

## Reviews

Antler, *Last Words*. Available Press, Ballantine Books, 1986. \$4.95.

You'll never get in a car reading Antler. Everything seems to start with his body. The "I" of *Last Words* grabs the hair on the back of your neck and pushes your nose into lilacs, turds, and mirrors, so all you want to do is turn and smell the hand in your hair. At its best, *Last Words* starts you with Antler and leaves you seeing something you'd normally not look at for the sake of your sanity.

The best poems in *Last Words* are the scariest ones. The greatest battery comes in "Truncheons of Work-Ethic Bludgeoning" where "Christ wasn't kidding when he urged us to consider/the lilies who neither spin nor sew," and "500 million tons of poison/belch(es) from smokestacks every year." In "Factories Are Boxcars Full of Jews" Antler inquires, "Were those who worked toward the murder/of 6 million Jews/Worse than those who work toward the murder/of all human life?" These poems and several like them are Antler's response to the criticism of another poem in *Last Words* called "Factory." "Factory" is probably the most well-wrought poem in the collection. It is the longest, and the most acclaimed. Antler's "real life" factory was Continental Can in Milwaukee; he caught lids. (Having caught labels in NJ, "Factory" is a scary poem to me.) Antler's toughest poetic response to his critics is "Your Poetry's No Good Because it Tries to Convey a Message":

Tell it to the ashes of Neruda's library,  
Tell it to 52 million children under 15  
    working in factories in Southeast Asia,  
Tell it to more people born in 2984  
    than all the people ever born . . .  
Tell it to Lorca while the soldier fires  
    two bullets up his ass.

Antler grounds his most serious material in himself. Much of *Last Words* is first person point of view. The testimonial quality of his work doesn't de-universalize it, though. His philosophy of himself as integral to, rather than separate from or dominant over, life connects detail to principle. Antler's philosophy makes him and his readers believe change is possible; unfortunately, it also makes us quite culpable for the mess we're in.

Taking our horrors into consideration, it's no surprise that some of *Last Words* is escapist, or just plain funny. I want to believe that the turd in the pool scene (most people know it from *Caddyshack*) was written first by Antler in "Beyond the Call of Duty." If the pun in the title is deliberate, the metaphor of a poet's duty undoubtedly lies at the bottom of all this fun. After two turd poems, Antler sets up readers for more fun, then in "The Bewilderment of Laughter" he examines and operates that fun by examining Death.

A good portion of *Last Words* wrangles with death. At the end of "The Bewilderment of Laughter" Death is indifferent: "Death with its skull that never stops grinning/the grin that never stops touching/our face from the inside . . ." The laughter at biting a turd in the earlier poem gives way to: "The laughter of crowds at public tortures and executions,/the laughter of the guillotined head . . ." Antler does come to some kind of agreement with death after all his poems on the subject. "Alan Watts' Dying in His Sleep Elegy" is a beautiful poem where the "I" gets high and dances with a tombstone mirror: "as the lights clicked on and off on and off/on and off on and off on and off . . ./ Alan Watts — you'll never know you died." The elegy is carefully measured in joints.

It's either the pot, the Imagists, or some natural talent that allows Antler to focus on an image as well as he does on an idea. In what may be his most memorable poem, Antler writes:

As if Everything in the Universe had waited  
Till I came, till I could smell them opening  
    my nose caressed by those blossoms, those lilacs,

those clusters of fragrance and the living color  
called purple,  
As I opened and closed my eyes with my breathing,  
Every so often remembering where I was,  
Remembering I had a face and that face had a nose —

This whiff of “The Puberty of Smell” points up the major distinction between Antler and his poetic predecessor, Whitman. Antler has a sharp sense of concentrated specificity that Whitman is often without. Antler gives us Lorca’s bullets in the spirit that Whitman gives us: “What living and buried speech is always vibrating here, what howls/restrained by decorum,/Arrests of criminals, slights, adulterous offers made, acceptances, rejections with convex lips,/I mind them or the show or resonance of them — I come and depart.” Antler’s best poetry minds the living and buried speech; in that, I commend his work. Antler’s other poetry shuts down the vibrating voices; in that, I understand his work. I hope people read his work and take it to heart before, well — before they realize the hard way that he has important things to say.

In some crazed “encounter” way, I want to touch the person that leaps out of this book, the person that is this insanely aware of horror and this able to deal with it. Last Words? *Buy the Book!*

— Paul Taylor  
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Krieg, Joann P., ed. *Walt Whitman: Here and Now* (Prepared under the auspices of Hofstra University). Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985. viii, 248 pp. \$29.95.

On 25 and 26 April 1980, more than twenty scholars met at Hempstead, Long Island, on the campus of Hofstra University, participating there in a conference held to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the first (1855) edition of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. Five years later, most of the papers and addresses delivered at this colloquium were gathered and edited by Professor Krieg, who teaches in the American