

SEXUAL STRATEGY IN "I SING THE BODY ELECTRIC"

When I recently reread the *Children of Adam* poems, I wanted to test a sexual hunch. Knowing they were written after the *Calamus* poems to offset supposed themes of homosexuality, I wanted to find *Children of Adam* a series of very heterosexual verses. I suspected that the poems were probably not all created after the *Calamus* poems and could have been old *Calamus* poems dressed up to celebrate love of women instead of love of men. However, I came to the conclusion that the two sets of poems cannot be classified as heterosexual (*Children of Adam*) and homosexual (*Calamus*), but rather should be categorized as poems celebrating "amativeness" (the instinct of physical love) and "adhesiveness" (the quality of attachment on which friendship rests). Whitman's own definition for adhesiveness, which he sent to a Washington paper, was "a personal attraction between men that is stronger than ordinary friendship. The 'Calamus' poems celebrate it." The *Calamus* poems are not erotic, but the *Children of Adam* poems certainly are. The latter's 'amative' eroticism is not to be equated, however, with heterosexual love: what I intend to demonstrate in this paper is that *Children of Adam* celebrates physical love indistinctive of gender.

What convinced me that the *Children of Adam* poems are not really heterosexual was the impression as I read them that some of them could have been addressed to either a man or a woman. "As Adam Early in the Morning" has Whitman saying, "touch the palm of your hand to my body as I pass," yet in "We Two, How Long We Were Fool'd," there are no female images at all. The "two" of this poem could be men. Moreover, Whitman himself felt at ease using a poem to mean either heterosexual or homosexual love. "Once I pass'd through a Populous City" was originally written about meeting

a man. The manuscript photograph in Fredson Bowers' book *Whitman's Manuscripts, Leaves of Grass (1860)* shows the poem was later changed to describe meeting a woman. I did not find out about this change until after I had marked in my book "Once I pass'd through a Populous City" as the *only poem to exhibit unmistakable heterosexuality!*

I am not the first person to be deceived by Whitman. The French critic Jean Catel misread the famous Sections 28 and 29 of "Song of Myself," saying of Section 29, "This passage explains in three rhythmic balancings (accentuated by abundant alliteration) the act of love." Elsewhere Catel says of the same Section 29, "The poet's aim in this line is nothing less than a suggestion of the recreation of the world through the sex act." But Section 29 actually describes masturbation, not the act of love that Catel would like to see recreate the world.

The conclusion, however, that *Children of Adam* is a celebration of physical but not necessarily heterosexual love can be proven through a close reading of the single most significant *Children of Adam* poem, "I Sing the Body Electric."

"I Sing the Body Electric" is a poem of one hundred sixty-four lines divided into nine uneven sections. The lines can be categorized as those dealing with the male imagery, those dealing with female imagery, and those which could be described as sexless. The third category of lines cannot be described as simply descriptive of either masculine or feminine because such lines as "The love of the body of man or woman balks account, the body itself balks account" I count as masculine. Why? Because the sense of the line is masculine: "Or woman" in such lines seems added as an afterthought by the poet much as overly sensitized speakers today fumble with "he or she" and "his or her"

when addressing a mixed audience. Whitman may have even penned in "our woman" during revision of the poem. If I had access to the manuscript, I could check out my hunch, but the manuscript does not exist. It does not appear in Bowers.

It is not difficult to conclude that "I Sing the Body Electric" is weighted in favor of masculine imagery. Section 2, for example, includes nineteen lines for male, only three for female, in spite of the fact that its opening line would lead us to expect a section equalizing the two genders:

The love of the body of man or woman balks
account, the body itself balks account,
That of the male is perfect, and that of the
female is perfect.

Lines 3-9 describe rather sensuously a man. When line 10 brings up women, we would expect some lines devoted to them, but line 11 snaps us back to a naked male swimmer. In this section (2), women receive a scant three lines--as many as are devoted to the "wrestle of wrestlers, two apprentice-boys" caught in "the embrace of love and resistance." Similarly, Section 3 devotes its entirety to the description of an old man, "the father of five sons, and in them the fathers of sons, and in them the fathers of sons." There is no corresponding stanzaic treatment for an old woman.

Section 5 begins "This is the female form" leading us to expect a sensuous description of a woman. But the focus switches in line 4 to the narrator who sweeps us into the excitement of a sexual encounter. When one first reads it, this sexual act seems natural enough. It is certainly graphic:

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.

