

Walt Whitman, *Tagebuch [Specimen Days]*, ed. Eva Manske; trans. Götz Burghardt. Leipzig: Reclam, 1985. 327 pp.

To understand the importance of this new translation of *Specimen Days*, we must view it in its unique critical context. Over a decade ago, John Hess identified the sources of the German Democratic Republic's interest in Whitman as "the Marxist sense of continuity" and "Lenin's idea of two cultures" (*Walt Whitman Review*, 22 [March 1976], 30). These two concepts have always been significant to a Marxist-Leninist reading of cultural phenomena; they formed the foundations of Socialist Realism, the literary movement that endorsed the socialist view of history and that often embraced Whitman as an exponent of the ideal of a democratic brotherhood of the common people. But while the interest in Whitman is indeed strong in some Eastern European nations, and especially in the USSR, his work has not been uniformly embraced by all socialist countries. The German Democratic Republic has some singular reasons for propagating Whitman's writings.

To the Western observer, some of the reasons for this special interest have become obvious only in the years since Hess's article, especially since the onset of the broad GDR cultural self-examination known as the *Erbediskussion*. This discussion probes the *Erbe* (the cultural "heritage" or "inheritance") in an ambitious attempt to review German history and culture and to identify those traditions on which the present society is built. The GDR today understands itself as continuing the best traditions of German history, culture and thought, although it is not always entirely clear which traditions will be embraced and which will be rejected or ignored. In recent years, for example, the international press has noted the new, more open-minded attitudes of GDR authorities toward GDR churches (especially Protestant), a move that went hand in hand with a reevaluation of the personality of Martin Luther, who was finally welcomed into the progressive tradition and transformed into an ancestor of the modern GDR.

Whitman has always been a part of the socialist *Erbe* as propounded by official GDR cultural policy, not only because of the message of his poetry (as Hess suggested), but also because of the individuals who were originally responsible for his reception in Germany. Ferdinand Freiligrath, the revolutionary poet and friend of Marx, was the first German translator of Whitman. Even before the first socialist country—the USSR—was established, social democrats and communists showed a keen interest in Whitman's poetry. Another prominent Whitman enthusiast was the expressionist poet Johannes R. Becher, who composed the GDR's national anthem and was one of East Germany's first ministers of culture; his position allowed him to facilitate the publication of Whitman in GDR publishing houses. In the years following World War II, Whitman has repeatedly been invoked as a witness to the building of East Germany's new society and state.

Thus, beyond the general interest in Whitman shown by many Marxists, there are specific and localized reasons for the GDR's fascination with the American poet. The extent of this interest is reflected in the variety of editions of Whitman's work published in East Germany. One edition that Hess mentioned in passing is a 1966 edition of Whitman's writings entitled *Lyrik und Prosa*—an edition that deserves closer attention since the translation is by Erich Arendt, one of the GDR's most significant (and difficult) poets. It is the first genuine GDR translation of Whitman's poetry and selected prose, and it has since been included in the popular Reclam series—the

fourth edition was published in 1981. Reclam, a mass publisher specializing in fine, inexpensive editions of world literature, has a long association with Whitman, having published the first widely available German edition of Whitman's poetry in 1907 (in a translation by the German naturalist Johannes Schlaf).

So it is fitting that Reclam has published the first complete German edition of *Specimen Days* (parts of *Specimen Days* have previously been published in German, one selection by O. E. Lessing in 1905 and another by Hans Reisiger in 1922). This little book, edited by an American literature specialist at the University of Leipzig, Eva Manske, is exceedingly well done. It is prefaced by an 1887 George C. Cox photograph of Whitman with hat, traditionally one of the favorite poses for leftist admirers of Whitman. Götz Burghardt's translation is fully adequate; his German captures the fragmentary and idiosyncratic quality of Whitman's prose. The editorial apparatus includes fine annotations, with expert introductory material on many important nineteenth-century American cultural figures. The back cover quotes Freiligrath on Whitman's personality and offers insight into the German perception of the poet:

. . . freshly from the prairie and the new settlements, from the coast and large rivers, from the crowds of harbors and cities, from the battleground of the South, the smell of the earth that has brought him forth [is] in his hair, his beard and clothes: a man the like of which has not yet been in the world . . . —the poet.

Eva Manske's fourteen-page postscript is a remarkably non-dogmatic and professional example of Marxist literary criticism. Her first concern is with the Civil War section of *Specimen Days*. Instead of viewing it only as an impressive historical document, Manske argues that this section reveals "the active solidarity and humanity of the poet, his deep love towards mankind and peace which make this part of *Specimen Days* a moving book of peace" (p. 287). While Manske observes that in his later life the poet was dismayed by the "uninhibited capitalist development" following the Civil War (p. 299), she nevertheless is willing to meet him on his own ground. There is little dogmatism: Whitman is seen as a complex personality, his book is seen as a complex book, and both are viewed as developing in an increasingly complex American society. This perspective emerges in spite of the editor's somewhat abrupt and simplistic analysis of how "good" capitalism (in the fight against slavery) turned sour (in the years following the war).

Manske ends her postscript with Whitman's poem "Full of Life Now," concluding with the words: "Be it as if I were with you. (Be not too certain but I am now with you.)" Whitman is certainly very much with the East Germans, at least according to significant representatives of GDR poetry. This first complete German edition of *Specimen Days* will, as the editor intends, continue to inspire readers in a country where access to American literature is not always easy. Whitman has become an important cultural bridge between the German Democratic Republic and the United States. When bridges are so few, those that do exist should be cherished.