

Horace Traubel on Walt Whitman

Written for the Sunset of Bon Echo

People with the old consciousness need not be old people. And people with the young consciousness are not necessarily young people. Often the young are the old and the old are the young. But on the whole, the old regard Walt as the Finisher, and the young regard him as the Starter of something. To some people he's a reminiscent inspiration. To others, he's a prophetic inspiration. He's spoken of on the one hand as if he was, and on the other hand, as if he is and has to be. We've always had to face this curious and yet natural, psychical contradiction in our controversies over Walt's intimate significance. Most of the old men and women either won't come to our Whitman meetings at all, or come to remind us that we have strayed from the faith. This is true of the young who are old, as well as of the old who are senile. The original Whitmanites rather seem to imagine that they own Whitman. That he's their private property. That they have him in trust. When youthful interpreters choose contemporary and amplified grounds for liking Walt, these guardians resent the novel idea as a sort of apostacy. Joel Benton used to accuse us of hitching Whitman not, to a star but to our "toy-carts." Why couldn't we let Whitman alone? But we contended that we found Whitman of use at births as well as at funerals. Let Whitman alone? If he was buried away in a grave—yes, then we could let him alone, but if he was a living force, we couldn't let him alone. And for the very best of reasons. We couldn't let him alone because he won't let us alone. John Swinton more than once addressed a questionnaire to me, not exactly in these words, but in this fashion: "Whitman and I were born about the same time. We were boys in Brooklyn together. We had the same sort of mother. We had the same schooling or lack of it. We grew up side by side. Why then are you now celebrating Walt Whitman, instead of John Swinton? We were guilty of making a revolutionary construction. Swinton didn't want us to make any deductions on Walt. He was proud and almost boastful of his growing fame. But he was quite serious in his naive insistence on additions for himself. He was proud, too, of himself and said so. William Swinton spoke to us on one occasion, lamenting what he called "modern" attempts to give "modern radical meanings to 'Leaves of Grass'." A beautiful woman, one of Walt's oldest friends, Nellie O'Connor, admitted to me that she "shrank from the New Whitmanism." It's but square to say that she added: "But I don't think that's your fault. I think it's mine." I've heard it said that every Tom, Dick and Harry's claiming Walt for his own. But that's Walt's glory. That's what fits him to all time and space. Critics have said that no one but an Englishman can act Hamlet. Maybe no one but an Englishman can act an English Hamlet, but the wonder of Hamlet, perhaps, is that there's an equal French and German and Chinese and Negro Hamlet. Yes, and many other Hamlets. Even a Woman Hamlet, as Bernhardt splendidly