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WALT WHITMAN'S POETRY: THE LIBERATION OF THE  
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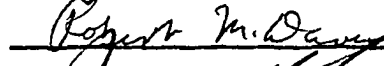

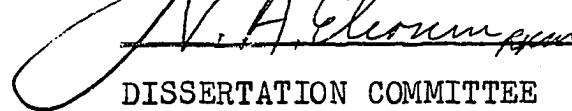
WALT WHITMAN'S POETRY: THE LIBERATION OF THE BODY

A DISSERTATION  
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY  
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Norman, Oklahoma  
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WALT WHITMAN'S POETRY: THE LIBERATION OF THE BODY

APPROVED BY

DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. ANNE GILCHRIST, CRITIC . . . . .	1
II. TIME, DEATH, IMMORTALITY . . . . .	30
III. BODY MYSTICISM . . . . .	62
IV. FUNCTIONING FORM . . . . .	95
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	119

# WALT WHITMAN'S POETRY: THE LIBERATION OF THE BODY

## CHAPTER I

### ANNE GILCHRIST, CRITIC

Anne Gilchrist, an English widow of forty-one and mother of four, read Leaves of Grass in May 1869 and fell in love with its author. She kept her feelings to herself for more than two years, then wrote to Whitman on September 3, 1871, confessing her hopes to be his wife. Whitman, a little flattered and much baffled by the lady's passion didn't know what to say to her, and so said very little. He answered her first two letters with a brief note, telling her, "My book is my best letter, my response, my truest explanation of all."<sup>1</sup> Such a suggestion, meant to draw her attention from his person to his book, only kindled her passion. For in her next letter she writes, "Your book does indeed say all--book that is not a book, for the first time a man complete, godlike, august, standing revealed the only way possible, through the garment of speech."<sup>2</sup>

Thus began a correspondence which was to last seven years. She wrote letters at regular intervals, filled with news of her activities, family, and love, and he sent her an

infrequent note about his affairs and an occasional newspaper or magazine as indication that he had received her letters.

When she finally announced her desire to come to America to be with her Whitman, Whitman tried to dissuade her with the idea that he himself might come to England. Her mind was made up and she knew his ruse for what it was. She set sail on August 30, 1876, and was face to face with the poet in the autumn of that year. She was forty-eight by now and looked quite good with her full head of dark hair fashionably cut. He was fifty-seven and looked much older with his face and head buried in white hair and his body partially paralyzed from a stroke in '73. If she felt any disappointment or regret in coming to America and finding an old man who was not the match of her private image of the poet, she kept it to herself. She stayed nearly a year in Philadelphia, a short ferry ride away from Whitman. She summed up the impressions of her visit with Whitman in a letter to William Michael Rossetti:

We are having delightful evenings this winter; how often do I wish you could make one in the circle around our tea table where sits on my right hand every evening but Sunday Walt Whitman. He has made great progress in health and recovered powers of getting about during the year we have been here: nevertheless the lameness--the dragging instead of lifting the left leg continues; and this together with his white hair and beard give him a look of age curiously contradicted by his face, which has not only the ruddy freshness but the full rounded contours of youth, nowhere drawn or wrinkled or sunk; it is a face as indicative of serenity and goodness and of mental and bodily health as the brow is of intellectual power. But I notice he occasionally speaks of himself as having a 'wounded brain' and of being still quite altered from his former self.<sup>3</sup>

She left America in June of 1879 for her home in England. Once there she continued writing letters to Whitman but with less regularity and without confessions of passion. She closed these letters generally with tokens of regard not exclusively personal or intimate: 'love from us all and to your brother and sister.' He sent her an occasional note and maps tracing in blue ink his travels through America.

The story of their relationship has been told many times before and with greater detail. Biographers, interested in piecing together the fragments of Whitman's life, study the relationship either as a revelation of Whitman's charm and courtesy since the lady remained his good friend, or as an example of how he loved Woman only as an ideal and could not love her as an actual person. Such points of view on the details of the affair are useful for an understanding of Whitman's personality.

But, I believe there exists another perspective to the story untried by scholarship; one which permits a better understanding of his poetry. What caused such a total response to the man, was the total response of Mrs. Gilchrist to his poetry. She understood his poetry, as Whitman himself had admitted, "better and fuller and clearer than anyone else."<sup>4</sup> Her two essays, "A Woman's Estimate of Walt Whitman" in 1870, and "A Confession of Faith" in 1885, reveal a perception and poetic understanding unmatched in sensitivity and accuracy. I believe an examination of her response to his



poetry may reveal some things about the nature of his poetry not fully appreciated before.

It would do us well before examining Anne Gilchrist's opinions of Whitman's poetry to create its historical context with a brief survey of some other major critical opinions of Whitman before 1870. Seeing what she has to say in terms of when she said it, is part of the wonder of her perception.

The first appreciative essay of Leaves of Grass comes in Emerson's famous letter to Whitman dated July 21st, 1855:

Dear Sir,

I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of Leaves of Grass. I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contri-  
buted. I am very happy in reading it, as great power makes us happy. It meets a demand I am always making of what seems the sterile and stingy nature as if too much handwork and too much lymph in the temperament here were making our Western wits fat and mean. I give you joy of your free and brave thought. I have great joy in it. I find incomparable things, said incomparably well, as they must be. I find the courage of treatment which so delights us, and which large perception only can inspire.

I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start. I rub my eyes a little to see if this sunbeam were no illusion; but the solid sense of the book is a sober certainty. It has the best merits, namely, of fortifying and encouraging. I did not know, until I last night saw the book advertised in the newspaper, that I could trust the name as real and available for a post-office.

I wish to see my benefactor, and have felt much like striking my tasks and visiting New York to pay you my respects.

R. W. Emerson<sup>5</sup>

It is a beautiful letter full of praise for the poetry and encouragement for the poet. There is nothing too specific about the praise, however, and the literary historian may wish Emerson had explicated a few sections of the poems, or cited a line or two and praised a specific strategy in use. Emerson's calling the 1855 book a "most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom" seems to attribute a greater degree of intellectuality to the poetry than most would say it deserves. But, he modifies this by calling it "fortifying and encouraging." It is not helpful to analyze isolated phrases of the letter too closely because first, they tend to reveal more about Emerson than Whitman, and secondly, the general congratulatory tone of the letter (which is all this personal note is meant to have), becomes obscured. Let it be enough that this first favorable comment, as unspecific as it is, comes from the most respected contemporary man of letters.

The next favorable comment on Whitman's poetry comes two days later in a review of Leaves of Grass in the New York Tribune. The reviewer was probably Charles A. Dana, a good friend of Whitman's, and it seems likely that he wrote the review with the help of notes supplied by Whitman himself. The review is favorable and appreciative only in a very pedestrian way. Most of the phrases of praise heaped on Leaves of Grass could be plucked whole and heaped on any piece of printed matter that one enjoyed. The reviewer

praises the book for its "bold, stirring thoughts," its "passages of effective description," and for possessing a "rare felicity of diction." He goes on to say that the reader will surely be impressed with its "vigor and quaint beauty of isolated portions."<sup>6</sup> The review clearly smacks of the style of one who does not know what to say of a friend's work but does not want to lose a friend either. However, there is one comment in the review which stands apart from the rest and shows that indeed the reviewer understood the words of his friend, for he is shocked and cannot hide it: "Indeed, his independence often becomes coarse and defiant. His language is too frequently reckless and indecent, though this appears to arise from a naive unconsciousness rather than from an impure mind. His words might have passed between Adam and Eve in Paradise, before the want of fig-leaves brought no [sic] shame, but they are quite out of place amid the decorum of modern society, and will justly prevent his volume from free circulation in scrupulous circles."<sup>7</sup> This charge of indecency was the one that bothered everybody the most--even Whitman's friends. They may have liked him personally, liked many things about his poetry, even liked his patriotism, his democratic spirit, and later his nursing the wounded during the Civil War, but they just couldn't help being baffled by and annoyed with his attention to the body. His friends would read him and praise him for what they were used to ("bold, stirring thoughts,"

"passages of effective description," etc.) but try to play down, pardon, or avoid altogether what they thought was his inexplicable nastiness. His hostile reviewers of course would make his "indecenty" their prime target for contempt. It is remarkable that Adam and Eve's pristine beauty occurred to this reviewer in connection with the poetry and that he dismissed or ignored the possible critical implications which might have aided his understanding of what Whitman was doing. The prophecy here given just nineteen days after the appearance of Leaves of Grass was to prove true during Whitman's lifetime: as long as he kept the sex in, he and his book would never be fully accepted.

The next favorable article we shall consider was by Edward Everett Hale, author of "The Man Without a Country," and it appeared in the North American Review in January of 1856. The article displays a genuine appreciation for the poetry of Leaves of Grass and an understanding of Whitman's joy in being alive and his love of nature: " . . . one reads and enjoys the freshness, simplicity, and reality of what he reads, just as the tired man, lying on the hill-side in summer, enjoys the leaves of grass around him--enjoys the shadow,--enjoys the flecks of sunshine,--not for what they 'suggest to him,' but for what they are."<sup>8</sup> He goes on with comments praising Whitman's simplicity of language, his avoidance of the conventional, and the "distinctness of his imagination." But, he ends the article with a variation on

the usual theme of "indecenty." "For the purpose of showing that he is above every conventionalism, Mr. Whitman puts into the book one or two lines which he would not address to a woman nor to a company of men. There is not anything, perhaps, which modern usage would stamp as more indelicate than are some passages in Homer. There is not a word in it meant to attract readers by its grossness as there is in half the literature of the last century which holds its place unchallenged on the tables of drawing rooms. For all that, it is a pity that a book where everything else is natural should go out of the way to avoid the suspicion of being prudish."<sup>9</sup>

The charge is modified somewhat by a defense; nevertheless, it sticks as an accusation. Where Dana felt Whitman's grossness arose from a "naive unconsciousness," Hale believes it arises from a desire to be thought of as "above every conventionalism." The first implies innocence, the second cunning. They are polar attempts at explaining away what disturbed them, what they could not accept.

On May 10, 1856, Sara (formerly Grata) Payson Willis Eldridge Farrington Parton, alias Fanny Fern, reviewed Leaves of Grass for the New York Ledger. She begins her review with a good deal of extravagance: "Well baptized, fresh, hardy, and grown for the masses. Not more welcome is their natural type to the winter-bound, bedridden, and spring-emancipated invalid. 'Leaves of Grass' thou art

unspeakably delicious, after the forced, stiff, Parnassian exotics for which our admiration has been vainly challenged."<sup>10</sup> Her review is a hearty acceptance of the unconventional rebellious young man, "a man who dared speak out his strong, honest thoughts in the face of pusillanimous, toadying, republican aristocracy; dictionarymen, hypocrites, cliques, and creeds; . . . a large-hearted, untainted, self-reliant, fearless son of the Stars and Stripes, who disdains to sell his birthright for a mess of pottage; . . . ." <sup>11</sup> It is a vigorous celebration of the free spirit of independence and it calls to mind Fanny Fern's own violently independent life. She is known to have been wild and uncontrollable as a child who had no interest in school whatsoever and used the pages of her geometry text for curl papers. As a young woman she was notorious for playing practical jokes on her unsuspecting and indulgent first husband, despised and abused her second husband, driving him to seek a divorce. Finding it necessary to earn a living for herself, she turned to writing, and by 1855 had so fiercely worked her way into the publishing world that she was being paid the incredibly high sum of \$100 a column. Fanny Fern had undoubtedly felt a kindred spirit in Walt Whitman, the Iconoclast, and pays tribute accordingly.

She is aware of the charge of sensuality which had been fixed against the Leaves, but confesses that she 'extracts no poison from them.' They are not sensual because

the whole naked body is frankly revealed, rather than individual parts depicted with enticing costumery: "The artist who would inflame paints you not nude nature, but stealing virtue's veil, with artful artlessness now conceals, now exposes, the ripe and swelling proportions."<sup>12</sup> To the modern reader with his peculiar concerns, Fanny Fern is clearing Whitman of pornographic intent; he writes of the body without trying to arouse the reader's prurient interest. It is a good service she does for Whitman. A popular female journalist wholeheartedly accepting Whitman should have turned the tides of public opinion in his favor. Curiously, however, she went unheeded. I think her effectiveness is minimized because the answer to one important question which she might have considered is unmistakably absent. Why does Whitman write about the body? Fanny Fern never answered the question, either because she failed to ask it, or did and didn't know the answer. The result, however, is to leave her review finally shallow and unsatisfying. She doesn't explain Whitman or the poetry as much as she reflects her own upbringing and moral constitution.

On December 2, 1866, there appeared a four and a half column article by William D. O'Connor in the New York Times, which William Sloane Kennedy calls "heavy artillery" in the defense of Whitman.<sup>13</sup> The article is introduced by the editor, Henry J. Raymond, who makes it clear that 'the opinion here given by O'Connor of Leaves of Grass in no way

reflects the opinion of this establishment.' He prints O'Connor's essay only "because it is written with very marked ability and embodies the opinions of a very competent and accomplished writer."<sup>14</sup> He ventures a few comments himself about Whitman and concludes with the usual charge: "Nor can we fail to note that while he sometimes thus soars aloft in the very highest regions of thought and song, Walt Whitman often also wallows exultingly in unredeemed and irredeemable indecency and filth."<sup>15</sup>

William Douglas O'Connor, a good friend and vigorous defender of the poet and the man, begins his "heavy artillery" with a shy decoy: "We have not, of course, the slightest wish to defend or excuse in these columns, what may, and from certain points of view, what must appear as serious blots upon the author's performance . . . "<sup>16</sup> The blots are, of course, glandular stains.

Having pushed aside the flesh in the poems, O'Connor makes several remarkable observations on the poetry. He recognizes, for instance, that Whitman's "I" is not meant to be egotistical but representative of nineteenth-century American man, and of all men: "It aims to fix, in living art, an example, a model of manly being, operant upon the imaginations of men, for the use of the future of America, while, at the same time, it presents to the world, in one bold figure, the interpretation of the average historical American. Beyond this, it becomes a representative



embodiment of the whole human nature, and seeks to express the cosmical character of the individual--yourself; the absolute miracle you are in all your parts from top to toe; your absolute sanctity; your wondrousness, eternity, priceless value; your centrality in the universe; all things, good and evil alike, being for your suppliance, your benefit, your development--in one word, the basic idea of Democracy."<sup>17</sup>

He states that the poem's size and structure are huge and rambling in direct correspondence to his subject, the nation of America. Leaves of Grass, he goes on to say, embodies all aspects of American life, so much so, that if America were to vanish, sink into oblivion, and only this book were to survive, people who had never heard of America would be able to know and understand her from this slim volume. He compares Whitman as the embodiment of America to Homer, Lucretius, Shakespeare, Dante, and Rabelais as embodiments of their nations.

But O'Connor's masterpiece of Whitman defense is his pamphlet, The Good Gray Poet, which appeared in the same year as the Times article. In fact, it is a wonder to imagine that the Times article with its calm, thoughtful, philosophic voice of investigative discourse came from the same pen as the pamphlet with its angry, righteous rhetoric aimed at injustice.

Walt Whitman had been a clerk in the Indian Bureau of the Department of Interior for six months when on June 30, 1865,

he was abruptly dismissed by the Secretary of the Interior, James Harlan, who discovered that Whitman was the author of Leaves of Grass, a book "full of indecent passages."<sup>18</sup>

While Secretary Harlan had no complaints about Whitman's ability as a worker (in fact, within those six months Whitman had been promoted), he thought that Whitman was a "free lover" and "a very bad man."<sup>19</sup> J. Hubley Ashton, the Assistant Attorney General and good friend to Whitman, came to Whitman's aid and protested the dismissal. But, Harlan was a fanatical Methodist and could not be reasoned with, so Ashton gave up the attempt and managed to secure another job for Whitman in the Department of Interior. The incident was closed with no damage to Whitman, but O'Connor saw in the act the most ignorant kind of intolerance and severe suppression of free speech. Nine weeks after Whitman's dismissal, O'Connor started his Vindication and got it published in January of the following year.

It is a lyrical and impassioned defense of the man and the poetry, and easily becomes one of America's first documents in the battle against censorship. He begins his pamphlet with descriptions of Whitman's physical appearance which are among the most beautiful and are calculated to describe a god:

. . . his uncovered head, majestic, large, Homeric, and set upon his strong shoulders with the grandeur of ancient sculpture. I marked the countenance, serene, proud, cheerful, florid, grave; the brow seamed with

noble wrinkles; the features, massive and handsome, with firm blue eyes; the eyebrows and eyelids especially showing that fullness of arch seldom seen save in the antique busts; the flowing hair and fleecy beard, both very gray, and tempering with a look of age the youthful aspect of one who is but forty-five; the simplicity and purity of his dress, cheap and plain, but spotless, from snowy falling collar to burnished boot, and exhaling faint fragrance; the whole form surrounded with manliness as with a nimbus, and breathing in its perfect health and vigor, the august charm of the strong.<sup>20</sup>

O'Connor describes his character with equally superlative terminology: "If I could associate the title with a really great person, or if the name of man were not radically superior, I should say that for solid nobleness of character, for native elegance and delicacy of soul, for a courtesy which is the very passion of thoughtful kindness and forbearance, for his tender and paternal respect and manly honor for women, for love and heroism carried into the pettiest details of life, and for a large and homely beauty of manners, which makes the civilities of parlours fantastic and puerile in comparison, Walt Whitman deserves to be considered the grandest gentleman that treads this continent."<sup>21</sup> O'Connor is leading the reader by means of these magnificent descriptions to the question which cannot be answered except in the negative: How can a bad book come from such a good man?

