

THE BIOGRAPHER'S PROBLEM

Section 11 of "Song of Myself" is an erotic pastoral. It flows naturally from the poet-narrator's announced purpose (in Section 2) to leave perfumed houses and rooms and "go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked."

Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore,
Twenty-eight young men, and all so friendly,
Twenty-eight years of womanly life, and all so lonesome.

She owns the fine house by the rise of the bank,
She hides handsome and richly drest aft the blinds of the
window.

Which of the young men does she like the best?
Ah the homeliest of them is beautiful to her.

Where are you off to, lady? for I see you,
You splash in the water there, yet stay stock still in your room.

Dancing and laughing along the beach came the twenty-ninth
bather,
The rest did not see her, but she saw them and loved them.

The beards of the young men glistened with wet, it ran from their
long hair,
Little streams passed all over their bodies.

An unseen hand also passed over their bodies,
It descended tremblingly from their temples and ribs.

The young men float on their backs, their white bellies swell to the
sun . . . they do not ask who seizes fast to them,
They do not know who puffs and declines with pendant and
bending arch,
They do not think whom they souse with spray.

If "voyeurism," as some critics say, is the driving force of this lyric, it is a complex act of voyeurism. The woman in the house watches the young men. She, in turn, is being watched—"I see you"—as she stands alone and then joins the young men. There are three parties to the experience Whitman creates: the lonesome woman; the twenty-eight young men; and the "I" who watches her even as she hides behind her window blinds watching the young men. But we don't know the gender of this watching "I." This may be another of Whitman's habitual transpositions and gender shifts. Androgyny is one of his changes of garment. Like Zeus, who assumed at will the forms of bull, shower of gold, swan, and eagle, the happy genius of *Leaves of Grass* is the lover of men and women, of Ganymede as well as Hera.

We can't help asking if the number twenty-eight carries a specific or occult meaning. Whitman, after all, cites it three times. Does twenty-eight refer to the menstrual cycle? To the normal span of childbearing (that is, "womanly") years? To the sidereal and lunar months (especially if you average them)? To February, with a twenty-ninth day for leap year? To Whitman's age when he came to New Orleans early in 1848 and supposedly had a crucial love affair? (He left New Orleans four days before he turned twenty-nine.) Does "twenty-eight" have to have any specific significance at all, or would any other anapestic quantity—say, thirty-three—do just as well? What, after all, are we looking for?

Numbers aside, the poem as a whole is problematical, like so much of Whitman's best work. Early readers may have been shocked and baffled by a poem which, provided they were willing even to acknowledge these things, plays on voyeurism, sensual touching, and orgasmic imagery. In his thorough-going introduction to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, Malcolm Cowley passed over Section 11 altogether, presumably because it did not fit the analytic scheme he devised for "Song of Myself." "Sometimes," the poet Randall Jarrell wrote, "Whitman will take what would generally be considered an unpromising subject (in this case, a woman peeping at men bathing naked) and treat it with such tenderness and subtlety and understanding that we are ashamed of ourselves for having thought it unpromising, and murmur that Chekhov himself couldn't have treated it better."¹ One thinks, too, of Edna Pontillier in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. Chopin's work owes a good deal of its erotic inspiration to Whitman.

In their rich indeterminacy poems like “Twenty-eight young men” are a challenge to criticism. They are “personal” and audacious to a degree almost unique in nineteenth-century literature, but they are not personal or confessional testimony. The poet-hero of “Song of Myself,” sexual athlete and universal lover, is a fiction, a dramatic persona, and not the biographical Walt Whitman at all. This biographical Whitman, however, is an impassioned spokesman for a literature that welcomes and celebrates sexuality instead of rejecting it. “Sex, sex, sex,” Whitman exclaimed to his disciple, Horace Traubel, “whether you sing or make a machine, or go to the North Pole, or love your mother, or build a house, or black shoes, or anything—anything at all—it’s sex, sex, sex . . . the root of roots: the life below the life!”²

Because he makes sex so explicit and central a force Whitman provokes in his biographers an unusually aggravated (although fully justified) curiosity about the role sex actually played in his life. *Leaves of Grass* and his many other declarations about the sexual substrate of all human activities generate billows of smoke, but when we come down to “evidence” and verifiable event we find scarcely any fire at all. This isn’t to say the fire did not exist.

