

Lilac and Star and Thrush Salute Abe Lincoln

My last column on poets inspired by birds' songs, ended with mention of Robert Frost's poem, "Come In" and the way thrush music seemed to Frost to be an invitation to "come in" to the dark woods and "lament." But Frost rejects the invitation because he was "out for stars."

But an earlier poet, Walt Whitman, wrote perhaps "the greatest elegy in literature," according to Yale's top literary scholar, Harold Bloom, because he heeded the invitation of the thrush to lament the passing of America's greatest president, Abraham Lincoln.

The poem created by that decision is *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed*, and that poem is so fine, I urge serious readers to Google it up so you can study it more deeply. If you own, *Leaves of Grass*, all the better. I find having a book in hand far better. One can make notes in the margins, highlight lines that stick, and carry it into the woods for more intimate study. By the way, Bloom's fine book, *How to Read and Why*, has revealing chapters on Whitman and many other writers.

Toward the end of the Civil War, Whitman came to the Washington D. C. area to nurse and care for his brother and other wounded soldiers. There he saw daily the agony of the wounded, the many amputations and deaths. He also caught occasional glimpses of Lincoln and saw what a heavy burden the war had lain on him. So news of his death struck the poet very hard, and that grief brought forth his beautiful elegy.

The poem rests on three symbols Whitman saw almost daily, a bright star nightly "drooping" closer and closer to the smoky darkness of the horizon. Then the lilacs he saw blooming fragrantly with their heart-shaped leaves, and lastly the singing of the hermit thrush he would hear on his nightly meditative walks along a path between woods and a swamp.

The poem opens and deftly sets the scene, “When lilacs last in the dooryard bloomed,/ And the great star drooped in the western sky in the night,/I mourned and yet shall mourn/ With ever returning spring.”

“Ever returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,/ Lilac blooming perennial, and drooping star in the west,/ And thought of him I love.”

The thrush is not introduced until the third verse. With his melodiously passionate song pouring forth the depth of Whitman’s love for his beloved president, the thrush personifies the poet himself, “In the swamp, in the secluded recesses/ A shy and hidden bird is warbling a song./ Solitary the thrush/ The hermit withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements/ Sings by himself a song./ Song of the bleeding throat/Death’s outlet song of life,/ (For well dear brother I know, If thou wast not granted to sing/ Thou wouldst surely die.)

More of the thrush’s song reappears in verse 13: “Sing on, sing on, you gray brown bird/...Pour your chant from the bushes/ Limitless out of the dusk, out of the cedars and pines,/ Sing on dearest brother, warble your reedy song/ Loud human song with uttermost woe./ O liquid and free and tender!/ O wild loose to my soul—O wondrous singer!/ You only I hear --yet the star holds me, (but will soon depart,)/ Yet the lilac with mastering odor holds me.”

A verse that puzzled me for a time is the one celebrating “death and the knowledge of death.” “Dark mother ever gliding near with soft feet,/ Have none chanted for thee...a chant of fullest welcome?/ Then I chant it for thee, I glorify thee above all...that when thou must come, you come unfalteringly/ Approach strong deliveress...I joyously sing the dead,/ Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee.”

As a Christian, these lines seem better to describe the ocean of God’s love than “the last enemy to be destroyed” mentioned in the Bible. But Whitman had become disenchanted with organized religion, and had fashioned his own vision, seeing death as a “Mother,” who puts an end to suffering and war and forgives all “the “sins that

flesh is heir to.” Given all the suffering he saw as a nurse, doubtless he prayed for many to be released from their agony by death.

But we must not let any disagreements created by this verse lead us to ignore the sheer beauty of his loving appreciation of Lincoln created by so many of the lines celebrating the lilac, the star, and the thrush: “Passing the song of the hermit bird and the tallying song of my soul/ Passing I leave thee, lilac with heart-shaped leaves...I cease my song for thee...O comrade lustrous with silver face in the night/ Yet to each and all retrievements out of the night:/ The song, the wondrous chant of the gray brown bird. Comrades mine in the midst/ And their memory ever to keep, for the dead I love so well,/ For the sweetest, wisest soul of all my days and lands --and this for his dear sake,/ Lilac and star and bird, twined with the chant of my soul/ There in the fragrant pines, and the cedars dusk and dim.”

There may be other eulogies lauding Lincoln’s greatness. But few, I think are more profound or melodious than Walt Whitman’s.

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