He admits that there are, at the most, eighty lines out of nine thousand "which the most malignant virtue could shrink from."<sup>22</sup> But, these are no more, and are in fact a great deal fewer, in number than one would find objectionable

in Shakespeare, for instance.

Unlike Fanny Fern, O'Connor grapples with the question 'Why the fleshy poems?' and concludes "All that this poet has done is to mention, without levity, without low language, very seriously, often devoutly, always simply, certain facts in the natural history of man and of life, and sometimes, assuming their sanctity, to use them in illustration or imagery."<sup>23</sup> The questionable material is for "illustration or imagery," and he defends such use of it for the same use is found in the Bible: "The freest use of language, the plainest terms, frank mention of forbidden subjects; the story of Onan, of Hagar and Sarai, of Lot and his daughters, of Isaac, Rebekah, and Abimelech, of Jacob and Leah, of Reuben and Bilhah; of Potiphar's wife and Joseph; tabooed allusion and statement everywhere; no veil, no euphemism, no delicacy, no meal in the mouth anywhere."<sup>24</sup> If the Great Book uses sexual imagery for explanation, surely Whitman may with impunity. Not only does such language have acceptable religious use, it is found also in all the great masters of secular literature. Against Harlan's defenseless prudery, O'Connor marshalls an army of civilization's greats. Throw out Whitman and you must also discard as indecent Homer, Lucretius, Aeschylus, Dante, Plutarch, Tacitus, Shakespeare, Virgil, Swedenborg, Goethe, Byron, Cervantes, Hugo, Juvenal, Spenser, Rabelais, and Bacon.

It is a rational argument based on a consensus of the great authors and it works well against Harlan's basic

unreasonableness. However, O'Connor's understanding of the body in Whitman's poetry is limited by such an argument. He is able to appreciate Whitman only insofar as Whitman is like other writers and fits into the tradition. O'Connor sees the flesh as an historically acceptable form for poetically expressing ideas, and fails to see that perhaps it is itself the subject of the poetry. He is able to vindicate Whitman but not to explain him. Later in the pamphlet he attributes a socially useful reason to Whitman's method which acts to further the defense of Whitman against charges of immorality but does not further understanding of Whitman's meaning:

" . . . this poet seeks in subtle ways to rescue from the keeping of the blackguards and debauches, to which it has been abandoned, and to redeem to noble thought and use, the great element of amativeness or sexuality, with all its acts and organs."<sup>25</sup>

So much for American defenders of Whitman. In England the situation was much the same. Those Englishmen who liked Whitman and liked his poetry in general, were disturbed by his fleshiness and wished it weren't there,--not only wished it weren't there, but actually went ahead and removed it. So there appeared in England, for the first and last time anywhere in the world, a Leaves of Grass expurgated.

William Michael Rossetti, brother to Dante Gabriel and Christina, brought out in 1868 Poems by Walt Whitman. In his prefatory explanation for this selection, Rossetti explains

that he thought it "permissible to omit two or three short phrases" from Whitman's 1855 Preface "which would have shocked ordinary readers."<sup>26</sup> Among the shocking words which were necessary to delete were "womb" and "prostitute." As Harold Blodgett writes of Rossetti: "It was as if he operated under a taboo fear, as if the mention of 'prostitute' might bring one to the British Isles, although according to Lecky and other experts in the state of moral civilization, another was hardly needed."<sup>27</sup> Rossetti defends himself against having Bowdlerized the text by stating that he never omitted any section of the poems themselves. He asserts in proud terms the service he has done to all concerned: "For the benefit of misconstructionists, let me add in distinct terms, that, in respect of morals and propriety, I neither admire nor approve the incriminated passages in Whitman's poems, but, on the contrary, consider that most of them would be much better away; and, in respect of art, I doubt whether even one of them deserves to be retained in the exact phraseology it at present exhibits."<sup>28</sup>

One is kind by calling the edition pruned. Not only was it "cleaned up," but Whitman's arrangement of the poems was destroyed, many entire poems were left out, and titles were changed. "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun," for example, became "Manhattan Faces." and "As I Lay With My Head in Your Lap, Camerado" became "Questionable?" The result of all this was a properly dressed up Whitman invited to a mannerly afternoon tea.

Whitman regretted the whole affair. The expurgated Leaves of Grass haunted and tortured his memory. In talks with Traubel it bursts out:

Damn the expurgated books! I say damn 'em! The dirtiest book in all the world is the expurgated book. Rossetti expurgated--avowed it in his preface . . . .

Well--I have heard nothing but expurgate, expurgate, expurgate, from the day I started. Everybody wants to expurgate something--this, that, the other thing. If I accepted all the suggestions, there wouldn't be one leaf of the Leaves left--and if I accepted one why shouldn't I accept all? Expurgate, expurgate, expurgate! I've heard that till I'm deaf with it. Who didn't say expurgate? Rossetti said expurgate and I yielded. Rossetti was honest, I was honest--we both made a mistake. It is damnable and vulgar--the mere suggestion is an outrage. Expurgation is apology--yes, surrender--yes, an admission that something or other was wrong. Emerson said expurgate--I said no, no. I have lived to regret my Rossetti yes--I have not lived to regret my Emerson no. Expurgate, expurgate--apologize, apologize: get down on your knees . . . . Did the Rossetti book ever do me any good? I am not sure of it: Rossetti's kindness did me good--but as for the rest, I am doubtful . . . .

. . . . In a day and month and year of weakness I yielded to the idea that the English reader could not stand a full dose of Walt Whitman. It was an evil decision growing out of the best intentions . . . .

Of course I see now as clearly as I did then how big and fine Rossetti was about it all. . . . But I now feel somehow as if none of the changes should have been made: that I should have assumed that position: that's the only possible, final, logical position . . . so we must look out--must not compromise unless it's a life and death issue, as it was not in this case.<sup>29</sup>

Mrs. Anne Gilchrist first read the expurgated Selection in May of 1869, and then sent a letter to Rossetti on

June 22, 1869, telling him how much she liked it: "I was calling on /Mr. Madox Brown/ a fortnight ago, and he put into my hands your edition of Walt Whitman's poems. I shall not cease to thank him for that. Since I have had it, I can read no other book: it holds me entirely spell-bound, and I go through it again and again with deepening delight and wonder."<sup>30</sup>

Rossetti responded to her enthusiasm by promising to send her the complete, unexpurgated Leaves of Grass. Rossetti must have warned her about the unexpurgated edition, for she responded to his offer, "I shall quite fearlessly accept your kind offer of the loan of a complete edition, certain that great and divinely beautiful nature has not, could not infuse any poison into the wine he has poured out for us. And as for what you specially allude to, who so well able to bear it--I will say, to judge wisely of it--as one who, having been a happy wife and mother, has learned to accept all things with tenderness, to feel a sacredness in all?"<sup>31</sup>

The several letters Mrs. Gilchrist wrote to Rossetti after reading the complete Leaves of Grass were eventually amplified and turned into "A Woman's Estimate of Walt Whitman" and published in Boston's Radical Review in May of 1870. If we turn our attention now to an analysis of this article, I believe we will find what she has to say about Whitman not only refreshing and original in comparison to what has been written before her, but especially courageous in terms of the conditions under which she wrote.



The first thing one notices about the essay is that Mrs. Gilchrist's attitude, unlike the male reviewers who preceded her, is not apologetic nor defensive on behalf of Whitman. Nor does she use Whitman, as Fanny Fern did, as a red flag of rebellion to flaunt before a stodgy masculine world. She gestures with neither open palms nor clenched fists. Her attitude throughout is simply interested and intelligent, and she moves through the essay with the interpretive gestures of a critic confident in her materials and her audience.

She begins by describing the effect of the poems on her:

I had not dreamed that words could cease to be words, and become electric streams like these. I do assure you that, strong as I am, I feel sometimes as if I had not bodily strength to read many of these poems. In the series headed 'Calamus,' for instance, in some of the 'Songs of Parting,' the 'Voice out of the Sea,' the poem beginning 'Tears, Tears,' etc. there is such a weight of emotion, such a tension of the heart, that mine refuses to beat under it--stands quite still--and I am obliged to lay the book down for a while. Or again, in the piece called 'Walt Whitman,' and one or two others of that type, I am as one hurried through stormy seas, over high mountains, dazed with sunlight, stunned with a crowd and tumult of faces and voices, till I am breathless, bewildered, half dead. Then come parts and whole poems in which there is such calm wisdom and strength of thought, such a cheerful breadth of sunshine, that the soul bathes in them renewed and strengthened.<sup>32</sup>

The interesting thing about her response recorded here is that it is not intellectual. That is, she records her reactions to the poems as they affected her physically. There is not an attempt here to "explain" with the mind the power of

Whitman's poetry, as former critics had done. There is only a record given of what happened to her as she read--and what happened affected her sense life and can be described only in those terms. Even when she writes of her soul she uses physical, sensuously vivid terminology. I believe this is the response that former critics had ignored or shied away from. This was what they tried so hard to apologize for and defend their women against. You could really understand Whitman's sense of the body only by exploring, understanding, and admitting your own. And it is the supreme irony of course, that a woman was the first to let herself go, to accept Whitman's body consciousness by recognizing her own.

Later in the essay, after attributing to Whitman the power of the greatest of poets, she writes: "I do not think or believe this; but see it with the same unmistakable definiteness of perception and full consciousness that I see the sun at this moment in the noonday sky, and feel his rays glowing down upon me as I write in the open air. What more can you ask of the words of a man's mouth than that they should 'absorb into you as food and air, to appear again in your strength, gait, face,'--that they should be 'fibre and filter to your blood,' joy and gladness to your whole nature?"<sup>33</sup>

In the first sentence she affirms knowledge obtained through the body, her body, as superior to abstracted comprehension. Her second sentence is a kind of poetic principle

which maintains that great poetry, such as Whitman's, affects the very functions and chemistry of the body. What has happened here is that Whitman's sensual response to life has been transmitted through his poetry to Mrs. Gilchrist. That is, she accepts--seriously--the command that these poems enter your bloodstream and give your self the awareness of your body's life. Such a process is absurd and unfathomable unless it be mystical.

This ability to affect the reader's body Mrs. Gilchrist attributes to the affirmation in Whitman of two forces previously neglected in poetry. The first is the force of the present:

I am persuaded that one great source of this kindling, vitalizing power--I suppose the great source--is the grasp laid upon the present, the fearless and comprehensive dealing with reality. Hitherto the leaders of thought have (except in science) been men with their faces resolutely turned backwards; men who have made of the past a tyrant that beggars and scorns the present, hardly seeing any greatness but what is shrouded away in the twilight, underground past; naming the present only for disparaging comparisons, humiliating distrust that tends to create the very barrenness it complains of; bidding me warm myself at fires that went out to mortal eyes centuries ago; insisting, in religion above all, that I must either "look through dead men's eyes," or shut my own in helpless darkness. Poets fancying themselves so happy over the chill and faded beauty of the past, but not making me happy at all,--rebellious always at being dragged down out of the free air and sunshine of to-day.

But this poet, this 'athlete, full of rich words, full of joy,' takes you by the hand, and turns you with your face straight forwards . . . . Here is one come at last . . . whose songs are the breath of a glad, strong, beautiful life, nourished sufficingly, kindled to unsurpassed intensity and greatness by the gifts of the present.<sup>34</sup>

Whitman sings about the present and declares it good.

The result of such a poetic perspective intensifies appreciation for the here and now and creates the conditions for living to the moment's fullness. In conjunction with an increased awareness of the present is a minimizing of the influence of the past. Whitman puts aside not only the past as cultural history but also the past as a collection of memories of mistakes and perpetuated attitudes which stifle and belittle the life of man. As she puts it a little later in the essay, Whitman is able to "roll the stone of contempt off the heart . . . and cut the strangling knot of the problem of inherited viciousness and degradation."<sup>35</sup> It is a psychological history that Whitman destroys, what a contemporary reader would call neurosis. Whitman, she writes, frees the mind from compulsive behavior, from the necessity of acting in life as if it were a series of events and situations which man through his innate wickedness must sully and must be guilty for.

The affirmation of the present and its concurrent victory over mankind's historical sense of fear and guilt allows Whitman the freedom of affirming in poetry a second force of life, that is, the force of sex. Mrs. Gilchrist writes that mankind has felt shame about sex. A woman has dared not contemplate the act deemed shameful: " . . . she has to say to herself, 'Soul, look another way--you have no part in this. Motherhood is beautiful, fatherhood is beautiful; but the dawn of fatherhood and motherhood is not beautiful.'"<sup>36</sup> This shame has caused silence on the subject and

silence in turn has perpetuated shame. "It is true that instinct of silence . . . is a beautiful, imperishable part of nature too. But it is not beautiful when it means an ignominious shame brooding darkly. Shame is like a very flexible veil, that follows faithfully the shape of what it covers--beautiful when it hides a beautiful thing, ugly when it hides an ugly one. It has not covered what was beautiful here; it has covered a mean distrust of man's self and of his Creator."<sup>37</sup> This silence is a form of that 'strangling knot of inherited viciousness and degradation' of which she spoke before--the stone which heavies the heart. In contemporary terms, this silence has been compulsive, the result of inherited and perpetuated guilt feelings. As she described Whitman before cutting the Gordian knot, here too he frees mankind: "It was needed that this silence, this evil spell, should for once be broken, and the daylight let in, that the dark cloud lying under might be scattered to the winds. . . . That is what these beautiful, despised poems, the 'Children of Adam,' do, read by the light that glows out of the rest of the volume: light of a clear, strong faith in God, of an unfathomably deep and tender love for humanity--light shed out of a soul that is 'possessed of itself.'"<sup>38</sup>

Whitman is, then, the poet of the body. "Novalis said: 'We touch heaven when we lay our hand on the human body;' which, if it means anything, must mean an ample justification of the poet who has dared to be the poet of the body as well

as of the soul--to treat it with the freedom and grandeur of an ancient sculptor."<sup>39</sup> But, unlike Novalis who only thought and spoke this truth, Whitman wrestled with it and gave it concrete meaning. She states her belief that mankind has been unjust to itself in formulating and perpetuating a separatism of mind and body. The result has been devastating for man, causing an elevation of the mind and a hatred for the flesh. Men have lived either in abstraction, without regard to the needs and uses of the body, or have wallowed in base appetites unmindfully. She insists, instead, that the organic relationship between soul and body be recognized, how "the body is itself the root of the soul,--that whereby it grows and feeds."<sup>40</sup> She has come full circle, asserting at the end of her essay what she stated at the beginning--the body is the vehicle for true knowledge.

Unlike the critics and friends before 1870 who could not accept Whitman's talk of the body, Mrs. Gilchrist understood and explained his meaning. The masculine literary world at the time apologized for Whitman, advised against females reading him, and finally expurgated him. Mrs. Gilchrist, in defiance of general opinion, completely accepted him, in fact, loved him. What more total response to a poet of the body than the body response of love. Under the circumstances of being a widow, middle-aged, with four children, and from another country, the response seems desperate, perhaps foolish. But Anne Gilchrist's conduct throughout the

sixteen years she knew and loved Whitman was never either. Whitman's own comments about her are always full of tenderness and admiration. After she died Whitman wrote to her son, Herbert: "Nothing now remains but a sweet and rich memory--none more beautiful all time, all life all the earth. . . ."41 Later, when Herbert Gilchrist was preparing a biography of his mother, Whitman wrote to him, "I cannot let your book go to press without at least saying--and wishing it put on record--that among the perfect women I have known . . . I have known none more perfect in every relation than my dear, dear friend, Anne Gilchrist."42 Finally, in 1891, at his last birthday dinner, he said, "I ask myself more than a little if my best friends have not been women. My friend, Mrs. Gilchrist, one of the earliest, a picked woman, profound, noble, sacrificing, saw clearly when almost everybody else was interested in raising the dust--obscuring what was true."43 It would be impossible to take exception to such statements. We should conclude that, considering Whitman's endorsement of her character and acknowledgement of her insights into his poetry, Mrs. Gilchrist stands as the first and finest critic of Leaves of Grass.

## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>The Letters of Anne Gilchrist and Walt Whitman, ed. Thomas B. Harned (Garden City, New York, 1918), p. 67.
- <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 68.
- <sup>3</sup>Emory Holloway, Whitman: An Interpretation in Narrative (New York and London, 1926), p. 293.
- <sup>4</sup>Letters, p. 67.
- <sup>5</sup>Quoted in Walt Whitman, New York Dissected (New York, 1936), p. 173.
- <sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 157.
- <sup>7</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup>"Leaves of Grass Brooklyn, 1855," North American Review, LXXXII, No. 170, 275.
- <sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 277.
- <sup>10</sup>Quoted in Dissected, p. 162.
- <sup>11</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 163.
- <sup>13</sup>The Fight of a Book for the World (Yarmouth, Mass., 1926), p. 17.
- <sup>14</sup>Untitled article, p. 2.
- <sup>15</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup>Ibid.



<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Quoted in The Good Gray Poet (Toronto, Canada, 1927),  
p. 5.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 7-8.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>26</sup>Quoted in Harold Blodgett, Walt Whitman in England  
(Ithaca, New York, 1934), p. 30.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Horace Traubel, With Walt Whitman in Camden, I  
(Boston, 1906), p. 124, 150-51; II (New York, 1908), p. 266;  
III (New York, 1914), pp. 319-20.

<sup>30</sup>In Re Walt Whitman, ed. Horace L. Traubel, Richard  
Maurice Burke, and Thomas B. Harned (Philadelphia, 1893),  
p. 41.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., pp. 44-45.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>41</sup>Letters, p. xxxvi.

