

## **"WHEN LILACS LAST IN THE DOORYARD BLOOMED" AS AN ILLUSTRATION OF WHITMAN'S ARTISTRY**

Alex Severino

The study that follows in an attempt to evaluate one of Walt Whitman's best known poems in the light of its poetic artistry. The major characteristics of the American poet's verse will be identified and their full significance exposed through an analysis of Whitman's famous elegy for President Lincoln. Since this poem is considered to be poet's greatest achievement, a careful perusal of its content and structure should yield tangible proof of Whitman's poetic excellence.

Written upon the occasion of President Lincoln's assassination, "When Lilacs Last in the Doorvard Bloomed" stands as Whitman's most accomplished poem. Although some of the principles governing his artistry were enclosed in Whitman's manifesto issued in 1855 as a preface to his first book of poems, *Leaves of Grass*, the poem now under scrutiny seems to comprise them all in one perfect example of aesthetic effect. Here we have same involvement with American democratic ideals which were Whitman's major concern since the publication of *Leaves of Grass* and its accompanying expository preface. According to this manifesto, Whitman set out in 1855 to sing the common democratic man and to establish himself as its prototype. In the norms that he expounded for the great poets of the future, Whitman said that such a poet should concern himself with description of the American people's life-their surroundings, vitality and spiritual aspirations. Walt Whitman, who believed himself to be the incarnation of the future poet, did not, however, restrict his themes to the American scene. Believing that the democratic American citizen, of whom he spoke, was the symbol of future man everywhere, he encompassed the whole universe in his poetry. He intended to "trail the whole geography of the globe, and salute courteously every city large and small" from an American point of view. Examining the poem, one may notice the same concern with America as representative of the cosmos

that Whitman evidenced in the now famous preface. While still mourning the death of his beloved democratic leader, Whitman asks what pictures he should hang on the walls of Lincoln's mausoleum. The description that follows is made up of scenes taken from nature, of activities which will go on in spite of an individual death and which will never die:

And the city at hand with dwellings so dense,  
and stacks of chimneys  
And all the scenes of life and the workshops,  
and the workmen homeward returning.

It is the eternal aspect of nature which finally delivers Whitman from his personal grief. The poet accepts death as a part of the cosmos. At the end of the poem, the democratic ideal, embodied in Lincoln, is one with the forces of the universe which go on realizing themselves in the unforeseeing future. The poet's all-embracing love for the universe has aroused his positive unfaltering faith in the final deliverance of mankind.

With the publication of *Leaves of Grass* Walt Whitman caused a great deal of adverse criticism from his fellow American writers. William Dean Howells, in an article published in 1865 in a magazine called *The Round Table*, denounced Whitman's verse as being "unspeakably inartistic" and attacked the poet's exploitations of his own ego:

The method of talking to one's self in rhythmic and ecstatic prose is one of the surprises at first, but in the end, the talker can only have the devil for a listener, as happens in other cases when people address their own individualities; not, however, the devil of the proverb, but the devil of reasonless, hopeless, all-defying egotism.

William Dean Howells failed to realize that the *I* in Whitman was generic most of the time. The famous critic did not distinguish between the *I* of Whitman's poetry and the personality of the poet himself. The narrator of Whitman's poems is not the poet himself but one who interprets, sees and is himself part of the cosmos. He should not be defined as being the poet Whitman, but a highly complex character who interprets the world around him. He is not an egotist, as Howells called him, but an egoist. There is a subtle difference in the meaning of these two words, which has to be taken into account when one considers the role of the speaker in Walt Whitman's poems. An egotist, as everyone knows, is a person who is self-centered and enjoys speaking in the first person singular. An *egoist*, on the other hand, is one who believes himself to be the mea-

sure of all things. Nothing exists except what person believes to be true. In the last analysis, the egoist looks upon all questions in relation to himself. In the first lines of Whitman's "Song of Myself", the poet describes his role as poet:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

Whitman is going to speak for all mankind. Whatever he believes will be the standard norm applicable to everyone. The poet interprets the universe for everyone, and whatever he finds to be the truth is to be considered as such. It is not, therefore, the man Walt who speaks but rather the all-embracing, highly sensitive and responsive poet.