Correctly or not, we tend to think of Ralph Waldo Emerson as having the sexual voltage of a day-old corpse. Yet we know that Emerson married twice and fathered four children. To reduce this to simple acts, we know for a certainty at least four more things about Emerson’s sex life than we’ve ever been able to find out about Whitman’s.

Instead of offering facts Whitman teases us with “secrets” and “mysteries,” just as he teased his disciple Horace Traubel. “Some day when you are ready and I am ready,” the seventy-year-old poet said, “I will tell you about one period in my life of which my friends know nothing.” Whitman hinted that it involved something “sacred” and “serious” that would “open your eyes.” It might “even disgust you,” he said. Like other members of the Camden circle, Traubel assumed that Whitman was about to reveal a secret involving illicit love, illegitimate children, and enforced separation from the mother and her offspring. But as hard and persistently as he tried, Traubel never extracted the story. Promising to tell and then not telling was the Penelope’s web of Whitman’s last years. Perhaps the “secret” was only a screen for

Whitman’s collective mysteries—his transformation into a poet, for one, and the price he may have paid for his dedication in sustained intimacy with women, men, and what he called “the Me myself,” “the real Me.”

In the much-quoted letter he wrote in 1890 to the English author John Addington Symonds, Whitman absolutely disavowed what he called Symonds’ “morbid” and “damnable” imputation of homosexuality. “Tho’ always unmarried,” Whitman said, “I have had six children—two are dead—One living southern grandchild, fine boy, who writes to me occasionally. Circumstances connected with [the children’s] benefit and fortune have separated me from intimate relations [with them].” Only “angry litigation and fuss,” he explained a year later, had prevented him from moving the dead children “f’m down south” to the tomb he had built for himself in Camden. No trace of children or grandchild has ever surfaced.

Poems are at best dubious biographical evidence. Nevertheless, some biographers managed to find supporting evidence for a romance with a New Orleans woman in the seven-line lyric, “Once I Pass’d through a Populous City.” The romance survived and flowered even after Emory Holloway in 1920 discovered the original manuscript. Instead of a woman Whitman had written about “one rude and ignorant man, who, when I departed, long and long held me by the hands with silent lips, sad and tremulous.” This poem, as Paul Zweig wrote, “tells us about Whitman’s willingness to manipulate the tone and imagery of his poems for literary effect, but not much about the life he led in New Orleans; it tells about the power of his love fantasies for men, but not much about his sexual habits.”³ As late as 1960 Holloway himself, like the bereft whaling ship *Rachel* at the end of *Moby-Dick*, was still deviously cruising in search of Whitman’s children and their mother. That “rude and ignorant man,” however, although he may have had only a fantasy existence, was the genotype for Peter Doyle, Harry Stafford, and all the other working-class, barely literate young men—soldiers, drivers, deckhands—in Whitman’s life. Only his sacred book, *Leaves of Grass*, stood closer to his heart than these.

The history of over a century of Whitman biography is to a large extent the history of a pussyfooting accommodation to the issue of

sexuality, more specifically homosexuality. One sees biography being skewed in the interests of literary public relations. Some contemporary witnesses, countering the charge that Whitman was an immoral man who wrote immoral poems, depicted him as a sort of saint who even in his youth was above fleshly pleasures. "The girls did not seem to attract him," said a man who knew Whitman during his schoolteaching years on Long Island. "He did not specially go anywhere with them and show any extra fondness for their society, seemed, indeed, to shun it."

One wonders what these witnesses, among them Peter Doyle and Whitman's brother George, made of the poet's references to "stalwart loins," "love-flesh swelling and deliciously aching," "limitless limpid jets of love hot and enormous," "phallic thumb of love," "bellies pressed and glued together with love." It was unthinkable even to hint at masturbation, the great nineteenth-century tabu, yet there was Whitman writing about the

. . . young man that wakes, deep at night, his hot hand seeking
to repress what would master him—the strange
half-welcome pangs, visions, sweats,
The pulse pounding through palms and trembling encircling
fingers—the young man all colored, red, ashamed, angry.