<sup>42</sup>Quoted in Elizabeth Porter Gould, Anne Gilchrist and Walt Whitman (Philadelphia, 1900), p. 53.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 54.

## CHAPTER II

### TIME, DEATH, IMMORTALITY

As Mrs. Gilchrist noted, Whitman's unique attitude toward the present was part of his program for bodily liberation. Instead of looking backward in time at the jewels of human thought and expression, he looked around himself and took account of the beauties he himself could find and feel. He looks backward neither for his inspiration nor his form. We do not sense that the muse comes to Whitman when he is in a studious posture, bent over his desk, surrounded by books, the lamp burning low. We see him rather sauntering along Broadway searching faces in a crowd, riding on top an omnibus, or crossing in a ferry. When he sits, he looks out, not down. His form, too, is not borrowed from the past. He chose something utterly unique to date and forever unrepeatable, the one thing which could not be learned nor ever copied. He chose the hum of his own valved voice.

His poetry, then, is filled with the captured moments of his felt life. This sense of the life of the present so vividly pervades his work, that recent critics have noted

Whitman's technical achievements in giving poetic expression to the living moment. Among the efforts at analyzing Whitman's poetic NOW, two critical efforts stand out and need mentioning. In the first, James W. Gargano attempts to describe Whitman's poetic play with time in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." He identifies Whitman's method as the "gradual magnification of the re-occurring moment with which the poem begins and ends."<sup>1</sup> Gargano states that through poetic technique, Whitman is able to destroy the bonds of time, place, and distance more successfully than he could through rational argument. In the first section of the poem, Whitman appears satisfied with his absorption of present phenomena. Time seems to stand still for this intimate and perfect union between the world and himself. But, a transformation occurs, Gargano states, and the objects about him become symbols of a present moving toward a future, and the "usual" men and women aboard the ferry with him, dissolve into a vision of their "curious" future counterparts. Present and future achieve "dramatic simultaneity." In the second section, Whitman envisions the repeated future enactments of this moment, and by supplying greater detail the moment becomes completely realized.

In the third section of the poem, Whitman "establishes the future as if it had materialized into the present."<sup>2</sup> Men and women who had been previously envisioned as future actors in this event, now come alive and experience the crossing of the East River in the present, and Whitman, who was in the present, now places himself in the past and acknowledges that

he felt what they are now feeling. The future becomes the present, the present becomes the past, and the single moment of the poem has become an epitome of timelessness multiplied with being and relationships which transcend historical limits. As Gargano phrases it: "He has dispensed with argument, with italicizing and didacticism, and has dramatized his vision of the mystical union of all reality in a transcendent instant."<sup>3</sup>

In the fifth and sixth sections, Whitman broadens and deepens this eternal moment to include the psychological dimension. The uniformity and universality of human nature unites all men in all times. Hence, Whitman affirms in himself the doubts, sorrows, joys, and evils which all men at all times have felt and will continue to feel. "The moment quite simply described in the poem's opening outburst has at the end of the sixth section encompassed the equally staggering variety and oneness of all human experience."<sup>4</sup>

In the seventh section, Whitman makes quiet preparation for the poem's concluding affirmation by showing how the imagination freely moves through time annihilating the distance it creates. Whitman "conceives of his 'future-present' reader's thought as directed backward upon the poet and thus intersecting the poet's past thought (upon the reader) once launched forward into the future."<sup>5</sup> In the eighth section, then, Whitman returns to his surroundings enlarged and assured with the knowledge that this moment on the ferry is not just another isolated, passing moment lived and forgotten. He has seen it as a moment shared with all mankind, "a moment

containing time instinct with all time, place pregnant with all places, and self a compendium of all selves."<sup>6</sup> Whitman asserts, then, unpretentiously and unpresumptuously,

We understand then do we not?  
What I promis'd without mentioning it, have  
you not accepted?

What the study could not teach--what the  
preaching could not accomplish is accomplish'd,  
is it not?<sup>7</sup>

Not through argument does Whitman convince, Gargano maintains, but through the dramatic presentation of the lived moment shared with the reader. After the perceived union of poet and reader in the eighth section, the poem closes in the ninth section with the lyrical blessing of the "dumb, beautiful ministers" which served in the realization of this eternal moment.

Gargano's essay is useful for its focused attention on the assumption that Whitman's method of writing poetry is the most appropriate way of stating his idea. Instead of expatiating solely on the "argument" of the poem, as many critics have done, Gargano talks about its art, and thereby reveals quite a bit more about the poem's meaning.

Another more comprehensive critical effort in describing Whitman's technical achievements in respect to the subject of time, is the essay by John F. Lynen, "The Poetry of Present and the Form of the Moment: Walt Whitman."<sup>8</sup> Early in the essay, Lynen states his basic proposition that "Whitman's poetry is, above all, a poetry of the now, a poetry which not

only depicts the present moment but makes the poem itself exist at that moment and portrays all events, objects, and thoughts as things now appearing to consciousness."<sup>9</sup> The notion is similar to that found in Gargano's essay: Whitman's poetry is about the present and in the present, a present which renews its contemporaneity with each new reader. In order to maintain the present moment before the reader's mind, Whitman devised three suitable poetic forms which Lynen calls the song, the meditation and the imagist poem.

The song is the simplest form which Whitman created and the one which tends most toward the vagueness of Whitman's poorer poems. In the song, a single object acts as a symbol for present experience. The reader perceives the object and simultaneously becomes aware of the actual present moment of perception. The reader is meant to focus his attention on the object and absorb the associations brought to mind by the poet, thereby realizing the object in its total context. "The intention of the song is to portray the experience of now perceiving some one thing . . . and in the best of Whitman's songs this sort of drama is very neatly brought off."<sup>10</sup> In the "Song of the Broad Axe," for example, focused attention on the axe brings to mind "the awareness of its functions, the places in which it is found, the meanings it has had in various other times."<sup>11</sup> Association leads to association and in Lynen's words, "the reader comes to realize that just as the shapes the axe now cuts are continuous with the more

general forms in terms of which men think and act, so the whole form or order he recognizes as the present is only to be perceived by seeing also the shape of history and that dialectic of which the modern age is the latest phase."<sup>12</sup> Throughout the poem, the general concept (tool, history) alternates with the particular object (axe, the present). By the end of the poem, the universal and particular are brought to a high level of generalization: the universal axe is discovered in the particular one contemplated, just as history is discovered within the present moment experienced.

The second form, the meditation, Lynen believes is richer than the song because what the self perceives is not the limited single object of the song, but an entire dramatic situation and setting. Objects within the setting may serve individually as symbols, but they are not limited by that function since they serve a larger whole, and it is the total picture which is the symbol for the now. The reader is meant to focus on the many elements of the setting or landscape which may include himself (another advantage over the song).

Instead of a broad axe or a spear of grass, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" presents an entire situation as a symbol for the present. In "Lilacs" the situation is the poet's present remembering of a previous sorrowful spring at the time of President Lincoln's death. The time is present, and the poet looks around himself at the



same landscape he saw during the previous spring and meditates upon the meaning of death. His concentration upon the present springtime scene with its new growth of vegetation and renewed human activity, assures the poet that life goes on. A great man has died and must be forever mourned, but life's continual cycle of death and rebirth can be a source of hope. In fact, it is the knowledge of death which gives meaning to the present. The poet absorbs more intensely his present surroundings because his understanding of life's transience makes each passing moment more precious.

The setting consists of elements which are both real and symbolic; that is, the elements are actual, personal objects which relate to Whitman's sense life, at the same time that they fit the formal, public conventions of the elegy. "For instance, the poet saw the star 'drooping' in the western sky just before Lincoln's death, and therefore it becomes for him a personal image of the dead man. But it also has this meaning with respect to the system of public recollections we call the elegy, where the star has always served as a traditional symbol of the person mourned."<sup>13</sup>

Lynen lists a number of characteristic devices Whitman uses in the imagistic poem to create the illusion of presentness. Among Whitman's more obvious techniques is his continual use of the present tense and of the present participle. His unique use of meter and rhythm also augments the sense of continuous duration. The long lines, irregular beats, and end-stopping, give the effect that each line is a restatement

of the previous lines. Parallelism is another device Whitman exploits to keep his sentences focused on the present. Not only words and phrases are repeated, but whole syntactical forms are paralleled throughout a given passage. This use of parallelism makes the poem "hover and delay so that its meaning seems to expand rather than advance."<sup>14</sup> Suspending the movement of the poem makes the reading of the poem coincide with the voice of the poet, creating a unity of poet and reader in the present moment. "Indeed, Whitman is the master of every trick for concealing the forward thrust of sentences. By inverting the normal word order, confusing tenses, separating the main elements, smothering the grammatically important under the subordinate, confounding participle and gerund, noun and verb, oppositional phrase and subject, he makes the sentence itself seem suspended in mid-course."<sup>15</sup>

While both Gargano and Lynen concentrate on Whitman's sense of time as revealed through his technique, they do not ignore what we could call philosophic grounds for his notions. They both recognize Whitman's debt to Transcendentalism. Gargano opens his essay affirming the critical belief that "the poem's heterogeneous details 'demonstrate' the Transcendentalist doctrine of the essential spirituality and unity of all human experience."<sup>16</sup> Lynen says, "his sense of time is at most a variant of that which appears in the conscious theory of the Transcendentalists and has its origin in the main tradition of American thought from Puritan New England onward."<sup>17</sup> For the Transcendentalist the present moment

contains all times and therefore all things. When the totally conscious self realizes the moment's total content, then all of reality is revealed as a single, unified event.

In his life and in his writings, Thoreau upheld the preciousness of the moment which allowed one a vision of the unity of all experience. Perhaps Thoreau's most eloquent statement of the idle moment which truly lived unites man with the forces of the universe occurs in Walden at the beginning of the chapter entitled "Sounds":

I did not read books the first summer; I hoed beans. Nay, I often did better than this. There were times when I could not afford to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work, whether of the head or hands. I love a broad margin to my life. Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveller's wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been. They were not subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance. I realized what the Orientals mean by contemplation and the forsaking of works. For the most part, I minded not how the hours went. The day advanced as if to light some work of mine; it was morning, and lo, now it is evening, and nothing memorable is accomplished. Instead of singing like the birds, I silently smiled at my incessant good fortune. As the sparrow had its trill, sitting on the hickory before my door, so had I my chuckle or suppressed warble which he might hear out of my nest. My days were not days of the week, bearing the stamp of any heathen deity, nor were they minced into hours and fretted by the ticking of a clock; for I lived like the Puri Indians, of whom it is said that "for yesterday, today, and tomorrow they have only one word, and they express the variety of meaning by pointing backward for yesterday, forward for tomorrow, and overhead for the passing day. This was sheer idleness to my fellow-townsmen, no doubt; but if the birds and flowers had tired me by their standard, I should not have been found wanting.

A man must find his occasions in himself it is true. The natural day is very calm, and will hardly reprove his indolence."<sup>18</sup>

A passage from his Journals proposes a similar attitude toward the unoccupied moment which properly lived accomplishes more than endless hours of determined labor: "A broad margin of leisure is as beautiful in a man's life as in a book. Haste makes waste, no less in life than in housekeeping. Keep the time, observe the hours of the universe, not of the cars. What are threescore years and ten hurriedly and coarsely lived to moments of divine leisure in which your life is coincident with the life of the universe?"<sup>19</sup> Take time to live in Time might summarize Thoreau's program. One must transcend his daily routine and perceive with fresh senses the life about him which he cannot see when he is too busy. Such fresh perception is the way to the immortal moment. As Whitman transcended his ferry ride only to arrive where he started and see it as the everlasting moment, so Thoreau transcends the Walden experiment only to return to it and see in it his life as one with the eternal process.

We might say, then, that contemplation of the present moment for both writers is the means for the Transcendental experience. But, their attitudes toward time, I believe, are similar in another way. They both desire to live in what I shall call "organic time." We find that Thoreau writes in his Journal: "Let us preserve religiously, secure, protect the coincidence of our life with the life of nature. Else what are heat and cold, day and night, sun, moon, and stars

to us? . . . My life as essentially belongs to the present as that of a willow tree in the spring. Now, now, its catkins expand, its yellow bark shines, its sap flows; now or never must you make whistles of it. Get the day to back you; let it back you and the night."<sup>20</sup> Again he writes: "These regular phenomena of the seasons get at last to be--they were at first, of course--simply and plainly phenomena or phases of my life. The seasons and all their changes are in me. I see not a dead eel or floating snake, or a gull, but it rounds my life and is like a line or accent in its poem. Almost I believe the Concord would not rise and overflow its banks again, were I not here. After a while I learn what my moods and seasons are. I would have nothing subtracted. I can imagine nothing added. My moods are thus periodical, not two days in my year alike."<sup>21</sup> It seems that Thoreau found in nature, in the natural processes, a metaphor for the passing movements and moments of his own life. The kind of human time which moves analogously to the natural process--events and moments which are related to a whole benevolent ever re-occurring movement toward a beneficial end--we may call organic time. In Walden there is a less explicit statement of this in Thoreau's creation of a consciousness which exults in its parallel to the cycle of the seasons. In fact, in examining Thoreau's major writings, it seems the longer he lived the more he considered important the subjugation of the self to the processes of nature. The highly transcendental mode of A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers is given

up at the end of his life for simple, clear observations of what nature is doing in The Maine Woods and Cape Cod. He seems to have felt more and more the need to be a part of what was happening in nature.

There is peace in the natural processes. Seeing human life in terms of the re-occurring seasons or the steady growth of vegetation or the endless and even wash of the ocean upon the beach gives one a perspective from which to view the vicissitudes of human life. One sees one's own life as part of a whole, as autumn is part of the whole seasonal cycle, or a branch part of the tree, or one wave part of the tides. One becomes a part of the historic, endless movement of life. There is, simply, eternity--of some sort--and one life well lived within the living perpetual pageant is perfection enough for one man. What appear to be brutal changes in life become temporary alterations. Death, the most brutal of all, is ripe fruit fallen, not into oblivion, but into seeds. Necessity becomes grace, limitation fulfillment, destiny faith, and life eternity. This is, no doubt, the attraction to the Romantic bias in literature--it offers hope. Thoreau's story at the end of Walden of the "artist in the city of Kouroo" most succinctly and beautifully portrays the Romantic endeavor: the man devoted to the creation of beauty in life achieves immortality.

I believe Whitman's sense of organic time was similar to Thoreau's. While he lacks Thoreau's metaphor for it, he does not miss its spirit. In a sense, Whitman was Thoreau's

Kouroo artist--living unaffected by the ravages of time, peaceful within, tirelessly revising and perfecting his single masterpiece. Living into old age he remained oblivious to it, its paralysis, its numerous attacks upon his health, and the long list of diseases and malfunctions which eventually brought it to an end. One calls to mind the scene described by Whitman's attending physician, Daniel Longaker, in his account of the poet's last sickness and death. Whitman, not having left his bed in months, breathing with half a lung, constipated, feverish, needing a catheter, unable to taste food, fast losing weight, finger-tips blue, paining with every movement, this Whitman tells Dr. Longaker how grand it is to grow old gracefully. Dr. Longaker adds shortly thereafter: "He fully realized his critical condition, but gave not the slightest evidence of anxiety or fear of its probable outcome. He was, indeed, cheerful and complained of nothing, admitting that he had pain or suffered in any way only when he was especially asked. I may say here, this state of mind (this lack of anxiety for the future, this absence of complaint, this cheerful attitude) was maintained to the last hour of his life."<sup>22</sup> He continued writing and reading and seeing friends from his bed, apparently undisturbed by his suffering. During the last four months of his illness there was a daily expectation of the end. When the end came it was distinguished only by its quiet:

The end came simply and peacefully, Whitman conscious to the last, calm and undisturbed. About 4:30 P.M. he was seen to be visibly sinking, and Dr. McAlister, Harned and Traubel were at once sent for and came--the doctor arriving at 5:30. When questioned by the doctor, Walt faintly smiled and whispered that he felt no pain. Later he beckoned Mrs. Davis and whispered to her, "Won't you lift me up?" He was carefully raised and a pillow placed under his shoulders, after which he lay quietly with his eyes closed, breathing faintly. Shortly after 6 o'clock he opened his eyes and in his last whisper said, "Warry, shift." Warren carefully moved him, and, momentarily opening his eyes again, he smiled faintly his appreciation. He lay very quietly, his respiration growing shorter. Outside, a gentle rain and the closing day. The end came--quietly as "a lapsing breeze," his right hand resting in that of Horace Traubel, his spirit child, who was the last person on earth whom he recognized.<sup>23</sup>

Whitman died as he lived--with peace. One feels that he left this world with no regrets, with the knowledge that he had lived his life fully and well and that it was now simply time to move on.

This attitude of being at peace with the movement of time--what I call living in organic time--is not only observable in his life, but is also a major theme of his poetry. We find not only acceptance of time's movements and the changes its movements bring about, but also a firm faith in the goodness of the overall plan this movement is part of. This idea is implied subtly in most of his poetry, but finds blunt statement in "To Think of Time": "What will be will be well, for what is is well." (l. 64) Faith in the outcome begins for Whitman even before one's entrance into time, before birth:

It is not to diffuse you that you were born of  
your mother and father, it is to identify you,  
It is not that you should be undecided, but that  
you should be decided,



Something long preparing and formless is arrived  
 and form'd in you,  
 You are henceforth secure, whatever comes or goes.  
 (ll. 72-75)

In the same way that Nature has devised an elaborate and efficient plan for propagation--all the creatures, plants, and elements contribute to preserving and generating the life of all members--so mankind is part of a special scheme which began functioning before man was born. Identity and life come through time. Whitman has a magnificent vision of this in "Song of Myself":

Rise after rise bow the phantoms behind me,  
 Afar down I see the huge first Nothing, I know  
     I was even there,  
 I waited unseen and always, and slept through the  
     lethargic mist,  
 And took my time, and took no hurt from the fetid  
     carbon.