However, a close look at these images reveals their unusual aspect: "jets of love" and "quivering jelly of love" are visual. What is unseen in normal heterosexual coupling is visible in these images, so Whitman's concern is not so much the interaction of man and woman as the action of man himself. What does follow as a standard sexual act is foggy, merging metaphors of bridegroom as night and bride as day:

Bridegroom night of love working surely and
softly into the prostrate dawn,
Undulating into the willing and yielding day,
Lost in the cleave of the clasping and
sweet-flesh'd day.

These are beautiful images descriptive of a beautiful event, but they are certainly not as vivid as the ones immediately preceding them ("jelly of love"). With this fusion of graphic imagery into foggy imagery, we experience a quality of Whitman's poetry that is quite unique: his ability to fuse the real with the surreal. Jean Catel in *Walt Whitman, la naissance du poète* praised the technique: "The originality of Whitman lies in this, that through him we pass imperceptibly from realism to surrealism, that is to say from a state of clear consciousness in which images have distinct outlines to the unconscious, the soul, in which images are fused in that 'atmosphere'--we should rather say that emotional state--in which the poet will transmit it, still warm with life. No one has known better than he how to fuse the objective outline and the inner image in such a way that everywhere reality unifies the soul while the soul animates reality." I am not in disagreement with Catel at all on this point. I really admire Whitman's ability to move from clear

pictures to cloudy, but my point is that Whitman's focus is tilted in favor of visible masculine imagery so Section 5, which begins by suggesting a focus on the female, actually devotes only twelve of its twenty-three lines to the woman.

The final four sections of the poem continue to focus on the male. Section 6 begins "The male is not less the soul nor more, he too is in his place." We are promised a paean for man, and the line count is fulfilling: nine lines for masculine, no lines for feminine. Likewise the promise of Section 7 is fulfilled: "A man's body at auction" devotes all twenty-three lines to the description of a male slave. Whitman runs over the entire body and manages to point out even private parts in clever metaphor: "There swells and jets a heart." The intent of Whitman's penis imagery is not subtle--and if the reader misses it, Whitman says in the very next line: "Do you think they are not there because they are not express'd in parlors and lecture-rooms?" Obviously he is not referring to the circulatory system's heart. Section 8 is supposed to balance Section 7. It begins "A woman's body at auction." But by lines 3 and 4, Whitman is finished with the woman and is ready to pass to the man in a neat parallelism of rhetorical smoothness:

Have you ever loved the body of a woman?
Have you ever loved the body of a man?

Of ten lines, woman gets a scant four in Section 8. Section 9 represents the poem's climax as Whitman is in a fever to make his point. He begins with an examination of his own body:

O my body! I dare not desert the likes of you in
other men and women, nor the likes of the
parts of you.

His imagery starts with his own image and remains masculine ("manly beard...man-balls, man-root") until line 19:

All attitudes, all the shapeliness, all the
belongings of my or your body or of any
one's body, male or female.

Lines 20-33 return to catalogue the masculine body, with only one line strongly feminine:

The womb, the teats, nipples, breast-milk, tears,
laughter, seeping, love-looks, love-per-
turbations and risings.

Of the thirty-six lines in Section 9, seventeen are masculine oriented; only three are blatantly feminine.

What is Whitman after? "I sing the body electric" finally becomes "I sing the soul electric." His entire poem has been a metaphor of body for soul. The concluding lines tell us:

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!

He was unable to communicate the idea that physical love among souls knows no genderizing, but he suggested as much as the fusion of male and female images in the poem. Is his poem thus obscure? James E. Miller in *Start With the Sun* answers that charge: "It is the practice arising from the doctrine of *suggestiveness* that calls forth the familiar charge of obscurity, and such a charge is based upon a misunderstanding of the nature of words and the nature of the mind. Whitman says, 'Human thought, poetry or melody, must leave dim escapes and outlets--must possess a certain fluid, aerial character, akin to space itself, obscure to

those of little or no imagination, but indispensable to the highest purposes.'" Whitman had such "highest purposes" and could articulate his insights satisfactorily only in poetry. The freedom of his verse form permitted his thought free access to us unencumbered by strict meter and rhyme. That his imagery inclined to masculinity we have seen; that it could have or should have been otherwise we would be fools to wish.

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THE VISIT HOME

This Christmas I'm bringing home a translator.
I need an ambassador, but cannot afford one.
Besides, my family won't admit that I'm
a separate country.
even when they see a map of me on TV news.
Last year when I tried to tell about my life
someone dabbed white-out on my tongue.
This year if they listen well, they could learn
to know me.
If they listen poorly, they'll disown me.
If they interrupt, I'm moving to Australia.