As even more disturbing possibilities than heterosexual escapades began to assert themselves, the loyalists devised a defensive line of interpretation. The illicit New Orleans romance and all those illegitimate children demonstrated that although Whitman may have been "immoral," by the strict public standards of his time, at least he was immoral in a conventional, socially acceptable way. Dr. Richard Bucke, who served as Whitman's St. Luke and St. Paul, wrote: "To use the simple and hearty old scripture phrase, 'the love of women' has, of course, been, and is in a legitimate sense one of the man's elementary passions." But the loyalists rose up in anger when an outsider, Bliss Perry, moralized the matter of Whitman's children. "Sins against chastity commonly bring their own punishment," Perry wrote in the first (1906) edition of his biography, *Walt Whitman: His Life and Work*. He went on to concede that at least after 1862 Whitman's "life was stainless as far as sexual relations were concerned."

Facing his attackers, Perry decided to play it both ways. He retained the reflections on "sins against chastity" in his second edition. But he appended the opinion of someone he identified as "a well-known admirer . . . of the poet." In all likelihood this was the English poet and sexual publicist Edward Carpenter. "The real psychology of Walt Whitman would be enormously interesting," Perry quotes him as saying. "I think the key-note to it would be found to be a staggering ignorance, or perhaps willful non-perception, of the real physical conditions of his nature. But the truth about him (the innermost truth) escapes from almost every page for those who can read."⁴ This was substantially the argument of the study Carpenter was to publish in 1924, *Some Friends of Walt Whitman: A Study in Sex-Psychology*.

In the Freudian and post-Freudian eras, Whitman biography became even more defensive in the face of a profoundly embarrassing situation for American literature. The historical Whitman had started creeping out of the closet. He was to be imagined, in Allen Ginsberg's words, "eyeing the grocery boys" in the supermarket. Writing in the late 1930s, Newton Arvin, himself homosexual, finessed the whole problem by concentrating on the social, political, intellectual, and literary backgrounds of Whitman's work; socialism displaced sex. Henry Seidel Canby's *Walt Whitman, An American*, published two years after Pearl Harbor, in effect drafted Whitman into the armed services. He was "the symbolic man of the nineteenth century," a democratic poet-prophet who remained "intelligible and dynamic" for the generation fighting a war against totalitarianism.

Gay Wilson Allen's valuable biography, *The Solitary Singer*, first published in 1955, simply temporized when forced to confront the sex issue. Allen discussed Whitman's "Calamus" poems in the light of the phrenological concept of "adhesiveness." The term denoted the love of comrades (what we might call brotherhood or male bonding) as distinguished from "amativeness," or sexual love between men and women. (I don't believe the phrenological scheme even acknowledged sisterhood.) But Allen had a hard time explaining Whitman's tormented feelings about the Washington horsecar driver, Peter Doyle.

"Depress the adhesive nature, It is in excess—making life a torment," Whitman wrote in his notebook during a crisis period with

Doyle: "Ah, this diseased, feverish disproportionate adhesiveness." "Whatever the psychologist may think of this abnormally strong affection of the two men for each other," Allen says in a passage that was obviously painful for him to write (and is now painful to read), "actual perversion seem[s] unlikely. Incipiently the relationship may have been a dangerous one, but it does not appear actually to have been so." Symonds' suggestion that the relationship may have something other than "psychological" Allen characterizes as "sinister."⁵ In his Preface to the 1984 reissue of *The Solitary Singer* Allen goes totally limp. "I did not say he was *not* homosexual," he protests.

More recently, David Reynolds appears to be fighting the same sort of rear-guard action. He argues, in *Beneath the American Renaissance*, that Whitman's perturbed self-exhortation "is not necessarily a confession of a homosexual affair; instead, it is a passionate expression of the need to control the brain's organ of adhesiveness by one who took phrenology quite seriously."⁶ But I think Whitman put a rather broader construction on "adhesiveness" than the phrenologists intended. It took in sexual affinities that had no sanction in phrenological theory. With Peter Doyle and the New Jersey errand boy Harry Stafford, Whitman's "adhesiveness" had become so "disproportionate" that it slipped the leash of its original meaning and then of Whitman's control.