Long I was hugg'd close--long and long.

Immense have been the preparations for me,  
 Faithful and friendly the arms that have help'd me.

Cycles ferried my cradle, rowing and rowing like  
     cheerful boatmen,  
 For room to me stars kept aside in their own rings,  
 They sent influences to look after what was to  
     hold me.

Before I was born out of my mother generations  
     guided me,  
 My embryo has never been torpid, nothing could  
     overlay it.

For it the nebula cohered to an orb,  
 The long slow strata piled to rest it on,  
 Vast vegetables gave it sustenance,  
 Monstrous sauroids transported it in their  
     mouths and deposited it with care.

All forces have been steadily employ'd to  
     complete and delight me.  
 Now on this spot I stand with my robust soul.  
 (ll. 1152-1169)

This might sound like Darwinian mysticism, but to call Whitman's faith in mankind's process "faith in evolution" is really not to do it justice. It is not really a matter of forms evolving into higher forms. It is really a question of destiny. In some wonderful mystical way Walt Whitman actually existed among those prehistoric mammoth reptiles. He was not evolving, he always was, his "embryo has never been torpid." He, just as all men, was destined to be on the spot he now stands. The world may have evolved in preparing itself to receive him--the mist cleared, sauroids had to die, and the strata piled up--but Walt Whitman always was.

This passage describing a birth stands in marked contrast to a poem by Dylan Thomas describing a birth. Putting them side by side may sharpen the focus on Whitman.

Twenty-four years remind the tears of my eyes.  
 (Bury the dead for fear that they walk to the  
   grave in labour.)  
 In the groin of the natural doorway I crouched  
   like a tailor  
 Sewing a shroud for a journey  
 By the light of the meat-eating sun.  
 Dressed to die, the sensual strut begun,  
 With my red veins full of money,  
 In the final direction of the elementary town  
 I advance for as long as forever is.<sup>24</sup>

First of all, Thomas's poem lacks the cosmic and historical significance of his origins and considers life and time from the vantage of a puny fetus. Before birth Thomas was a busy tailor making the shroud, his body, which he was to be buried in. Whitman, before his birth, "slept," and "was hugg'd close" by "Faithful and friendly arms," and was nourished by

"vast vegetables." Thomas's sun is "meat-eating" whereas Whitman's stars made room for him and took care of him by sending "influences to look after what was to hold me." In Thomas's veins is money, the easily spent stuff of the marketplace, while Whitman's soul is "robust." In short, Thomas's poem is an unhappy recollection of the sad beginning of the "sensual strut" he calls life, while Whitman's poem is a celebration of Being.

For Whitman man always was and always will be. Death has no dominion since it is merely part of the same good process that the ancient dinosaurs, who carried the Whitman egg in their mouths, were part of:

If all came but to ashes of dung,  
If maggots and rats ended us, then Alarum!  
for we are betray'd,  
Then indeed suspicion of death.

Do you suspect death? If I were to suspect  
death I should die now,  
Do you think I could walk pleasantly and  
well-suited toward annihilation?

Pleasantly and well-suited I walk,  
Whither I walk I cannot define, but I know  
it is good,  
The whole universe indicates that it is good,  
The past and the present indicate that it is good.  
("To Think of Time" ll. 103-111)

We might contrast this passage to another poem by Dylan Thomas:

Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,  
Because their words have forked no lightning they  
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright  
 Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,  
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,  
 And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,  
 Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight  
 Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,  
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,  
 Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears,  
     I pray,  
 Do not go gentle into that good night.  
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.<sup>25</sup>

Instead of walking pleasantly and well-suited to death, Thomas wants all men to burn, rave, and rage against death. Whitman cannot define what happens after death, but he trusts it is good and is willing to die. Thomas, on the other hand, hates death, sees it as the end of all things good and pleasurable and tries to resist and delay its onslaught. Whitman walks to death, but Thomas calls for a glorious, protesting, desperate gesture of the will to life.

Let us look at each man through the perspective of the other. Whitman anticipates Thomas when he writes "Do you suspect death? If I were to suspect death I should die now," and one thinks of the continual sense of terror which haunted Thomas and which he could find escape from only in debauchery, and one calls to mind the eighteen straight whiskies he took one night to calm his despair causing cerebral poisoning and his death. In short, Thomas suspected death and committed suicide at thirty-nine. Looking back to Whitman through

Thomas we read "Old age should burn and rave at close of day," and we picture a quiet old Whitman with a grandfather beard and children on his knees. No rage, no fight, but a great old Santa Claus looking toward his last Christmas.

Dylan Thomas saw Time as a negative, destructive force. So, he lived against Time, living twice as hard, taking life and pleasure to an excess against that time when it would all be taken away. But, like a child let loose in a candy shop, the sweetness eventually sickened him, and what gave him most pleasure brought him down. In a sense, then, his argument became one not against Time or death, but against life. She was too good to be true and he was not good enough to be true to her, and so he abused her and daily flirted with death. Time then went too slowly in bringing him to his object, and his living twice as hard was an effort to cut his life in half. In either case, Time was not organic for Thomas, was not part of an overall growth. Time was mechanical, ticking relentlessly forward to the inevitable midnight hour, or it was out of joint, banging, churning, and halting in its progress toward the final escape.

Whitman, on the other hand, did not suffer in such a way. Life was good and was getting better. The world unfolds itself in time, like a blossom, and one who lives within time unfolds himself accordingly. The world and self are Becoming, the potential moving toward the actual, possibilities made realities, in short, what life has to live is lived. So, Whitman lived unafraid, on the open road, taking

his chances, going for broke. He had nothing to lose and life to gain. Time is the means for perfection: what would happen would be for the best--even death.

Perhaps Whitman's reconciliation to death is the supreme achievement of his sense of organic time. If death is not to be feared, then nothing need be feared. If death is not an end but a beginning of some kind, then human time, like time for Nature, is organic.

I wish I could translate the hints about the  
 dead young men and women,  
 And the hints about old men and mothers, and  
 the offspring taken soon out of their laps.

What do you think has become of the young and  
 old men?  
 And what do you think has become of the women  
 and children?

They are alive and well somewhere,  
 The smallest sprout shows there is really no  
 death,  
 And if ever there was it led forward to life,  
 and does not wait at the end to arrest it,  
 And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.  
 And all goes onward and outward, nothing  
 collapses,  
 And to die is different from what any one  
 supposed, and luckier.

("Song of Myself" ll. 121-130)

Either you believe him or you don't. It is impossible to logically argue the reader to believe, and Whitman acknowledges this when he writes how he wishes he could "translate the hints." Belief in immortality is an act of faith, unprobable to those who lack the unnamed experience which causes affirmation.

Part of the time Whitman merely affirms:

I know I am deathless,  
 I know this orbit of mine cannot be swept by  
     a carpenter's compass,  
 I know I shall not pass like a child's carlacue  
     cut with a burnt stick at night.  
                     ("Song of Myself" ll. 406-408)

This affirmation is healthy-minded. The imagery is pleasant and vivid, and we sense conviction on his part.

And as to you Death, and you bitter hug of  
     mortality, it is idle to try to alarm me.

.....

And as to you corpse I think you are good manure,  
     but that does not offend me,  
 I smell the white roses sweet-scented and growing,  
 I reach to the leafy lips, I reach to the polish'd  
     breasts of melons.  
                     ("Song of Myself" ll. 1289-1296)

Again the affirmation is realized with vivid imagery. Whitman believes in eternality because it is felt--the body-manure finds perpetuation in the look, smell, and feel of summer vegetation. However, some affirmations by Whitman are shrill, and they neither convince nor inspire since they lack concrete support beyond the rhetoric or dally in vague generalizations:

I swear I think now that every thing without  
     exception has an eternal soul!  
 The trees have, rooted in the ground! the weeds  
     of the sea have! the animals!

I swear I think there is nothing but immortality!  
 That the exquisite scheme is for it, and the  
     nebulous float is for it, and the cohering is  
     for it!

And all preparation is for it--and identity is  
for it--and life and materials are altogether  
for it!

("To Think of Time" ll. 117-121)

It is not chaos or death--it is form, union,  
plan--it is eternal life--it is Happiness.  
("Song of Myself" l. 1318)

The exclamation points and dashes give him away.

Whitman's greatest statements of faith in death's harmless sting lie in his greatest, richest lyrics, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," and "Passage to India." In these poems his intimations of immortality find concrete expression through an experiential argument rather than through mere forensic display. That is to say, in these songs his faith in immortality is presented or shown, rather than simply stated.

In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" the long catalogues of things in sections three and nine, as Stanley K. Coffman has pointed out,<sup>26</sup> serve as bridges between himself and his readers in years to come. Instead of being content with stating that "It avails not, time nor place--distance avails not," Whitman presents in these catalogues the concrete, experiential basis for saying so. The "dumb, beautiful ministers" which he names and describes unite us because we share them in our lives. This, coupled with the poem's sense of everlasting present time--which Gargano's analysis given above helped to describe--creates for the poem an argument



unargued, yet realized and proved in the event of reading--  
Whitman is still with us.

In the poem "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" Whitman counters the loss of the dead with images of what promises eternal life. The device of mourning for the dead while simultaneously contemplating what lives, is Whitman's way of establishing hope. For instance, the star, the bird, and the lilacs, as Lynen pointed out above, function not only as symbols, but also as real, sensible objects in the total landscape. Kenneth Burke observes that they are objects of sight, sound, and smell respectively,<sup>27</sup> and the vivid, lingering descriptions of them lessen their abstract symbolic meaning, and heighten their literal meaning in the poem. They are in the poem because Whitman observes them in the spring and they are therefore evidence of life's continued renewal. Hence, he brings a "sprig of lilac" to Lincoln's coffin as a token of faith.

In section eleven of the poem Whitman wonders how "To adorn the burial-house of him I love?" There follows a vivid catalogue:

Pictures of growing spring and farms and homes,  
With the Fourth-month eve at sundown, and the  
    gray smoke lucid and bright,  
With floods of the yellow gold of the gorgeous,  
    indolent, sinking sun, burning, expanding  
    the air,  
With the fresh sweet herbage under foot, and  
    the pale green leaves of the trees prolific,  
In the distance the flowing glaze, the breast  
    of the river, with a wind-dapple here and there,  
With ranging hills on the banks, with many a line  
    against the sky, and shadows,

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.  
 (ll. 81-88)

Whitman would decorate the house of the dead with picturesque scenes of life's daily activity in town and country during an April sunset. Like the setting sun "gorgeous, indolent, sinking," "burning, expanding the air," death is a setting which must be seen in its total perspective, within the endless pageantry and variety of life. In the distance are the farms, the trees, the river, and the hills against the sky, in the foreground is the city dense with homes, chimneys, and people. And like the men returning home from work, death is a return home after the work of one's life. Overriding all is the promise of the "growing spring." In this passage Whitman gives his vision of immortality a visual embodiment in the commonplace which here takes on allegorical overtones.

In "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" when Whitman learns death, he also learns poetry. He finds his voice and the meaning of his life in the denial of both. Only by seeing life with reference to its end, does its pleasure and purpose come into focus. It is the old paradox newly stated: You find your life in losing it. The poem is a dramatization of this affirmation. The setting is a Long Island beach one mild May night, and the dramatis personae are the boy, the bird, and the ocean. After hearing the bird sing his lament for his lost mate, the boy in sorrow and questioning rage

asks for a clue or a word which would explain to him the  
newly aroused

. . . fire, the sweet hell within,  
The unknown want, the destiny of me.  
(ll. 156-57)

And the ocean answers his cry with

. . . the low and delicious word death,  
And again death, death, death, death,  
. . .  
(ll. 168-69)

The knowledge of death is what finds the poet his voice and the man his life. It is a stark, poetic drama, in the manner of Beckett or Yeats, and its performance has the mystery of ritual. It is like an initiation rite which fixes the boy in the man's role from now on. With the loss of his innocent blindness is gained the truth of his mortality. What must follow is commitment to his life's occupation--poetry.

A recent article begins, "When Whitman wrote Passage to India he was really confronting the philosophical implications of the theory of evolution to which Darwin had given scientific respectability in 1859."<sup>28</sup> What Whitman himself had to say about "Passage to India" might seem to support such a thesis: "There's more of me, the essential ultimate me, in that than in any of the poems. There is no philosophy, consistent or inconsistent, in that poem . . . but the burden of it is evolution--the one thing escaping the other--the unfolding of cosmic purposes."<sup>29</sup> However, to assume that

Whitman means here literally Darwinism, I believe, is to commit a serious error. Whitman used the term "evolution," and that should justly be synonymous with Darwinism, but "one thing escaping the other--the unfolding of cosmic purposes" ought to act as sufficient modification for Whitman's use of the term. Indeed, "one thing escaping the other" sounds more like a parody of Darwin's "survival of the fittest" than a restatement of it, and "unfolding of cosmic purposes" is far too mystical to be a scientific estimation. No, I think in "Passage to India" we are dealing with something other than evolution, but with something which probably had similarities to evolution in Whitman's mind.

The passage in the poem is backward, a return to the past, to India as the embodiment of primal life and thought. All the achievements of modern technology have brought us back to where we started from. The Suez Canal, the Atlantic cable, and the American transcontinental railroad, which seemed at first to be products and promises of New World ingenuity, all become in the poem roads back to the Old World. Modern man has finally reached what the drive of history had sought to achieve in men like Columbus and Vasco da Gama--a good route to the East: "Thou rondure of the world at last accomplish'd." Progress has brought us home, and in doing so has made the whole world accessible. On one level, then, the poem is in praise of the world's manifest

destiny finally manifested.

On another level, the passage to India is the mystical passage of the mind,

To reason's early paradise,  
Back, back to wisdom's birth, to innocent  
    intuitions,  
Again with fair creation.

(ll. 172-174)

The poet desires a spiritual journey to the origins of life and thought which parallels the physical journey to India achieved by man. Therefore, he urges his soul to set sail with him, to transcend the limits of time and space in search of the mystical union with the source of all being:

O soul thou pleasest me, I thee,  
Sailing these seas or on the hills, or waking  
    in the night,  
Thoughts, silent thoughts, of Time and Space  
    and Death, like waters flowing,  
Bear me indeed as through the regions infinite,  
Whose air I breathe, whose ripples hear, lave  
    me all over,  
Bathe me O God in thee, mounting to thee,  
I and my soul to range in range of thee.

(ll. 187-193)

Once manifested in section eight, the desire for transcendence reaches its conclusion in section nine where the poet calls for the ultimate transcendence of life itself. Death is welcomed as the agent which allows for the total merge of self with the All:

Passage to more than India!  
O secret of the earth and sky!  
Of you O waters of the sea! O winding creeks  
    and rivers!

Of you O woods and fields! of you strong  
     mountains of my land!  
 Of you O prairies! of you gray rocks!  
 O morning red! O clouds! O rain and snows!  
 O day and night, passage to you!

O sun and moon and all you stars! Sirius  
     and Jupiter!  
 Passage to you!

(ll. 233-241)

We get finally a glimpse of the nature of Whitman's immortality which accounts for his faith in Time's steady flow toward death. Death is seen as a passage into the universe, a merge with all forms, entrance to an eternity with the endless processes of Nature. Whitman achieves here a vision of the unity of life and death, of the continuance of life in death. What one used as the model in life for organic time, the processes of Nature, one becomes part of in death. In some perfect sense, art has imitated nature.

There is a current advertisement in popular magazines which pictures a young man leaning over the side of a magnificent sailboat that is cutting with great speed through a dark green sea. There is a bright blue sky above, and the young man is tanned, grinning with great white teeth, and his hair is blowing in the wind. The copy below the photo reads, "You only go around once in life. So grab for all the gusto you can." It seems to me one could easily picture Whitman in the boat, leaning over, white mane blowing, grabbing all the gusto of his singular journey through life. The sea, the wind, and the sky, all part of Whitman's love for the outdoors.

The speeding sailboat perhaps a symbol of man's ingenuity carrying him on his passage to, shall we say, India.

But, I left one thing out of the original picture. Right in the center of the photo, at the horizon line, in the young man's hand as he leans over the rail, is a can of beer. Its presence suddenly makes the picture and the caption below un-Whitmanesque, makes it, of course, an ad. The young man is killing time, stopping it dead so he can take his big, bold, he-man pleasures before he gets too old to enjoy them. He has gotten away from it all--left communal responsibilities ashore for this Cris-Craft confrontation with Nature. He is also rich.

The young man is grasping the present moment because he knows it will vanish in the next moment. Time relentlessly hurries on leaving old age, unfulfilled desire, and death in its wake. From the vantage of an expensive yacht, life is meaningless if it isn't fun. Beer is the key to that fun. At first it heightens your senses to let all the fun in, then it slows you down so you can make it last longer, eventually it blots out consciousness and time for a deep, blind sleep. The gusto you grab is desperate.

When Anne Gilchrist observed Whitman's grasp of the present moment, we see it was not the dying moment of the young man on the boat she had in mind. Whitman's grasp was at each moment as part of a whole concept of time which viewed in each moment implications of previous moments and future moments. Time was organic for Whitman, related moments grew

and developed toward a beneficial end. His faith that death was only part of the process enabled him to face it without fear, and his hope in immortality after death helped him look forward to it.



## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>"Technique in 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry': The Everlasting Moment," JEGP, LXII (April 1963), p. 262.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 265.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 266.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 267.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>7</sup>Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York, 1965), p. 164. All citations from Whitman's poetry are from this edition.

<sup>8</sup>The Design of the Present: Essays on Time and Form in American Literature (New Haven and London, 1969), 273-339.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 279.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 306.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 307.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 311.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 325.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>"The Everlasting Moment," p. 262.

<sup>17</sup>The Design of the Present, p. 287.

<sup>18</sup>The Writings of Henry David Thoreau Vol. II (Boston and New York, Manuscript Edition, 1906), pp. 123-24.

<sup>19</sup>The Writings Vol. X, p. 433.

<sup>20</sup>The Writings Vol. IX, pp. 231-32.

<sup>21</sup>The Writings Vol. XVI, p. 127.

<sup>22</sup>"The Last Sickness and the Death of Walt Whitman," In Re Walt Whitman, ed. Horace L. Traubel, Richard Maurice Bucke, and Thomas B. Harned (Philadelphia, 1893), pp. 388-400.

<sup>23</sup>J. W. Wallace, "Last Days of Walt Whitman," In Re, p. 434.

<sup>24</sup>A Little Treasury of Modern Poetry: English and American, ed. Oscar Williams (New York, rev. ed. 1952), p. 522.

<sup>25</sup>Modern Poetry, ed. Maynard Mack, Leonard Dean, and William Frost (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1961), p. 354.

<sup>26</sup>"'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry': A Note on the Catalogue Technique in Whitman's Poetry," MP, LI (May 1954), 225-32.

<sup>27</sup>"Policy Made Personal--Whitman's Verse and Prose--Salient Traits," Leaves of Grass One Hundred Years After, ed. Milton Hindus (Stanford, 1955), 74-108.

<sup>28</sup>Edward J. Pfeifer, "The Theory of Evolution and Whitman's 'Passage to India,'" Emerson Society Quarterly, No. 42 (I Quarter 1966), p. 31.

<sup>29</sup>Horace Traubel, With Walt Whitman in Camden, Vol. I (Boston, 1906), pp. 156-57.

## CHAPTER III

### BODY MYSTICISM

The nature of Whitman's sex life, his preferences and partners, has been the subject of much controversy. From the very beginning of his career, as was shown in the brief survey of the earliest responses to Leaves of Grass in Chapter I of this work, Whitman's sexual mores were questioned. It was thought, at first, that Whitman was a sinner with women. His poems contained detailed descriptions of naked bodies, they praised with abandon the joys of copulation, and advocated a frank and free mingling of the sexes. He was considered by some an advocate of free love, and we recall that Secretary Harlan dismissed Whitman from the Department of Interior on this charge. Those who noticed his book considered it unfit for the eyes and ears of decent folk, and discreet men who honored the reputation of their chaste wives and looked after the proper education of their daughters, banned the book from the home library.

This opinion of Whitman was modified a great deal during his lifetime, the result of his work in the Civil War hospitals, his impeccable life, and the efforts of highly

respected friends. But, it was replaced later by the suggestion that perhaps it wasn't women, but men who were his objects of desire. John Addington Symonds was the first to suggest this. Symonds had a special interest in the subject of homosexuality among the ancient Greeks and the Renaissance artists, had himself homosexual leanings, and was not surprised, was perhaps grateful, to find what he thought was the same theme in Whitman's Calamus poems under the term "adhesiveness." In 1872 Symonds wrote to Whitman asking him to reveal the true meaning of the poems and to relate "some story of athletic friendship from which to learn the truth." Symonds confessed to Whitman his own desires "to believe that the comradeship . . . on a par with the sexual feeling for depth and strength and purity and capability of all good, was real--not a delusion of distorted passions, a dream of the Past, a scholar's fancy--but a strong and vital bond of man to man."<sup>1</sup> As is characteristic with Whitman, when he didn't know what to say, he said nothing. He did not answer this letter, nor did he answer a number of similar letters from Symonds which followed throughout the years asking the same questions. But, Symond's questions were on Whitman's mind, and as his conversations with Traubel in 1888 reveal, they were a source of annoyance:

What does Calamus mean? What do the poems come to in the round-up? That is worrying him a good deal--their involvement, as he suspects, is the passionate relations of men with men--the thing he reads so much of in the literatures of southern Europe and sees something of in his own experience. He is

always driving at me about that: is that what Calamus means?--because of me or in spite of me, is that what it means? I have said no, but no does not satisfy him. But read this letter--read the whole of it: it is very shrewd, very cute, in deadliest earnest: it drives me hard--almost compels me--it is urgent, persistent: he sort of stands in the road and says: 'I won't move till you answer my question. . . . My first instinct about all that Symonds writes is violently reactionary--is strong and brutal for no, no, no.'<sup>2</sup>

Again, after Whitman showed Traubel another letter by Symonds which asked the same questions:

You will see that he harps on the Calamus poems again--always harping on 'my daughter.' I don't see why it should but his recurrence to that subject irritates me a little. . . . Symonds is still asking the same question. I suppose you might say--why don't you shut him up by answering him? There is no logical answer to that, I suppose: But I may ask in my turn: "What right has he to ask questions anyway?" W. laughed a bit. "Anyway, the question comes back at me almost every time he writes. He is courteous enough about it--that is the reason I do not resent him. I suppose the whole thing will end in an answer, some day. It always makes me a little testy to be catechized about the Leaves--I prefer to have the book answer for itself."<sup>3</sup>

Eighteen years after Symonds first asked the question, Whitman sent him an answer. Dated Camden, August 19, 1890:

Ab't the questions on Calamus pieces &c: they quite daze me. L of G. is only to be rightly construed by and within its own atmosphere and essential character--all of its pages and pieces so coming strictly under that--that the Calamus part has even allow'd the possibility of such construction as mention'd is terrible--I am fain to hope the pages themselves are not to be even mention'd for such gratuitous and quite at the time entirely undream'd & unreck'd possibility of morbid inferences--wh' are disavow'd by me & seem damnable. Then one great difference between

you and me, temperament & theory, is restraint--  
 I know that while I have a horror of ranting &  
 bawling I at certain moments let the spirit impulse,  
 (? demon) rage its utmost, its wildest, damndest--  
 (I feel to do so in my L of G. & I do so). I end  
 the matter by saying I wholly stand by L of G. as  
 it is, long as all parts & pages are construed as  
 I said by their own ensemble, spirit & atmosphere.<sup>4</sup>

Whitman's answer is unequivocal and unusually clear, but then, he had a long time to think about its formulation. Modern scholarship tends to regard this explanation as a defense, especially since he added in this same letter the so far unproved business that he is the father of six children. His plea of paternity seems to have been a decoy which he hoped would baffle and silence all further inquiry. A few early critics accepted him at his word no doubt out of unassuming trust and affection, but most recent scholarship finds him guilty of a lie meant to hide his homosexuality. The search for his children has uncovered only Civil War veterans whom he nursed and referred to as "sons," and a number of young men in his later life whom he befriended and called "comrades." Scholars as diverse as Newton Arvin, Henry Siedel Canby, Gay Wilson Allen, Malcolm Cowley, and Roger Asselineau, accept Whitman's anomaly.<sup>5</sup> However, only Malcolm Cowley maintains that Whitman was an active homosexual. The insufficient biographical data, the pervading tone of unfulfilled desire in his love poems, and the testimony of a great number of his contemporaries referring to his bodily decency lead the remaining critics to assert that his homosexuality was, more than likely, Platonic. So stands contemporary opinion on

the question of Whitman's homosexuality. We shall leave the subject for the present and return to it later in this chapter.

Another attempt to name Whitman's sex habits became also a way of purifying him of both charges of satyriasis and homosexuality. It stated that Whitman's relations with women and men were not physical at all because his own sexual make-up was not distinctly one or the other. He is considered a variation on both, an intermediate, what sex pathologists call a Uranian. Edgar Lee Masters believed this phenomenon was true for Whitman, and in his biography of Whitman quotes Edward Carpenter, De Joux, and Havelock Ellis as sources for the description of the type.

The Uranian's attachments do not involve sexual acts, but are purely emotional in character. He possesses the mind and body of a man combined with the emotions and spirit of a woman. Masters quotes from Carpenter's The Intermediate Sex:

"Such men, as said, are often muscular and well-built, and not distinguishable in exterior structure and the carriage of body from others of their own sex; but emotionally they are extremely complex, tender, sensitive, pitiful, and loving, 'full of storm and stress, of ferment and fluctuation of the heart; the logical faculty may or may not in their cases be well developed, but intuition is always strong; like women they read characters at a glance, and know without knowing how, what is passing in the minds of others; for nursing and waiting on the needs of others they have often a peculiar gift; at the bottom lies the artist nature, with the artist's sensibility and perception. Such an one is often a dreamer, of brooding, reserved habits, often a musician, or a man of culture, courted in society, which nevertheless does not understand him--though sometimes a child of the people, without any culture, but almost always with peculiar inborn refinement."6

De Joux states that they are frequently very skillful artists who have a marked tenderness for children, a love of flowers, and a strong sense of pity for the poor and the deformed. Since society and nature prohibit physical union, they are celibates, and consequently appear fresh and pure with the manners and modesty of a saint.

This type of man is seen as an advance guard of civilization which will flourish in the future, replacing such ties between men as money and law with Love. Whitman, then, is not only justified as the Poet of Love, but is memorialized as a prophet of a future race of men. Whitman's nursing the Civil War wounded, his intimate devotion to the common laborer, Peter Doyle, and his loving embrace of all mankind regardless of race, creed, or caste, are explained then as the natural manifestations of a Uranian, and Leaves of Grass takes its place as the Bible of the future.

One last attempt at defining Whitman's sexual anomaly may be mentioned. A recent article in a medical journal by Dr. Josiah C. Trent puts forth the opinion that Whitman's sex problems stem from the possibility that he was a eunuch.<sup>7</sup> Dr. Trent examined the reports of physicians attending to Whitman toward the close of his life and noticed that Whitman had never been completely undressed by the doctors. Also, John Burroughs, a long-time friend of Whitman, remarked how Whitman's body was strangely like a child's in form, in its pink color, and in its delicately textured skin--which might point to the absence of certain male hormones of the gonads.



Of course, Dr. Trent's suggestion is pure supposition which cannot ever be validated. I mention it only to show the extent of the field-day a commentator may have with Whitman when he forgets the limits of what a future reader is willing to entertain as a serious suggestion.

We see, as a result of the above brief discussion, that Whitman's sexuality has undergone a fairly thorough analysis by curious observers. They have covered the major possibilities--from excesses with women to excesses with men, to the psychological and physical inability of committing excesses with either. Which, we might justly ask, is the real Walt Whitman? Our investigation has left us with a collection of inexplicable suspicions in our minds (both for the hunter and the hunted), with a feeling that no solution has been approached, no conclusion justified. We have searched in vain, and Walt Whitman with his secret, laughs behind his knuckles. To say that he debauched women contradicts our knowledge of his pity for prostitutes, his love and respect for motherhood, his reverential attitude toward all the women who knew him and wrote of him. To say he was homosexual contradicts most of the biographical data about him and seems to depend on narrow-minded suppositions. Uranianism seems like a false category, a simplistic evaluation for a really complex phenomenon. To suggest castration seems like a grasp at floating straws.

Perhaps the trouble lies with us rather than Whitman. It is our desire to categorize which is wrong, our desire to

say that Whitman is this rather than that. We believe too strongly in mutually exclusive terms, in the impossibility of contradictions co-existing. We love precise logic too much, and distrust the oxymoronic imagination. We should perhaps, listen more seriously to Whitman when he writes,

Do I contradict myself?  
 Very well then I contradict myself,  
 (I am large, I contain multitudes.)  
 ("Song of Myself" ll. 1324-26)

Listen when he says he hates to be "catechized," and begs Symonds to read Leaves of Grass as an "ensemble," and not focus on an individual section and press too heavily for an interpretation which narrows the whole. Perhaps we must open up, free our minds of the logical law of contradiction, admit possibilities beyond our common understanding. We must listen to Whitman and unscrew the locks from our doors, unscrew our doors from their jambs.

By now, I suppose, my reader suspects that I will call Whitman bisexual. If I refuse to limit his erotic life by one sex or the other, then he must include both. But, to call Whitman bisexual, I am afraid, is to make the same mistake other commentators have, that is, to limit Whitman by his genitalia. To get at Whitman's meaning we must free our minds of the usual notion that only in the public area is located the kind of ecstatic bodily pleasure we call sexual. We must admit the possibility that the whole body is subject to erotic

pleasure, and that the whole world is a potential source of this pleasure. A psychologist might say Whitman was a pan-sexualist, his senses received erotic delight not simply from male or female but from the whole physical world. But, to see it through the eyes of a psychologist is to see it as a malfunction, an excess, a neurosis, is to declare Whitman's vision a product of psychic imbalance which could have been corrected if only he had undergone therapy. I believe his vision was not the result of a diseased mind, but of a mind heightened in perception through his special kind of mysticism which allowed him to see a condition of the human body free of compulsion and limitation, indeed, free of neurotic behavior.

A good deal of recent criticism has entertained the position that Walt Whitman was a mystic, that significant passages of his poetry contain a mystical meaning, and that "Song of Myself" is the narrative of a mystical experience. Scholars and critics of Whitman's mysticism have had basically two general directions of study open for them: one direction considers the similarities and differences in ideas between Whitman and other known mystics,<sup>8</sup> and the other considers the similarities and differences in the nature of the mystical experience--the method, style, action, or techniques of the mystical state--between Whitman and other mystics.<sup>9</sup> The first method may be broadly considered a philosophical approach to his poetry, and the second a psychological approach. We shall attempt here a new

understanding of the nature of Whitman's mysticism which shall in turn, perhaps, shed a brighter light on the meaning of his liberated mystical body. In other words, a psychological approach shall be employed to arrive at his philosophy.

Critics who have dealt with the nature of Whitman's mysticism have needed to reconcile the mystic's traditional attitude toward flesh and the material world with Whitman's attitude. Traditionally the mystic seeks flight from the material world and the realm of his senses and arrives at his special knowledge through various techniques of physical mortification. Hence arises our common image of the cross-legged mystic wrapped in a loin cloth, gaunt, pale, nearly incoherent, and contemplating a world far removed from the one invading his sense organs. Whitman, on the other hand, enjoys his sentient body thinking every function of it the grandest miracle of all, and collects and catalogues the things of the material world with great care:

In me the caresser of life wherever moving,  
backward as well as forward sluing,  
To niches aside and junior bending, not a  
person or object missing,  
Absorbing all to myself and for this song.

.....

Having pried through the strata, analyzed to a  
hair, counsel'd with doctors and calculated  
close,  
I find no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones.

.....

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy  
whatever I touch or am touch'd from,

The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than  
 prayer,  
 This head more than churches, bibles, and all  
 the creeds.

If I worship one thing more than another it  
 shall be the spread of my own body, or any  
 part of it,

. . . . .

I dote on myself, there is that lot of me and  
 all so luscious.

("Song of Myself" ll. 232-544)

James E. Miller, Jr. is an example of a critic who has confronted the meaning of flesh in Whitman's mysticism.<sup>10</sup> Using Evelyn Underhill's study, Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness,<sup>11</sup> Miller concludes that "Song of Myself" is a dramatic representation of the traditional elements of the Mystic Way--entry, awakening, purification of self, illumination, dark night of the soul, union, emergence--but that the glorification of flesh in the poem is the basic paradox which suggests to him Whitman's meaning "that it is only through the intimate fusion of the physical and spiritual, the ennobling of the physical through the spiritual that one can come to know transcendent Reality."<sup>12</sup> Miller calls such a mystical experience which glorifies the flesh "inverted."

I want to suggest that the nature of a mystical experience which relies on the flesh and glorifies it is not inverted, nor is it paradoxical in Whitman's poetry. I would like to argue that the flesh and the material world is the sine qua non of Whitman's mysticism. Using Norman O. Brown's

illuminating discussion of body mysticism and related matters in Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History<sup>13</sup> as a source for terminology, I would like to show how the "informing idea" to a good portion of Whitman's verse is body mysticism, and how the special nature of this mysticism accounts for his unique sexual attitude, his erotic delight in the things of this world.

The body mystic seeks to affirm a world of love and pleasure and to place the self in unity with such a world. The body mystic does this by seeking to transform or perfect the body, to establish within himself the modes of being and expression essential to a world of love and pleasure. An androgynous mode of being coupled with a narcissistic mode of self-expression would destroy the limitations of the body and allow a unity with the whole world of love and pleasure. Whitman, by means of his own dialectical imagination, a consciousness which seeks to circumvent the limitations of the formal logical law of contradiction, dramatizes in his poetry such a mysticism.

As Kenneth Burke has noted,<sup>14</sup> no poet ever stated more clearly the dialectics of his position than did Whitman when he wrote at the very beginning of Leaves of Grass:

One's-Self I sing, a simple separate person,  
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word  
En-Masse.

("One's-Self I Sing" ll. 1-2)

It was the special power of Whitman's imagination to be able to circumvent the law of contradiction, and to create a life and art based on the affirmation of the opposites logic maintains cannot exist simultaneously. He affirmed them and gave them dramatic unity in his poetry.

One is perhaps not disturbed by Whitman's declarations of the opposites he claims in "Song of Myself" to sing as poet:

I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet  
of the Soul,  
The pleasures of heaven are with me and the  
pains of hell are with me,

.....

I am the poet of the woman the same as the man.

.....

I am not the poet of goodness only, I do not  
decline to be the poet of wickedness also.

.....