In "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed" Walt Whitman, the man, is the speaker. It is he who feels the passing-away of his martyred friend. It is the individual Walt who cannot overcome his bereavement. Later, however, the *I* becomes generic. After the narrator hangs the emblems from nature upon the walls of Lincoln's tomb, he disregards his role as speaker to become mankind, the generic *I* — body and soul fused into one great entity in nature. In section eleven the pictures he hangs on the chamber walls are things which he can contemplate — the sun, the April month (the month Lincoln was assassinated), the green leaves from the trees, and other symbols. In section twelve all of these things into fuse his body and soul. Not until the end of the poem does the narrator, however, become the whole, complete poet. In section fourteen, while he has been purged of his grief, he cannot sing death as part of life yet. He seeks out the bird-the Muse-and finally emerges in section sixteen victorious over death and otherwise able to sing its praises. Lincoln's silvery face shines in the night together with the elements. Accepting death, the generic *I*, the poet, has accepted life:

Lilac and bird and star twined with the chant of my soul  
There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk an dim.

Walt Whitman is admired the world over no less for his artistic innovations than for his role as a poet of the cosmos. Fernando Pessoa, a modern Portuguese poet, believed that Whitman's poetry was the first major advance in world aesthetics since Aristotle. For the Portuguese poet, Whitman had broken away from Aristotle's unities. Fernando Pessoa was referring to Whitman's substitution of the temporal sequence in

a poem, where all action must have a beginning, a middle and an end, by the clustering of vivid impressions thrown together, fusing past, present and future and embracing all in one impressionistic whole. The poet's thoughts come sallying forth as they occur in his mind. As Leslie Fiedler points out in his introduction to the Laurel Edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman anticipated the stream of consciousness technique employed by James Joyce in his novels. Akin to the agglomerations of impressions, feelings and images which were to make up Whitman's metier, is the poet's belief that a poem should never be brought to a conclusion by the artist. The reader should be called upon to furnish his own thoughts, impressions and feelings in order to completely absorb the poem into his own mind.

These artistic norms may be found in the poem now under consideration, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed". The action in this poem does not develop along a logical sequence, nor at a particular unit of time. The poet seems to be always at a certain still point, gathering and emitting the thoughts which come to him regarding Lincoln's death. He relates them in vivid, descriptive imagery. Night and day intermingle within the poem. Past and future fuse into his poetic soul. There is, however, a certain thematic progression based on the final round-up of his thoughts. The poem has a climax and an anticlimax. These do not occur, however, as the result of a logically exposed sequence involving a set time unit or a beginning and a conclusion. They are, rather, greater intensities of focus. In the various planes and different shades of light which go to make up the poem as a picture, certain main elements stand out, giving us the opportunity to discern what is focused more sharply. The picture has to be completed, however, by the reader.

In the first section, Walt Whitman, the narrator, is located at a certain undefinable point in time. He looks back to the time of Lincoln's death in April, "when lilacs last in the dooryard bloomed". Suddenly, thrusting into the future, the poet vouches that shall always mourn his beloved leader. Spring will always be for him the same; it will forever bring thoughts of "him I love". In the next section the action takes place during the night, but in the third stanza it is day again—the day during which the lilac is blossoming by the old farmhouse. Then, in the fifth, sixth and seventh sections, day and night merge into one long ordeal—Lincoln's funeral procession. We are thrust back again into the month of April, when Lincoln was shot. In the course of the eighth stanza the poet

goes further back into the past. He recalls seeing the Western star full of woe, foreboding death, months before. Later, in section fifteen, the past is again invoked to bear into the action. Recalling the many soldiers who have died in the Civil War, the poet describes their corpses in order to show that they are at rest and that we who mourn them are worse off than they. Death is the great deliveress. Each section of this mighty poem goes to make up its final grandiose theme—death is parte of life eternal. There is no death, but only life. Seen from this wider perspective, the poem is pieced together by a certain undefinable internal structure which sews up the apparently illogical and fragmented stanzas into one complete whole. The poem reaches a climax when the *I* realizes, through the song of the bird, that everything is eternal and adops the bird's song as his own. The anticlimax is then presented at the end, when the speaker peacefully accepts Lincoln's death as part of the eternal organic evolution of the earth.

It is through symbolism, however, that Whitman achieves his greatest effect. The poet's reliance on nature's symbols in order to realize a perennial transcendence in his poetry is apparent since the publication of his first volume of poems. The very title of this first book is highly symbolic. His poems are going to be segments of nature—leaves of grass. At one point in his "Song of Myself" Whitman explains that the grass is the blanket of the Lord. Whitman's symbols ordinarily stand for things universal. They are representative of nature—the sea, the stars, the spring, and the shore. They are not, therefore, as subjective and elusive as those used by the French symbolists. Another characteristic of Whitman's use of symbols is that they assume various ambiguous meanings throughout a poem. These different meanings contribute to an easier interpretation in accordance with the reader's own feelings. In the beginning of "Lilacs", after a short introductory stanza, where the three main symbols are presented, each symbol assumes its basic separate role. Thus, the lilacs stand for spring, resurrection, and eternal life. The hermit-thrush signifies song—eternal music, poetry. This symbol also assumes the role of the *I* toward the end of the poem. In the introducing first section the man Whitman is parte of the symbolic trinity—lilac, star, and speaker. It is only in section four that we are introduced to the bird. As the poem develops, the bird acts as the poetic voice which redeems, through its song, on death, the grief experienced by the speaker. At the end, the latter merges, by way of his understanding the thrush's song, into the poet universal. When the universal *I* understands the mea-

