ideal is so far away from the truth, it comes off as a kind of joke. And that's very sad. Why is it so?

When labor is reckoned into business as just one more raw material, the laborer, the worker, becomes just one more piece of equipment. And the human being who is the worker must live in the shadow cast by that piece of equipment, or labor-self. If the labor-self is seen to be little and mean, then little and mean is the shadow. The littler and meaner the shadow, the more cramped is the space the poor human being has to dwell in and pace to and fro in.

Now this is terrible. Walt Whitman should be rolling over in his grave. But you know something? He's not. And I know that for a fact because I passed him in Harleigh Cemetery on my way here just a little while ago. And he's quite calm. Walt Whitman, calm? In the face of all this? How can that be? Maybe it's because, despite how bad things have become, old Walt is still optimistic.

Here Morea read the poem, "Song of the Sweeper," which had won the Doris Kellogg Neale prize for 1984. See *Mickle Street Review* #6, pp. 87-91.

I have been asked to say a few words to you today on the meaning of Walt Whitman to present-day poets. Well now, should a poet today concern himself and herself with the work and fact of Walt Whitman? I do believe so.

First of all there's the sheer fact of the language. Walt's language is rich, well-wrought, expansive, often intense—it's delicious. I recommend that every poet keep a copy of *Leaves of Grass* sitting about the house, much as if it were a bowl of, say, breadsticks, to be munched on from time to time, mindlessly. It may seem odd, but it's not just the body

that can be fed mindlessly, the mind can be fed mindlessly too. And Whitman is especially amenable to this, as he is not, as some, merely a program, but a whole world, a whole world unto himself—and can be so to us as well.

Then there's the political and social timeliness of much in Walt Whitman. He's a real foundation of individualism in our monolithic age, with its mega corporate states and mega national states. In the face of all these megas, Walt serves to remind us of our human energies. It's a shame to have to say this, and it's ironic too, but when it comes to needing reminding of one's human energies, it's many contemporary poets who are the worst offenders, who need to be reminded more than others. Many academic poets especially should take a plunge in Walt Whitman, for its therapeutic value. They will find in him one excellent means of rehabilitation. Women poets especially, as well as men, can find in Walt a liberating fountain, with his fluidity of gender and insistence on equality. He's surprisingly modern this way when you stop and consider how much history, how much change has taken place in the hundred years since he was around. Like Jesus of Nazareth, Whitman was unique in his ability to transcend the sexual mindset of his age and place.

While I'm close to the subject of politics and bad poetry, let me say that Walt solved for himself eminently well a very knotty, central conflict that is encountered in the writing of political poetry. It is the conflict between the political and the personal, the visionary and the purely private. The failure to resolve this conflict results in much bad political poetry. We poets today who wish to write good political poetry can find in Whitman a source of technical inspiration. Now of course we must each find our own unique solutions—even so, at the very least Walt shows us that the job can be done, and indeed must be.

Then there's the question of courage. Courage is the biggie. Everyone needs it, and poets are no exception. What kinds of courage do poets need?

First of all there's physical courage, the courage to face violence, hardship and oppression. We poets here in the United States at this moment don't need too much of this kind of courage, maybe just a little bit around the edges. And we can hope that things don't get bad in the future. But just in case they do we should keep ourselves limbered up by taking heart in Walt Whitman's example, because he did have physical courage.

He was fired from his government job for his beliefs and writings, and as most of us know and all of us should know, being fired and suddenly having no income is a form of physical oppression. Beyond this, Walt assigned himself the task of ministering to the wounded in the hospitals of the civil war. It took great physical courage for him to do this, and his doing so was central to his evolution as a poet.

Then there's the courage to be different. A poet comes out of himself before he comes out of the world. It's a religious thing—a poet is in the world, and of course must be, but somehow he is not quite of the world. This is not to say that poets are or should be after the fashion of Tiny Tim. Most poets are in fact quite normal in their appearance and behavior. Even so, if I may dare to say so myself, there is something funny about us poets, and most of us pay social penalties accordingly. Now Walt Whitman was legendary for his courage to be different, and we can learn this courage from him.

There is also the courage to be silly. We poets are, among other things, pretty silly. What we do is silly in a way, really. You know, there are many people who are terrified of writing. Hand them pencil and paper and they panic. I've heard that people who have bravely faced real bullets in battle have sometimes come home, been handed paper and pencil, and become paralysed with fear. My goodness, after one's been in a war, writing should be kidstuff. What is it that some of these brave soldiers lack? Maybe it's the courage to be silly. Now Walt Whitman was an eminently silly fellow, but he never let it bother him. And he came through it just fine.

Coupled with these is the courage to be alone. Writing is a lonely profession. The process is inherently isolating, and this is especially true for poets, whose techniques and often visions as well are not likely to lead on to friends, fame, or fortune any time soon, if ever. Most of us poets dwell in a state of abiding uncertainty at bad odds. Now Walt spent most of his early life in such a state. He paid his dues and persevered. He's an example to us all that what we do does make sense, and that we might turn out to be winners after all.

A number of years ago, I think it was in a Bob Dylan song, I heard the following line: To live outside the law you must be honest. And I've thought about it a lot. Why should you have to be honest if you live

outside the law? Because if you live outside the law, you don't have the law to take care of you. Live inside the law, inside rules, gods, ideologies, orthodoxies, and the law in its turn becomes your agent. The law deals with reality, with what is really going down in the world, deals with it for you. Live outside the law, and that service is not provided. You are on your own. You have to deal with reality directly, all by yourself. And it takes a lot of courage to do that. It takes a lot of courage to be an outlaw.

Yes. I said outlaw. Not criminal. No. Criminal is a very different and terrible thing. Criminal means mugging little old ladies, driving under the influence of alcohol, embezzling funds, betraying one's oath of public office. No, I don't mean that. I mean outlaw.

I may be biased, and I'll grant it, but I believe that the grandest and richest way to be an outlaw is to be a poet. Indeed, to be a true and good poet it is necessary to be an outlaw, if only somewhere in the depths of one's heart. Now Walt Whitman is the vitalest, most refreshing, most expansive, most commanding outlaw our history offers us. Why? Because he had the courage to face the truth, directly. No agents for Walt, he did the job for himself. It has been said that most people would rather meet a tiger on the road than face the truth. If you want to be a poet, a good and real one, follow Walt Whitman, and forego that tiger.

Follow Walt Whitman? Isn't that a double bind? How does one follow a leader? Follow, and you make yourself in the image of a follower rather than a leader. Fail to follow, and—well, you are failing to follow. So, how can a poet follow Walt Whitman? The secret lies in the truth and how you find it. The answer is: live outside the law, and be honest.

Thank you very much.