Evil propels me and reform of evil propels me.  
(ll. 422-465)

These are bold-faced statements, and rather than dialectical identities being established, somewhat general and unclear notions of poetics are being framed. But, when Whitman writes identifying who he is in "Song of Myself," what the essence of his being is, one is faced with the impossible being affirmed --opposites joining, the not-me becoming the me:

I am of old and young, of the foolish as much  
as the wise,  
Regardless of others, ever regardful of others,

Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well  
as a man,

.....

A Yankee bound my own way ready for trade, my  
joints the limberest joints on earth and  
the sternest joints on earth,  
A Kentuckian walking the vale of the Elkhorn  
in my deerskin leggings, a Louisianan, or  
Georgian,

.....

I am a free companion,

.....

I am the hounded slave,

.....

I am the mash'd fireman,

.....

I am an old artillerist, . . . . (ll. 330-858)

It would appear D. H. Lawrence missed the force of Whitman's dialectical imagination when he wrote: "Oh, Walter, Walter, what have you done with it? What have you done with yourself? With your own individual self? For it sounds as if it had all leaked out of you, leaked into the universe."<sup>15</sup> Lawrence misunderstood Whitman's ability to leak the universe into himself by affirming the not-self in himself. Where Lawrence feared Whitman's "merge" as the loss of self, Whitman meant it to be the achievement of unity. And to the other trippers and askers who surround Whitman questioning his meaning, he writes:



Do I contradict myself?  
 Very well then I contradict myself,  
 (I am large, I contain multitudes.)  
 ("Song of Myself" ll. 1324-1326)

He replies to his dialectics with a dialectical answer: I--multitudes.

The physical manifestation in Whitman of the dialectical imagination is his sense of touch. It is by touching that Whitman becomes, by touching that the not-me enters the body of me. At the beginning of Section 27 of "Song of Myself" Whitman asks, "To be in any form, what is that?" and goes on in Section 28 to revel in his sense of touch because it allows him to assume all forms: "Is this then a touch? quivering me to a new identity." This new identity, the result of unity with something outside himself is described in terms of an orgasmic pleasure he half brought on himself by first going out to touch. The result of this pleasure of touching, of the exercise of his dialectical imagination and the consequent feeling of unity, is truth:

All truths wait in all things,  
 They neither hasten their own delivery nor  
     resist it,  
 They do not need the obstetric forceps of  
     the surgeon,  
 The insignificant is as big to me as any,  
 (What is less or more than a touch?)

Logic and sermons never convince,  
 The damp of the night drives deeper into  
     my soul.

("Song of Myself" ll. 648-654)

Through the striking image of the last line, Whitman affirms that truth, the meaning of Being, comes to him not through

logic but through the denial of logic, and its bodily manifestation in him of touch. Whitman feels then knows. The body is the brain, touching is thinking, living is knowing. Whitman ignores logic and proposes a Cartesian twist: I live therefore I know. As mentioned in Chapter I of this work, Anne Gilchrist understood this about Whitman: his body taught him all he knew about life, and by extension, what is in his poetry is his body's life.

As was mentioned above, the end of body mysticism is a freeing of the body from its limitations so it can affirm a world of love and pleasure. One such limitation of the body is the specific male or female genital organization and mode of expression of love and pleasure. By assuming an androgynous mode of being and a narcissistic mode of self-expression, the limitations of the specifically genital pleasure can be overcome for a realm of pleasure and expression covering a greater area of the body. Since the androgynous being contains within himself both sexes, he does not need to seek his opposite outside himself. He is freed from the restless search for genital union, the orgasm. He is free then to pursue endlessly the non-orgasmic pleasures of the sensitive areas of the whole body--the equivalent of foreplay. This endless foreplay is a perpetual expression of delight in and love of oneself. A condition is reached which Norman O. Brown describes as polymorphous perversity--an erotic delight in the whole body. It is important to keep in mind that the polymorphously perverse body is not the

cramped body of the single-sexed, genitally oriented individual; it is rather the body which contains all sources of pleasure for the individual, incorporates the world of love and pleasure by imaging forth in a single body the male and female in endless foreplay. I believe this is Whitman's mystical body, his "kosmos." We can see the trouble Whitman's body has given critics over the years. Such a body defies the categories they have used. They have mistakenly been searching for the partner in orgasm, when it would have been of greater help and interest to find the source of stimulation.

In the collection Children of Adam Whitman speaks most ambitiously of the polymorphously perverse body. It is interesting that he assumes the identity of Adam for this section:

As Adam early in the morning,  
Walking forth from the bower refresh'd with sleep,  
Behold me where I pass, hear my voice, approach,  
Touch me, touch the palm of your hand to my body  
as I pass,  
Be not afraid of my body.

("As Adam Early in the Morning")

In terms of another body mystic, Jacob Boehme, Adam was the perfect man. Adam was at play in Paradise; he was androgynous (Eve was taken from his side); he was in a state of primal narcissism (he and his world were one). The fall of Adam occurred when he sought a self-identity separate from Nature, and play became serious work. By assuming the mask of the pre-Lapsarian Adam, Whitman opts for his perfect body.

R. W. B. Lewis has noted Whitman's stance as the new Adam writing a Yankee Genesis in the new Garden of America.<sup>16</sup> I would like to focus some attention on the polymorphous perversity of this new Adam.

To understand the polymorphous perversity in Children of Adam we must first begin by seeking an understanding of Whitman's use of the term "sex" as he gives it in "A Woman Waits for Me":

Sex contains all, bodies, souls,  
Meanings, proofs, purities, delicacies,  
    results, promulgations,  
Songs, commands, health, pride, the  
    maternal mystery, the seminal milk,  
All hopes, benefactions, bestowals, all  
    the passions, loves, beauties, delights  
    of the earth,  
All the governments, judges, gods, follow'd  
    persons of the earth,  
These are contain'd in sex as parts of itself  
    and justifications of itself. (ll. 3-8)

In Whitman's straightforward manner, it is clear that sex for him is not simply a genital organization of the body. It contains all human identity and energy, as well as all human creations. It bears, in fact, a striking similarity to Freud's notion of Eros, the pleasure principle at the root of all of man's activity. For Whitman, as for Freud, sex is the driving force of man's life, that which gives it form and content. As Whitman expresses it elsewhere:

Urge and urge and urge,  
Always the procreant urge of the world.  
  
Out of the dimness opposite equals advance,  
    always substance and increase, always sex,

Always a knit of identity, always distinction,  
 always a breed of life.  
 ("Song of Myself" ll. 43-46)

Whitman's "program" in Children of Adam consists in delineating every feature of this power, sex, and in trying to free it from anything that would hinder its expression. Specifically, then, Whitman identifies the sexual body with the soul and human history, presents an evocative description of the parts and functions of the total human body of pleasure, and gives an ecstatic pronouncement for a free and unhindered indulgence in the body's pleasure.

In Section 9 of "I Sing the Body Electric," Whitman begins by saying,

O my body! . . .  
 I believe the likes of you are to stand  
 or fall with the likes of the soul,  
 (and that they are the soul.)

and concludes the Section with the exclamation

O I say these are not the parts and poems  
 of the body only, but of the soul,  
 O I say now these are the soul!  
 (ll. 129-164)

We recall that in "Song of Myself" the soul in Section 5 was "the other I am" with which the poet had mystical intercourse and became one. Here, the soul and the body are affirmed as one.

In such lines as the following, Whitman presents the unity of all flesh throughout the history of mankind:

This is not only one man, this the father of  
 those who shall be fathers in their turns,  
 In him the start of populous and rich republics,  
 Of him countless immortal lives with countless  
 embodiments and enjoyments.

. . . . .

A woman's body at auction,  
 She too is not only herself, she is the teeming  
 mother of mothers,  
 She is the bearer of them that shall grow and be  
 mates to the mothers.

Have you ever loved the body of a woman?  
 Have you ever loved the body of a man?  
 Do you not see that these are exactly the same  
 to all in all nations and times all over the  
 earth?

("I Sing the Body Electric" ll. 113-123)

Each individual is the result of bodies of the past who bore him to the present moment, and this individual contains the seeds of future flesh. In a sense, then, at any given moment all of Time--past, present, future--is capsulized under the skin of every person. In terms of what we have said before in this study, organic time is manifested in the body. The flesh is a living document of time's promised continuity. This notion finds expression in Whitman's description of himself as "an acme of things accomplish'd . . . an encloser of things to be" ("Song of Myself" l. 1148). It also harkens back to Whitman's description of the immense preparations for his birth in Section 44 of "Song of Myself," quoted in Chapter II of this work.

Throughout Children of Adam there are numerous catalogues ranging from the lyrical to the clinical describing parts and functions of the body. There is a vivid, sensuous,

dramatic description of the love act:

Ebb stung by the flow and flow stung by the ebb,  
 love-flesh swelling and deliciously aching,  
 Limitless limpid jets of love hot and enormous,  
 quivering jelly of love, white-blow and  
 delirious juice,  
 Bridegroom night of love working surely and  
 softly in the prostrate dawn.  
 Undulating into the willing and yielding day,  
 Lost in the cleave of the clasping and sweet-  
 flesh'd day.  
 ("I Sing the Body Electric" ll. 59-63)

And there is the tender, delicate, impressionistic description of a night of love:

I heard you solemn-sweet pipes of the organ as  
 last Sunday morn I pass'd the church,  
 Winds of autumn, as I walk'd the woods at dusk  
 I heard your long-stretch'd sighs up above  
 so mournful,  
 I heard the perfect Italian tenor singing at  
 the opera, I heard the soprano in the midst  
 of the quartet singing;  
 Heart of my love! you too I heard murmuring  
 low through one of the wrists around my head,  
 Heard the pulse of you when all was still ringing  
 little bells last night under my ear.  
 ("I Heard You Solemn-Sweet Pipes")

These two lyrical passages stand in sharp contrast to the long mechanical list of the parts of the body in Section 9 of "I Sing the Body Electric." Whitman begins with "Head, neck, hair, ears, drop and tympan of the ears," and moves down the entire anatomy of the body to "Ankles, instep, foot-ball, toes, toe-joints, the heel." He then continues with a fortunately incomplete list of the internal organs and functions, mentions a few female organs, lists a number of general movements and positions of the body, and closes with the exclamation "The exquisite realization of health."

Whitman's joyful reverence for the pleasure and meaning of sex is clear in the lyrical passages above, but in the Sears-type catalogues just mentioned such a reverence is not easily recognized. I believe this difference can be accounted for in one of two ways. Whitman reverted to the mechanical catalogue either because his vision so possessed and excited him that he put aside concern for its expression; or he had grown furious at the shyness and repression which existed in his society concerning the subject of the body that he wanted to reverse the trend by shockingly proclaiming in unadorned language the complete naked body. This second alternative seems to be the case judging from Whitman's avowed intention as expressed in his reply to Emerson's letter published in the 1856 edition to celebrate the body in opposition to those who would repress it:

I say that the body of a man or woman, the main matter, is so far quite unexpressed in poems; but that the body is to be expressed, and sex is. Of bards for These States, if it come to a question it is whether they shall celebrate in poems the eternal decency of the amateness of Nature, the motherhood of all, or whether they shall be the bards of the fashionable delusion of the inherent nastiness of sex, and of the feeble and querulous modesty of deprivation. This is important in poems, because the whole of the other expressions of a nation are but flanges out of its great poems. To me, henceforth, that theory of any thing, no matter what, stagnates in its vitals, cowardly and rotten, while it cannot publicly name, with specific words, the things on which all existence, all souls, all realizations, all decency, all health, all that is worth being here for, all of woman and of man, all beauty, all purity, all sweetness, all friendship, all strength, all life, all immortality depend. The courageous soul, for a year or two to come, may be proved by faith in sex, and by disdaining concessions.<sup>17</sup>



Finally, Children of Adam is a gospel of erotic emancipation, a call for the abolition of repression and a return to the pristine state of natural Adamic innocence:

(I love you, O you entirely possess me,  
O that you and I escape from the rest and go  
utterly off, free and lawless,  
Two hawks in the air, two fishes swimming in  
the sea not more lawless than we;)

. . . . .

(O I willingly stake all for you,  
O let me be lost if it must be so!  
O you and I! what is it to us what the rest do  
or think:  
What is all else to us? only that we enjoy each  
other and exhaust each other if it must be so;)  
("From Pent-Up Aching Rivers" ll. 28-35)

In such lines as the above, as well as in the poems "One Hour to Madness and Joy," "We Two, How Long We Were Fool'd," and "Native Moments," Whitman calls for a national resurrection of the life of the body through his own personal portrayal of Adamic polymorphous perversity. In "Song of Myself," also, Whitman as the new Adam transformed repression into freedom and proclaimed the joys of the body:

Through me forbidden voices,  
Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil'd and I  
remove the veil,  
Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur'd.

I do not press my fingers across my mouth,  
I keep as delicate around the bowels as around  
the head and heart,  
Copulation is no more rank to me than death is.

I believe in the flesh and the appetites,  
Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each  
part and tag of me is a miracle.

(ll. 516-523)

In summation it should be seen that in the Children of Adam Whitman gives explicit enunciation to the form and substance of the resurrected body of which he had a vision in "Song of Myself." The body mysticism of "Song of Myself" is translated into a social program in Children of Adam by expanding his definition of the sexual body to include identifications with the soul and with all human activity. Whitman's pleasure principle is seen to have a striking resemblance to Freud's Eros, and one may conclude that Whitman's call for the life of the body through a return to an Adamic existence parallels closely the psychoanalytic cure for neurosis in a return to childhood's unrepressed Eros.

And what of the Calamus poems? Surely they contain an erotic exuberance, a sexual delight in virility, the parts and presence of men. I believe the Calamus poems are the reverse side of Whitman's coin, the natural and necessary by-product of polymorphous perversity. Genital limitation, we remember, has been surpassed, and therefore such a category as homosexuality which previous critics have tried to press on the Calamus Whitman, is really inapplicable. Whitman's love for men is not expressed in sodomy, but in a frank and free acceptance and appreciation of their bodies as human.

Another advocate of body life, D. H. Lawrence, shares with Whitman the same erotic delight in the male form as the female form, and a look at his expression of it may help to

clarify what Whitman is saying in Calamus.

In the middle of his great novel, Women in Love, there is a chapter entitled "Gladitorial" in which the two central male characters, Gerald and Birkin, wrestle naked in an effort to relieve depression and boredom. The result of the combat is emotionally rejuvenating for both. The first thing the reader notices is the sexual imagery Lawrence uses in describing the match:

They stopped, they discussed methods, they practised grips and throws, they became accustomed to each other, to each other's rhythm, they got a kind of mutual physical understanding. And then again they had a real struggle. They seemed to drive their white flesh deeper and deeper against each other, as if they would break into a oneness. Birkin had a great subtle energy, that would press upon the other man with an uncanny force, weigh him like a spell put upon him. Then it would pass, and Gerald would heave free, with white, heaving, dazzling movements.

So the two men entwined and wrestled with each other, working nearer and nearer. Both were white and clear, but Gerald flushed smart red where he was touched, and Birkin remained white and tense. He seemed to penetrate into Gerald's more solid, more diffuse bulk, to interfuse his body through the body of the other, as if to bring it subtly into subjection, always seizing with some rapid necromantic foreknowledge every motion of the other flesh, converting and counteracting it, playing upon the limbs and trunk of Gerald like some hard wind. It was as if Birkin's whole physical intelligence interpenetrated into Gerald's body, as if his fine, sublimated energy entered into the flesh of the fuller man, like some potency, casting a fine net, a prison, through the muscles into the very depths of Gerald's physical being.

So they wrestled swiftly, rapturously, intent and mindless at last, two essential white figures working into a tighter closer oneness of struggle, with a strange, octopus-like knotting and flashing of limbs in the subdued light of the room; a tense white knot of flesh gripped in silence between the

walls of old brown books. Now and again came a sharp gasp of breath, or a sound like a sigh, then the rapid thudding of movement on the thickly-carpeted floor, then the strange sound of flesh escaping under flesh. Often, in the white interlaced knot of violent living being that swayed silently, there was no head to be seen, only the swift, tight limbs, the solid white backs, the physical junction of two bodies clinched into oneness. Then would appear the gleaming, ruffled head of Gerald, as the struggle changed, then for a moment the dun-coloured, shadow-like head of the other man would lift up from the conflict, the eyes wide and dreadful and sightless.<sup>19</sup>

There is nothing about this passage one would call perverted, yet the comparison between wrestling and intercourse is deliberately maintained. The men are intimate friends and they struggle with mutual delight in one another.

When the match is finished, the men faint from exhaustion and Birkin lays prone on top of Gerald. Even the coming on of unconsciousness is described with sexual reference:

At length Gerald lay back inert on the carpet, his breast rising in great slow panting, whilst Birkin kneeled over him, almost unconscious. Birkin was much more exhausted. He caught little, short breaths, he could scarcely breathe any more. The earth seemed to tilt and sway, and a complete darkness was coming over his mind. He did not know what happened. He slid forward quite unconscious, over Gerald, and Gerald did not notice. Then he was half-conscious again, aware only of the strange tilting and sliding of the world. The world was sliding, everything was sliding off into the darkness. And he was sliding, endlessly, endlessly away.

(pp. 308-309)

When they awaken and sit up, Lawrence presents a sensitive cameo portrait of the two friends warmly holding hands:

He recovered himself, and sat up. But he was still vague and unestablished. He put out his hand to

steady himself. It touched the hand of Gerald, that was lying on the floor. And Gerald's hand closed warm and sudden over Birkin's, they remained exhausted and breathless, the one hand clasped closely over the other. It was Birkin whose hand, in swift response, had closed in a strong, warm clasp over the hand of the other. Gerald's clasp had been sudden and momentaneous.