ning of death as expressed by the song of the bird, he assumes the role of poet. He has been given the gift of the muse by the bird. He now understands that to glorify death is to glorify life. The next symbol, the star, assumes various meanings throughout the poem. In the first section it symbolizes love. Rather than standing for the person of the martyred presidente, the star-Venus-symbolizes the love the speaker had for Lincoln. His death causes immeasurable grief. It is this grief that the speaker has to overcome at the end of the poem in order to become the universal *I*. In section sixteen, the egotistical *I* realizes that Lincoln is now parte of the cosmos. At this point, the star assumes the role of the slain presidente, who is now part of the overhanging galaxy. Looking at the star, the poet sees the shining, silvery face of Lincoln in the infinite distance. While in the beginning of the poem the star had disappeared with Lincoln's death, it now shines again in the limitless cosmos. Besides the symbolic triad (lilac, star and bird), there is still another important symbol in "Lilacs". This is not a positive symbol like the others. The murky cloud symbolizes the grief experienced by the speaker. The dark cloud prevents him from glorifying death. It is appropriate, therefore, that with the emerging of the universal *I*, ar the end of the poem, the murky cloud completely disappears. The three major symbols reign triumphant over the "fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim".

Although this poem is representative of Whitman's poetic artistry, the poet has abandoned certain characteristics of his earlier workmanship. The language employed is by no means prosair and there are none of the fleshly, sexual, physiological descriptions of the body of this earlier poetry. Decidedly, Walt Whitman benefited from the criticism called forth by his first book. The language in "Lilacs" is elevated and noble as becomes an elegy. Upon close examination, however, the reader still detects the simple and direct manner of writing of his early verse. The poem is entirely free from the classical allusions so frequent in other elegies, such as *Lycidas* and Shelley's *Adonais*.

It is, however, for his contribution to the verse tchnique that Walt Whitman in justly remembered by today's poets. Although free verse forms have been common since the *Old Testament*, Whitman is to be given credit for reproducing, in the basic structure of his verse, the very rhythms of nature Such as life is, such is the form. Regarding his verse theories, Whitman asserted that he was trying to reproduce the rhythms

of the sea. Truly, rather than relying on the set metrical pattern common to classical verse, Whitman strives for a cadence that has much of the ebb and flow of the sea. The basic structure of his verse is not the line, but the stanza. His thoughts and emotions sweep over clusters of lines grouped within a stanza, maintaining, however, a basic accentual rhythm in specific set syllables throughout the verse sections. The asymmetry of his lines produces an harmonious sounding whole, not unlike that of a symphonic poem. In order to achieve the free verse pattern in his poetry, Walt Whitman emphasizes certain techniques, which try to substitute for the patterned rhythm, rhyme, and regular stanza employed by other poets. One of these devices is the reiteration of words and phrases. Building upon one word or phrase, the poet rises into a highly emotional pitch, which decreases as the action prepares for another emotional climax. Other techniques which serve to cause the various crescendos in Whitman's poems are the parallel grammatical structure and the periodic sentence. In section eight of "Lilacs" several parallel structures are introduced by the word *as*. Building upon an introductory clause presented in the beginning of his verse lines, Whitman rises into a high, emotional climax. Also, in section five and six, the poet makes use of a device called the periodic sentence. Introducing the sentence by a subordinate clause, he saves the impact of this thought for the main clause, which follows. The series of periodic sentences in sections five and six help to convey the forward, staccato movement of the funeral procession, as it moves night and day across America. Thus, the poet is able to reproduce in this verse the very action it describes.

These technical devices notwithstanding, the merit of Walt Whitman's poems rests on the profundity of their themes and on the universal scope of their content. As T. S. Eliot once said: "When Whitman speaks of the lilac or the mocking bird, his theories and beliefs drop away like a needless pretext." However, in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed" theory and theme converge into the creation of the greatest poems ever written. Whitman's elegy has inspired poets throughout the world and stands as a measure of achievement for poets to come.