As a Whitman biographer my understanding of the problem was this. The climate of discussion has changed dramatically during the past twenty years or so. Even for the general public homosexuality—or "homotextuality"—in American literary culture is no longer particularly newsworthy. One could deal with it in a level way, unencumbered by forensics. The biographer no longer had to back away or temporize, "defend" Whitman against a "charge," "prove" that he was straight, "prove" that he wasn't, or perform any such courtroom headstand. And it's not only the climate of discussion that has changed. Biography, too, has changed. Many of us now think of biography as being considerably less historical than literary, an autonomous, self-justified venture that in many respects is more like the novel than had been supposed. Once the Holy Grail of biography, "the true self," a core personality, may be, as Virginia Woolf suggested in *Orlando*, "many thousand selves."

Here, for example, is Walt Whitman in 1855 offering the meat and potatoes of biography in order to baffle our curiosity about this "true self":

Trippers and askers surround me,
People I meet, the effect upon me of my early life or the ward and
city I live in, or the nation,
The latest dates, discoveries, inventions, societies, authors old
and new,
My dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments, dues,
The real or fancied indifference of some man or woman I love,
The sickness of one of my folks or of myself, or ill-doing or loss or
lack of money, or depressions or exaltations,
They come to me days and nights and go from me again,
But they are not the Me myself.

That "Me," which is perhaps only the sum of many "presentations of self," remains elusive and even illusory, like Bigfoot or the Abominable Snowman. Whitman's "Me," to the extent that it exists, is hidden by many screens. Perhaps those screens are what it was all about in the first place, and the work and the career—the public manifestation—may be much more significant in the long run than the hidden self or selves. After all, isn't that one way we distinguish major literary lives from lesser ones?

Nonetheless, the biographer continues to look for the self behind the screen. Coherent, honest, and sensitive biographical narrative relies on intimate evidence and, as I mentioned before, evidence of this sort is hard to find when you're dealing with Whitman. In the 1988 *Voices and Visions* television program about Whitman, Allen Ginsberg recounts a sort of apostolic succession or orally transmitted gospel: Ginsberg says he heard from Neil Cassady who heard from Gavin Arthur who heard from Edward Carpenter that Carpenter had once gone to bed with Whitman, presumably in 1877. (That story reminds me of the whispering game called "Telephone" that children play at parties.) But even Ginsberg, who swears by this story and has told it many times, won't say for sure, because he can't, what Whitman actually "did" with Peter Doyle and the others. Maybe it doesn't matter.

What does matter is the way Whitman defines himself as homosexual in his poetry, in his letters and journals, in his daily conduct, in his frequently tormented relations with younger men and his evasive relations with women, in the way he uses democratic political models as a way of emancipating sexuality, in the way he invokes androgyny as a liberating imaginative mode. And at the same time we have to acknowledge the gulf that exists between the life Whitman lived, to the extent we can learn it, and the imagined life recounted in his poems. The cycle of discussion, as far as the sexuality issue is concerned, seems to have completed and maybe even exhausted itself: what was once scarcely mentioned is now talked about to the virtual exclusion of other issues. Whitman himself is most to blame for this. But perhaps it's time to move on to a broader focus. Who knows what the picture will look like to all us watchers after the twenty-ninth biographer comes up the beach?

Notes

¹ Randall Jarrell, "Some Lines from Whitman," in *Poetry and the Age* (New York: Vintage Books, 1953), 110.

² Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, Vol. III (New York: M. Kennerley, 1914), 452-53.

³ Paul Zweig, *Walt Whitman: The Making of the Poet* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 66.

⁴ Bliss Perry, *Walt Whitman: His Life and Work* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1906), 45-46, 322-23.

⁵ Gay Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer* (New York: 1955, rev. 1967), 423-24.

⁶ David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 317.