(p. 310)

Their conscious reflection to what has happened indicates Lawrence's reverence for the physical intimacy of men who love one another:

"One ought to wrestle and strive and be physically close. It makes one sane."

"You do think so?"

"I do. Don't you?"

"Yes," said Gerald.

There were long spaces of silence between their words. The wrestling had some deep meaning to them--an unfinished meaning.

"We are mentally, spiritually intimate, therefore we should be more or less physically intimate too--it is more whole."

"Certainly it is," said Gerald. Then he laughed pleasantly, adding: "It's rather wonderful to me." He stretched out his arms handsomely.

"Yes," said Birkin. "I don't know why one should have to justify oneself."

"No."

"The two men began to dress.

"I think also that you are beautiful," said Birkin to Gerald, "and that is enjoyable too. One should enjoy what is given."

"You think I am beautiful--how do you mean, physically?" asked Gerald, his eyes glistening.

"Yes. You have a northern kind of beauty, like light refracted from snow--and a beautiful, plastic form. Yes, that is there to enjoy as well. We should enjoy everything."

Gerald laughed in his throat, and said:

"That's certainly one way of looking at it. I can say this much, I feel better. It has certainly helped me. Is this the Bruderschaft you wanted?"

"Perhaps. Do you think this pledges anything?"

"I don't know," laughed Gerald.

"At any rate, one feels freer and more open now--and that is what we want."

"Certainly," said Gerald.

(pp. 310-311)

On one level, being physical and intimate has been therapeutic for them. It has relieved their ennui and renewed interest in their surroundings. But, a deeper, more significant, universal level to their intimacy is continually suggested by Lawrence. To love completely requires an appreciation for that one thing which keeps mankind apart--the body. To love only with the mind is easy, not enough, and not completely generous or honest. If we can love one another's bodies as well, "enjoy everything" as Birkin (Lawrence)(Whitman) says, then we can truly feel "freer and more open" with each other. The word, then, love, is made flesh, made real. We might describe the highest love between people as religious, since the ultimate act of religious faith and love is the consumption of the god. The similarity between secular love and religious love lies in this desire for more than intellectual comfort, lies in this desire for

complete physical union. And I wonder if this might partly be what Whitman had in mind when he said that the purpose of Leaves of Grass was religious. I wonder if he didn't mean that his message was simply to see in each other the god and then to love one another as willingly and as completely.

We see, then, the necessity for obeying Whitman's command to take Leaves of Grass as an organic whole, to see each section in relation to all sections. As no one would call Lawrence a homosexual because of a single passage, likewise, Whitman should be spared the accusation.

There has been much written on the spiritual crisis Whitman suffered between 1856 and 1860, and about the crisis finding its fullest expression in the Calamus poems. Clark Griffith believes that by 1860 Whitman felt his homosexuality to be a total repudiation of his affirmative philosophy of 1855-56, which had found its truest expression in the procreative urge, and that it wasn't until after the Civil War and his experience as the wound dresser that he came to see a way of transforming his homosexuality into the meaning of democracy.<sup>18</sup> Such criticism sees a new Whitman emerging toward the end of his life, a Whitman who seeks the politics of democracy as a balm for the basic conflict in his own psyche between his homosexual desires and his heterosexual ideals. However, in the light of body mysticism, I believe this theory dims and a sense of unity may be perceived from an overall view of his work.

If Whitman, the body mystic, sought to affirm a world

of love and pleasure, and sought to perfect the human body to receive erotic delight in its entirety, then, perhaps it is the search for erotic delight which gives unity to his work: "Song of Myself" on the eroticism of the self, Children of Adam on the eroticism between man and woman, Calamus on the eroticism between men, and the democracy poems on the perfect society for the pursuit of erotic delight. Furthermore, as Whitman intellectualizes democracy in Democratic Vistas its elements begin to sound like the politics of eroticism: Personalism ("Song of Myself"), a race of perfect men and women (Children of Adam), and brotherhood (Calamus). This desire of Whitman's to live all the lines of the body was so strong, then, that it not only shaped a good deal of his verse, but it may have framed his political beliefs as well.



## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Harold Blodgett, Walt Whitman in England (Ithaca, New York, 1934), p. 63.

<sup>2</sup>Horace Traubel, With Walt Whitman in Camden, Vol. 1 (Boston, 1906), pp. 73-76.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 202-03.

<sup>4</sup>Walt Whitman: The Correspondence, Vol. V: 1890-1892, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York, 1969), pp. 72-73.

<sup>5</sup>Newton Arvin, Whitman (New York, 1938); Henry S. Canby, Walt Whitman, An American (Boston, 1943); Gay Wilson Allen, Walt Whitman Handbook (Chicago, 1946), and Solitary Singer (New York, 1955); Malcolm Cowley, "Walt Whitman: The Secret," New Republic, CXIV (April 8, 1946), 481-84; Roger Asselineau, The Evolution of Walt Whitman: The Creation of a Book (Cambridge, Mass., 1962).

<sup>6</sup>Quoted in Edgar Lee Masters, Whitman (New York, 1937), p. 142.

<sup>7</sup>"Walt Whitman - A Case History," Surgery, Gynecology and Obstetrics, LXXXVII (July 1948), 113-21.

<sup>8</sup>For example see V. K. Chari, Whitman in the Light of Vedantic Mysticism: An Interpretation (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1964), and Malcolm Cowley, "Introduction," Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass: The First (1855) Edition (New York, 1959).

<sup>9</sup>For example see Roger Asselineau, The Evolution of Walt Whitman: The Creation of a Personality (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), and James E. Miller, Jr. "'Song of Myself' an Inverted Mystical Experience," in Whitman's "Song of Myself" --Origin, Growth, Meaning, ed. James E. Miller, Jr. (New York, and Toronto, 1964), pp. 134-56.

<sup>10</sup>Miller, loc. cit.

<sup>11</sup>(London, 1926).

<sup>12</sup>Miller, p. 137.

<sup>13</sup>(New York, 1959). Most readers of this book find it extremely valuable as a thoroughgoing interpretation of Freud, and an insightful discussion on contemporary behavior. We tend to agree with Brown in his general observations of what's wrong with us and what we need to correct the wrong: more eros and less strife. Nevertheless, his concluding comments on the way out for mankind have been a source of confusion which leaves one doubtful as to the ultimate worth of the book. On one hand, Brown calls for the resurrected body through mysticism, poetry, and psychoanalysis (which is the side of Brown's argument used in this study). On the other hand, Brown implies that the family must raise children in a new way--a way which will free them from sublimation and repression. In the first case the body is re-discovered and liberated, in the second the body is liberated from infancy. It is this second side of Brown's argument which leaves most readers disturbed. What are the new techniques of child-rearing which will free the child from neurosis? Brown gives

no specific clues, and his only implications most of us would find objectionable. It would seem that an active incestuous relationship between parent and child would ultimately free the child from repression. Brown, of course, never states this, and I doubt if he would advise it, but its logic is there in terms of the whole book, and is hence a source of confusion.

<sup>14</sup>"Policy Made Personal: Whitman's Verse and Prose--Salient Traits," Leaves of Grass: One Hundred Years Later, ed. Milton Hindus (Stanford and London, 1955), pp. 74-108.

<sup>15</sup>"Whitman," Whitman: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Roy Harven Pearce (Englewood Cliffs, 1962), p. 13.

<sup>16</sup>The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century (Chicago, 1955).

<sup>17</sup>Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York, 1965), pp. 737-38.

<sup>18</sup>"Sex and Death: The Significance of Whitman's Calamus Themes," PQ, XXXIX (January 1960), 18-38.

<sup>19</sup>D. H. Lawrence, Women in Love (New York, 1922), pp. 307-308.

## CHAPTER IV

### FUNCTIONING FORM

We are concerned in this work with Whitman's vision of the liberated body. Thus far we have examined its manifestation primarily in the subject matter of his poems. Taking our cue from one of the earliest critics of Whitman, Anne Gilchrist, we studied the two important themes of time and sex in Whitman's poetry and have seen, I hope, that in liberating the one from death and the other from sin, he liberated the body from the two forces which would deny its life. Without the fear of death, and with the hope of eternity, one is able to live each moment to its fullest with the assurance that while it will not last forever, it will surely be replaced by another equally as good. Without the fear of guilt, and with the assurance that what is human is good, one is able to affirm the pleasures of the body and accept them as part of our natural inheritance. If in examining these two themes, we have considered the content of Whitman's vision, what remains for us to consider is the form in which this vision finds expression. In the experience of poetry, of course, content and form are inseparable, but for the sake of study, a division is useful. We may formulate

our new question thus: How does Whitman through his chosen medium of poetry convince us of the truth of his vision?

Morse Peckham in Man's Rage for Chaos states that every work of art sets up certain expectations in the perceiver, and then proceeds to frustrate those expectations. To the extent that the perceiver experiences this discontinuity, to that extent does the work of art exhibit "non-functional stylistic dynamism" and satisfy man's need for an insulated rehearsal of disorientation.<sup>1</sup> I believe it would be extremely useful to open a discussion of the form of Leaves of Grass by examining the expectations and the consequent frustrations, and the specific kind of disorientation the reader experiences. I shall use a facsimile of the 1855 edition<sup>2</sup> since most critics agree that in it Whitman is most consciously asserting his uniqueness.

The 1855 reader skims through the book. The book is being sold as poetry and the reader expects to see words arranged on the page to look the way poetry looks. Whitman frustrates this expectation. Instead of lines with a traditionally regularized length, Whitman offers lines of varying lengths, and frequently offers lines so long that they run down the page from two to four times farther than usual poetry. Whitman also frustrates the reader's attempt to find what has always been part of poetry's baggage--rhyme and meter. Some lines do rhyme, but they are few and far between, and most of those that do rhyme seem the result of coincidence or

are in fact deliberate repetitions of the same word. While it is possible to place stress marks over accented syllables, the reader is frustrated in his attempt to find a significant pattern which applies to any number of consecutive lines. Punctuation is another source of frustration in the 1855 edition. Whitman uses the comma and period, but he also uses with sometimes baffling results, the dash, and four periods resembling an extended ellipsis. The dash, which has usually indicated an interruption or insertion, indicates here an extension of thought or expansion of idea. Ellipses usually indicated that some words were omitted, but here indicate, so it seems, a breath pause slightly shorter than a comma. Stanza divisions and refrains are also conspicuously absent. Titles, too, are missing, except for the repeated title of Leaves of Grass at the top of each page and at the beginning of the first six poems.

After the reader gets over these initial visual shocks or frustrations and begins a close reading of the book, other more serious frustrations lie in waiting. G. W. Allen and C. T. Davis have noted a significant aspect of mid-nineteenth century literary expectations: "In the mid-nineteenth century all literary compositions that had any standing as literature were constructed on the order of Aristotelean logic: beginning, middle, and end, or, in narration, time sequence. Language itself, in fact, is regulated by the laws of syntax, which are but conventions of time and logic. All actions are fitted into the clearly defined categories of 'tense.' As a

consequence, for centuries time-logic governed the literary forms."<sup>3</sup> The reader quickly learns that Whitman has abandoned the Aristotelean three-part form in favor of a form that doesn't seem to move in any single direction. The reader cannot pick out the beginning, middle, or end, and feels, in fact, that he might be justified in beginning wherever he happens to open the book, and ending wherever he pleases. Perhaps, too, the reader feels that rearranging the lines in any order is justifiable. The revelation of information in the book does not seem sequential. To read any number of lines with sense, it is not necessary to have read any number of specific lines before. Instead of a logical, sequential informational matrix, the poet offers a matrix that is alogical and consists of elements which are equal yet independent and meant to be accumulative rather than sequential. Whitman thereby frustrates the reader's expectations of a conscious literary form, a form which is really a syllogism in disguise.

Whitman further frustrates the reader's expectations of time-logic, as we noted in Chapter II of this work, through devices which sustain the poetry in the present tense. Relying on the study of John Lynen, we noted Whitman's devices which conceal the forward thrust of his sentences: the use of the present tense, participles, and parallelism; the inversion of normal word order; the smothering of the grammatically important under the subordinate; the confusing of tenses; and the confounding of participle with gerund and

noun with verb.

In the terms of Morse Peckham, the reader of Leaves of Grass 1855, experiences disorientation, and his reaction to it is analogous to problem-solving although the art perceiver "is not interested in solving a problem, only in experiencing as affect the perception of a disparity or discontinuity."<sup>4</sup> With all of Whitman's rule-breaking, the reader is left in a condition which demands some movement. Either you reject his violations as insane (John Greenleaf Whittier threw Leaves of Grass into the fire), or you accept them for their freshness and decide as Emerson did, to strike your tasks and pay the rebel a visit. In the former reaction you deny the artistic nature of the work, and in the latter you admit its possibility and search for its beauty. In the former you deny existence, and in the latter you seek involvement. And in this lies the formal magic of Whitman's vision, the happy marriage of content with form. If you're willing to admit the form, then you must admit the content, and vice versa. The liberated form of the poetry requires personal participation in the same way that the vision of the liberated body demands acceptance. In freeing the line Whitman frees the body. Logic and time were denied in the verse in the same way that they were denied for the body. The poet asks you to disorient yourself with respect to generally accepted notions of verse, in the same way that he disorients you with respect to accepted limitations of the body. If you take his hand in poetry, then you take his hand: "Stop this



day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems" ("Song of Myself" l. 33).

Thus far we have been considering the degree of poetic discontinuity to be found in Leaves of Grass in rather broad, general terms of mid-nineteenth century reader expectation. It is now possible for us to give a specific example of Whitman's stylistic innovation. Consider the following four pieces which were published in 1854:

Welcome his rough grip!  
 Welcome, the fleet horse with flying feet, and  
     arching throat, neck-laced with merry bells;  
 Welcome, bright eyes, and rosy cheeks, and  
     furred robes, and the fun-provoking sleigh-  
     ride;  
 Welcome, the swift skater who skims, bird-like,  
     the silvery pond;  
 Welcome, Old Santa Claus with his horn of plenty;  
 Welcome, the "Happy New-Year," with her many-  
     voiced echoes, and gay old Thanksgiving with  
     his groaning table, old friends and new babies;  
 Welcome, for the bright fireside, the closed  
     curtains, the dear, unbroken homecircle, the  
     light heart, the merry jest, the beaming smile,  
     the soft "good-night," the downy bed, and rosy  
     slumbers.

The bride stands waiting at the altar . . . . the  
     corpse lies waiting for burial.  
 Love vainly implores of Death a reprieve . . . .  
     Despair vainly invokes his coming.  
 The starving wretch, who purloins a crust,  
     trembles in the hall of justice . . . .  
     liveried sin, unpunished, riots in high places.  
 Brothers, clad "in purple and fine linen, fare  
     sumptuously every day" . . . . Sisters, in  
     linsey-woolsey, toil in garrets and shrink,  
     trembling, from insults that no fraternal arm  
     avenges.  
 The village Squire sows, reaps and garners golden  
     harvests . . . . the Parish Clergyman signs,  
     as his casting vote cuts down his already meager  
     salary.

The unpaid sempstress be-gems with tears the  
 fairy festal robe . . . . proud beauty  
 floats in it through the ball-room, like a  
 thing of air.

'Tis Sunday in the city.  
 The sun glares murkily down, through the smoky  
 and stenchladen atmosphere, upon the dirty  
 pavements;  
 Newsboys, with clamorous cries, are vending  
 their wares;  
 Milkmen rattle over the pavements and startle  
 drowsy sleepers by their shrill whoopings;  
 Housemaids are polishing door knobs, washing  
 sidewalks, and receiving suspicious looking  
 baskets and parcels from contiguous groceries  
 and bakeshops.

The sun rolls on his course . . . purifying the  
 air and benignly smiling upon all the  
 dwellers in the city, as though he would  
 gently win them from unholy purposes to  
 heavenly meditations and pursuits.

Only a child!  
 Oh, had you ever been a mother,  
 Had you nightly pillowed that little golden head,  
 Had you slept the sweeter for that little velvet  
 hand upon your breast,  
 Had you waited for the first intelligent glance  
 from those blue eyes,  
 Had you watched its cradle slumbers, tracing the  
 features of him who stole your girlish heart  
 away,  
 Had you wept a widow's tears over the unconscious  
 head,  
 Had your desolate, timid heart gained courage  
 from that little piping voice, to wrestle with  
 the jostling crowd for daily bread.  
 Had its loving smiles and prattling words been  
 sweet recompense for such sad exposure,  
 Had the lonely future been brightened by the hope  
 of that young arm to lean upon, that bright eye  
 for your guiding star,  
 Had you never framed a plan, or known a hope or  
 fear, of which that child was not a part . . . .

It seems to me that these pieces look and sound very  
 much like Whitman's poetry. Witness several of Whitman's

famous devices: the irregular line, lack of fixed rhyme or meter, repetition, parallelism, fragmentation, cataloguing, reluctance to use the copulative verb, and continued use of the present tense. Besides these technical devices, certain other characteristics of typical Whitman verse may be noticed. There is a depiction of the varied scenes of city-life, the expression of joy in nature, the characteristic expression of sympathy for all humanity, and the special attention for the tender child-mother relationship. There are differences, of course. The lines are not as rhythmical as Whitman's. They are filled with trite, easy phraseology and poetic diction. The attitude behind them is either blatantly sentimental or vaguely reformist. The images are not as precisely drawn as Whitman's, and the attempt at cataloguing is half-hearted. The love of humanity is limited to the love of good people or to unfortunate or pathetic people.

But the greatest difference between these "poems" and Whitman's, is that they were not printed in 1854 the way I show them here. They are actually selections from prose sketches and prose stories found in Fanny Fern's Fern Leaves from Fanny's Port-Folio<sup>5</sup>. In the first and third pieces I moved each independent clause to the margin, capitalized the first word, and indented whatever ran longer than one line. Also, in the third piece I separated Fanny Fern's second and third paragraphs with a double space. In the second piece I replaced all the semi-colons with Whitman's ellipses, and where Fanny Fern had made short paragraphs out of each line,

I reversed the paragraph form to match Whitman's. In the fourth piece I again moved each independent clause to the margin, capitalized the first word, and indented the remainder of the line, but I also replaced all of Fanny Fern's dashes with commas. My intention, of course, was deception. Forgive me, but I wanted you to think for a moment that Whitmanesque verse was being published before 1855 in America. I hope my experiment shows that some prose of this book bears a similarity to Whitman's verse.

A number of scholars have already noticed several other similarities which exist between Fern Leaves and Leaves of Grass. But the similarities noticed have been limited to external or physical details. For instance, both books bear a similarity in title, and both were bound in cloth covers that have impressed floral designs. Frances Winwar notes that Fern Leaves sold over 80,000 copies soon after publication, and that its success caused the overnight fame and fortune of Fanny Fern. She suggests that perhaps Whitman imitated these externals in the hope that he and his book would experience similar rewards. I suppose one could make a case for such an interpretation if one keeps in mind the fact that Whitman, the journalist, was keenly aware of what the public would buy. It also fits in with his widely known feats of self-publicizing in the form of laudatory book reviews of Leaves of Grass which he himself wrote and arranged to have published. Trying to promote his book in a disguise that was already acceptable and popular would be simply more evidence to

confirm what we already know about him.

But, in terms of what we've been trying to do here, another use of these similarities is made available. The similarities in title, covers, and as I have shown in line, become a specific source for observing Whitman's stylistic uniqueness, his frustration of reader expectation, his high level of art. The expectations created by the popular book, Fern Leaves, are used by Whitman to create a radical and innovative poetic experience. The reader picks up the innocent book because the familiar title and familiar cover promise more of what the reader has been used to. The line, perhaps, seems odd at first, but upon closer inspection, it too has a familiar ring. Then he reads along and experiences, soon enough, great surges of discontinuity. It is not the sentimental banality of the hack Fanny Fern, but a truly radical utterance, a barbaric yawp spoken with original unchecked energy which violates polite, accepted notions of poetic experience, of body and form. Whitman gives you what you think you're getting, tantalizes you with familiar insularity, then disorients you by taking away all reason for feeling that you've been down this road before. He challenges you to take his unfamiliar hand, to accept the invitation to travel the open road with one who wants to be your lover. Reading the poem is accepting his invitation, taking the form is taking the message.

If Whitman disorients the reader, he also re-orient's

the reader. He does this by supplying the reader with a new "I" and a new "eye" and a new "aye." What the I-poet sees and affirms, the reader does also. What is true for one becomes true for the other. I equals you, or in Whitman's own words:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume  
For every atom belonging to me as good  
belongs to you.  
("Song of Myself" ll. 1-3)

We may observe how Whitman shapes his verse and his reader's re-orientation through a three-part analysis of the voice of the I-poet.

# 1

Whitman's first avowed intention in Leaves of Grass was to express as completely as he could his own individual personality. As he wrote of his experiment in 1889 in "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads:"

After continued personal ambition and effort, as a young fellow, . . . I found myself remaining possess'd, . . . with a special desire . . . to articulate and faithfully express in literary or poetic form, and uncompromisingly, my own physical, emotional, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic Personality, in the midst of, and tallying, the momentous spirit and facts of its immediate days, and of current America--and to exploit that Personality, identified with place and date, in a far more candid and comprehensive sense than any hitherto poem or book. . . . "Leaves of Grass" indeed (I cannot too often reiterate) has mainly been the outcropping of my own emotional and other personal nature, an attempt, from first to last, to put a Person,

a human being (myself, in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, in America,) freely, fully and truly on record.<sup>7</sup>

We may observe several distinct efforts on Whitman's part to confirm the reader of his intention to identify himself with his book. In the 1855 edition his picture opposite the title page was a more intimate and revealing signature than his plain typed name would have been below the title. In Section 24 of "Song of Myself," Whitman summarizes the characteristics of the person he has been describing in the poem, and leaves no doubt that it is not a poet's fictive persona, but is the poet himself:

Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,  
Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking  
and breeding,  
No sentimentalist, no stander above men and  
women or apart from them,  
No more modest than immodest.

(ll. 497-500)

Again, in "Salut Au Monde." the poet names himself as the all-perceiving and greetings-giving visionary. He asks,

What widens within you Walt Whitman?

. . . . .

What do you hear Walt Whitman?

. . . . .

What do you see Walt Whitman?

(ll. 5-41)

and answers with catalogues of his own visions. These references to his own identity make it clear that he meant the "I"

voice in the poems to be the sound of his own voice. His final comment on the subject is the logical, fantastical conclusion,

Camerado, this is no book,  
Who touches this touches a man, . . .  
("So Long!" ll. 53-54)

We should add, however, that the "I" of the poet and the "I" of the verse were not so simply one, and were born of need as well as of intention. As Roger Asselineau convincingly points out in his detailed biography of the poet<sup>8</sup>, Whitman's revelations about himself were always slightly premature. He wrote not about the man he was, but about the man he willed himself to be. He was creating a personality at the same time he was creating a book. His life imitated his art. For instance, in the 1855 edition Whitman passed himself off as one of the roughs, an uneducated carpenter, which was a newly created role for him, since most of his previous working days were spent as a journalist--a fact he completely ignores. Asselineau states further that "each new edition marked a victory and was the resolution of a spiritual crisis,"<sup>9</sup> arguing that Whitman created in the extended poetic portrait of himself those qualities he needed in himself to see the crisis through. In this sense, art was therapeutic for Whitman and helped him maintain his equilibrium in spite of emotional and psychic upheavals. We might say, then, that the verse of the poet was the voice of a mind re-orienting itself through re-creation.



Whitman has said that as a young poet struggling for a method of expression, he was simmering, simmering, simmering, and that his exposure to Emerson brought him to a boil. No doubt part of what Emerson did for Whitman was to give him the confidence he needed in his own powers and perceptions. If Whitman seems to walk out of the pages of Emerson's essay, "The Poet," he finds in "Self-Reliance" a defense for his mode of genius: "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men--that is genius."<sup>10</sup> It was not the egoism of Whitman, but his genius to realize that in putting himself on paper, honestly and completely, he was putting the minds and hearts of all men on paper. His awareness of this prompted him to declare he had written a book about the identity of Everyman: "Then I meant Leaves of Grass, as published, to be the Poem of Identity, (of Yours, whoever you are, now reading these lines) . . . . . For genius must realize that, precious as it may be, there is something far more precious, namely, simple Identity, One's-self . . . . . To sing the Song of that divine law of Identity, and of Yourself, consistently with the Divine Law of the Universal, is a main intention of those Leaves."<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, the I-voice of the poems remains the poet's voice, but he becomes a spokesman for all men--for you whoever you are--a representative man. Those qualities and opinions he attributes to himself are not meant to be unique

to him; they are merely the attributes common to everyone:

All I mark as my own you shall offset it  
     with your own,  
 Else it were time lost listening to me.

. . . . .

In all people I see myself, none more and  
     not one a barley-corn less,  
 And the good or bad I say of myself I say  
     of them.

. . . . .

I do not say these things for a dollar or  
     to fill up the time while I wait for a  
     boat,  
 (It is you talking just as much as myself,  
     I act as the tongue of you,  
 Tied in your mouth, in mine it begins to be  
     loosen'd.)

("Song of Myself" ll. 392-1249)

It would seem that in acting as our representative,  
 the poet was assuming a great deal about the nature of his  
 audience and a great deal about his relationship with it.  
 It seems presumptuous of a man to believe that he would be  
 able to grasp the diverse and contradictory elements of his  
 audience and then be able to give voice to them in a single,  
 united poetic expression. Yet, this is exactly what Whitman  
 would have us believe he did:

In me the caresser of life wherever moving,  
     backward as well as forward sluing,  
 To niches aside and junior bending, not a  
     person or object missing,  
 Absorbing all to myself and for this song.  
     ("Song of Myself" ll. 232-34)

Of course, the long catalogues and contradictory affirmations  
 ("I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,/"

Regardless of others, ever regardful of others, /Material as well as paternal, a child as well as a man, . . . /["Song of Myself" l. 330 ff.7), help a great deal in giving us the illusion that his attempts were successful. But, I believe Whitman reveals some great doubts about knowing who his audience really is that he is supposed to be absorbing and representing. I think Whitman gives himself away with his continued use throughout Leaves of Grass of "you, whoever you are." This phrase may sound like Whitman's ultimate democratic address of brotherhood which disregards all considerations of race, creed, color, and sex, and considers only the fact that you are alive and therefore equal, but it also sounds to me like a question, "you, whoever are you?" The audience Whitman knew well was the one that read his undistinguished editorials and mediocre moralistic essays. After seventeen years of various journalistic jobs, he must have known his new yawp would not appeal to these tabloid readers, and, as I mentioned above, he probably packaged his new sound in old wrapping in an effort to slip it to them. I believe he knew he would have a new audience, or rather that he would have to have a new audience. So what he did is what all great artists must do--create his audience. In the same way he created his own personality while creating his book, he created his audience. As he attributed to himself the characteristics he wanted to have, so he attributes to his audience the characteristics of the perfect democratic man he wants them to have. As he re-oriented his own psyche,

so he re-orientes the mind of his reader.

## 3

A further statement by Whitman about his aim in Leaves of Grass reveals another aspect of the I-voice: "I also sent out Leaves of Grass to arouse and set flowing in men's and women's hearts, young and old, (my present and future readers,) endless streams of living, pulsating love and friendship, directly from them to myself, now and ever."<sup>12</sup> These feelings of love and friendship between Whitman and his audience are expressed frequently in physical terms, as the acts between lovers:

. . . . .

(Is it night? are we here together alone?)  
It is I you hold and who holds you,  
I spring from the pages into your arms--  
    decease calls me forth.  
O how your fingers drowse me,  
Your breath falls around me like dew, your  
    pulse lulls the tympan of my ears,  
I feel immersed from head to foot,  
Delicious, enough.

. . . . .

Dear friend whoever you are take this kiss,

. . . . . ("So Long!" ll. 53-64)

. . . . .

Here to put your lips upon mine I permit you,  
With the comrade's long-dwelling kiss or the  
    new husband's kiss,  
For I am the new husband and I am the comrade.

Or if you will, thrusting me beneath your  
 clothing,  
 Where I may feel the throbs of your heart  
 or rest upon your hip,  
 Carry me when you go forth over land or sea,  
 For thus merely touching you is enough, is  
 best,  
 And thus touching you would I silently sleep  
 and be carried eternally.  
 ("Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand." ll. 19-26)

Comerado, I give you my hand!  
 I give you my love more precious than money,  
 I give you myself before preaching or law;  
 Will you give me yourself? will you come  
 travel with me?  
 Shall we stick by each other as long as we  
 live?  
 ("Song of the Open Road" ll. 220-24)

Whoever you are, now I place my hand upon you,  
 that you be my poem,  
 I whisper with my lips close to your ear,  
 I have loved many women and men, but I love  
 none better than you.  
 ("To You" ll. 6-8)

I think you will agree that these lines are unprecedented in their desire for personal intimacy, for direct physical contact with the reader. Their insistence on being physical achieves a surreal existence when we remember Whitman's declared identification with his book. The poet seems deliberately to be taking advantage of us physically. He touches us and kisses us without our request or consent, and our own unconscious breathing on the page or thoughtless holding of the book in our hands or in our lap or on our hip, suddenly become unintentional ways of giving him delightful physical pleasure. The words themselves create pictures in our mind and we see him, a bearded old man, grinning at us and exchanging thrills with us which we hadn't planned on.

Whether we wanted to or not, we become partners in pleasure with him. The I-voice in this sense becomes incarnate, and the poet achieves through our act of reading, one of his avatars.

What Whitman is doing, I think, may be best understood with the aid of a contemporary analogy. The current and very popular human-potentiality movement which flourishes in such places as California's Esalen Institute, Chicago's Oasis, Washington's Orizon Institute, and Austin's Laos House, manifests itself in what is commonly called encounter groups or sensitivity-training sessions. At these group meetings individuals are encouraged to give up societal restrictions and formalities, as well as personal fears and inhibitions, in an effort to create close, meaningful, pleasurable, if temporary relationships with other members of the group. Various methods have been employed, but the most common involve some form of physical contact among participants (touching, hugging, wrestling, massaging, dancing), some form of physical release (screaming, nudity, communal bathing), various intellectual exercises in which the group, for example, let their thoughts wander together pursuing a certain fantasy or idea, and finally, individual revelations of one's innermost secret thoughts, insecurities, fears, or desires. Such group behavior, it is hoped, will break down personal defenses and barriers, and lead to confrontations among group members which will resolve themselves in bonds of friendship and acceptance. These sessions are considered

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therapeutic, and individuals, it is said, leave them emotionally and physically refreshed, open-minded, and better equipped to use to advantage life's daily personal encounters.<sup>13</sup>

I think you may already see certain similarities in technique to Whitman's poetry. Whitman demands physical contact. He touches us and has us touch him. He explores his own body, every organ and sense of it in "Song of Myself," and confesses his delight in it. He calls attention to his reader's body and says he loves it regardless of its pimples, discolorations, or misshapings, and affirms that touching it is delightful to him. Whitman reveals the bodies of men and women in Children of Adam, unclothes every parcel of flesh for our attentive examination, and invites us to touch and approve of them.

Physical release comes in several forms in Leaves of Grass. He refers to his poems as the yawp, belch, cry, carol, or song, and he constantly makes reference to the thrill of his or our own voice, hum, cry, or breath. Section 5 of "Song of Myself" is famous for its mystical orgasm. In Section 26 of that poem the trained soprano and orchestra steep the poet in orgasmic pleasure, and Sections 28 and 29 describe an occurrence of masturbation. He loves to be nude in the forest and to be in contact with the woods, and his amorous mother, the sea, rocks him in "billyow drowse," and the "bare-bosom'd night" and "voluptuous cool-breath'd earth" delight him with love.

His mind wanders over the whole of America, the earth, and the universe, and the reader accompanies him in his expanding consciousness exercise in such poems as "The Sleepers," "Salut Au Monde!", "Song of the Answerer," "Our Old Feuillage," "A Song of Joys," "Song of the Broad-Axe," "Song of the Exposition," "Song of the Redwood-Tree," "A Song of the Rolling Earth," and "Passage to India."

Finally, Whitman reveals his hidden suffering soul to free himself from the torment of secrecy and guilt. In the poems "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," "Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances," and "A Hand-Mirror," Whitman confesses his innermost secret insecurities and personal doubts and fears, and in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" he admits his hidden evil nature. The confessional nature of the poems purges Whitman of dishonesty in his dealings with his reader. He is not afraid to admit the worst about himself as well as the best. The reader is encouraged to be honest also, and to admit that similar fears and evils are present in his nature as well. In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" Whitman declares specifically that our weak natures make us brothers.

In the same way that encounter groups try to destroy the barriers which keep its participants apart from meaningful communication, so does Whitman try to destroy those barriers between himself and his reader. The encounter group sets up procedures for liberating the mind and body of its pre-conceived behavioral patterns, in the same way that Whitman sets up responses in his reader which alter accepted



notions of bodily limitations. The therapeutic nature of the encounter group is related to Whitman's re-orienting process of providing the reader in poetry with an insulated playground for body exploration. The body, for both participator and reader, is the means to health and wholeness.

It has been noted that the remarkable unity of Leaves of Grass is due to the fact that the reader has the impression of hearing the same voice throughout the book. I hope it has been shown here that the poet's voice is not a disembodied echo. When we hear his voice we feel his body's presence. His message of the liberated body thereby achieves a startling concreteness through the very act of reading.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Man's Rage For Chaos: Biology, Behavior, and the Arts (Philadelphia and New York, 1965), pp. 217-222, and 308-315.

<sup>2</sup>Published by the Eakins Press, New York, 1966.

<sup>3</sup>Walt Whitman's Poems (New York, 1955), p. 7.

<sup>4</sup>Man's Rage, pp. 220-21.

<sup>5</sup>Second Series (London, 1854). The original versions of the pieces appear respectively on pp. 59, 123, 188, and 235.

<sup>6</sup>See Clara Barrus, Whitman and Burroughs Comrades (Boston and New York, 1931), p. 178; Emory Holloway and Vernolian Schwarz, I Sit and Look Out (New York, 1932), p. 211, n. 6; F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (New York, 1941), p. 547, n. 9; Frances Winwar, "Fern Leaves and Leaves of Grass," New York Times Book Review, April 22, 1945, pp. 7 and 24.

<sup>7</sup>Comprehensive Reader's Edition, pp. 563-74.

<sup>8</sup>The Evolution of Walt Whitman: The Creation of a Personality (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1960).

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>10</sup>Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson: An Organic Anthology, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston, 1957), p. 147.

<sup>11</sup>Comprehensive Reader's Edition, pp. 750-51.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 751.

<sup>13</sup>Encounter groups are still in the experimental stages. Large-scale, objective research on what happens to group participants after they re-enter their normal environments, has yet to be done. Therefore, their ultimate value, or perhaps, harm, is still unknown. For a brief, objective survey on the present status of encounter groups, see, "The Group: Joy on Thursday," Newsweek, May 12, 1969, 104-106D.

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