

WHITMAN'S IDEA OF WOMEN

In an age when physicians rejoiced that neither the “emancipated” woman nor the prostitute “propagates her kind,” Walt Whitman claimed that *Leaves of Grass* was “essentially a woman’s book.”¹ He said so in 1888 about a book first published in 1855, but he undoubtedly alluded to the whole of *Leaves*, which took final shape in the early 1880s, in the sixth and final edition. By this time the doctors, who exerted at least as much influence as the ministers on society (perhaps more), had coined the term “neurasthenia” to describe the state of nervous exhaustion middle-class women suffered from being (we would conclude today) depicted as “creatures inferior to men yet somehow akin to angels.”² The woman’s place was in the home, maintaining the values or “moral affections” of her society, while also providing it with what Whitman called in “Song of Myself” “bigger and nimbler babes.”³ Whitman’s mother had stayed at home and given that society eight boys and girls. His sister Mary had had five children and his sister-in-law Mattie two. Only his sister Hannah failed in the propagation effort, probably because she had married a landscape artist and developed “neurasthenia”; today Whitman’s biographers diagnose it as hypochondria in view of the fact that she outlived all her brothers and sisters. None of the Whitman women had been “emancipated” in the sense of working outside the home, and yet they were, with the possible exception of Hannah, the models for the women in “A Woman Waits for Me,” who know “how to swim, row, ride, wrestle, shoot, run, strike, retreat, advance, resist, defend themselves.”⁴ In other words, they were “working women” who — given an equal chance in society — could have performed equally well in most pursuits. “The idea of the woman of America,” he wrote in *Democratic Vistas* (1871), was to be “extricated” from the “daze, [from] this fossil and unhealthy air which hangs about the word *lady*.” Such women were to be “develop’d, raised to become robust equals, workers, and it may be, even practical and political deciders with men”⁵

Whitman sounds like a feminist of the first order (in the nineteenth century, at least), but the rest of his sentence suggests that he is at best advocating what Harold Aspiz calls “a positive feminism.”⁶ Not only

are women potentially as great as men, Whitman says, but they are “greater” because of “their divine maternity, always their towering, emblematical attribute.” This superiority may not detract or distract from their equal qualifications with men in all other “departments,” but it does add an important dimension to the woman’s role in the future of America. For in using the West as a metaphor for America’s development, he called not only for “vigorous, yet unsuspected Literatures, perfect personalities and sociologies,” but also “perfect Women, indispensable to endow the birth-stock of a New World.”⁷ In an era when there were *no* female athletes, he welcomed athletic women who would develop their own identities in society, but also valued this unprecedented athleticism in terms of female fecundity. As Aspiz notes, “The women who are depicted in the poems exhibit healthy sexuality *and* the capacity for excellent motherhood”⁸ I emphasize the conjunction here because it points up Whitman’s dilemma with the “Woman Question”: that of the woman’s unresolved division of labor with regard to the burden of her sexuality. At a time when medical theories discouraged the enjoyment of female sexuality (because “recreational” sex with spouses drained the male of vital fluids — an ounce of semen was thought to equal forty ounces of blood), it must be said that Whitman called for the “complete” woman — that is, a life which included her “animal want,” her “eager physical hunger”; yet it was the purpose to which that passion was to be ultimately directed that may have brought him full circle in his argument for female emancipation.

Whitman sought to liberate the American female, as he did the male, from the same Victorian ideology about sex that had led to the threatened expurgation of *Leaves of Grass* in 1881, but the idealistic context of his argument always brought him back to celebrating the woman’s role as a mother. The occasion for the poet’s remarks about the female’s “eager physical hunger,” for example, came in a conversation with Horace Traubel in 1889, upon the birth of Traubel’s nephew, also the son of Thomas Harned, another of Whitman’s literary executors. “Your sister,” he told Traubel, “has done the proudest of proud things: she submitted her woman’s body to its noblest office. I look at the girls — at the childless women — at the old maids, as you speak of them: they lack something.” He went on to say that these women without the full exercise of their sexuality, and of course its resulting childbirth,

are not quite full — not quite entire: the woman who has denied the best of herself — the woman who has discredited the animal want, the eager physical hunger, the wish of that which though we will not allow it to be freely spoken of is still the basis of all that makes life worth while and advances the horizon of discovery sex is the root of it all: sex: the coming together of men and women: sex, sex.

At this point, Whitman stopped, but Traubel was so enthralled by the old man’s outburst that he urged him to continue. An Emersonian social “progressive,” Traubel shared Whitman’s belief in the amelioration of the race through a realization of nature’s laws. “Oh! how gloriously beautiful motherhood is,” Whitman told Traubel in reference to his sister: “She went through that business of having a baby like the sun comes up in the morning: no cross, no shock, no shame, no apology.”⁹ In assuming, however, the natural state of sex and childbirth, they were also assuming the woman’s “natural” disposition to remain at home and raise children. It is especially interesting to note, for example, that the child whose birth provided the occasion for Whitman’s praise of nature’s eugenic character was named for Herbert Spencer, the nineteenth-century English philosopher whose evolutionary writings reinforced the age’s conservative estimate of the woman’s place in society. The determinist argued that the woman’s physical development had concluded earlier than the male’s in order to preserve “those vital powers necessary for reproduction.” That indeed being the “weaker sex,” she had to rely upon her maternal instincts to survive during the early stages of human evolution. “A woman who could from a movement, tone of voice, or expression of face, instantly detect in her savage husband the passion that was rising,” Spencer wrote, “would be likely to escape the dangers run into by a woman less skillfull in interpreting the natural language of feeling.”¹⁰ Although the physical danger the woman faced with the male had largely disappeared as a result of the development of civilized man, she nevertheless retained her capacity for survival, which also led to the propagation of modern society.

Hence, in calling for the liberation of the impassioned woman, Whitman was also calling for perfect mothers whose full sexual response (including orgasm, it was thought by eugenicists in the

nineteenth century) was necessary for healthy offspring. "There are millions of suns left," he had proclaimed in "Song of Myself," intending no pun; but the fact is that the "healthiest" birth in Victorian America was thought to be that of a male, possibly a philosopher or a poet whose prophetic powers would lead the new nation to its great destiny, and that daughters were sometimes thought to be the product of a conception involving an unimpassioned female, if indeed any issue at all were to result from the woman's suppression of natural inclinations. This idea flew in the face of the more conservative theories of the Victorian era, such as Sylvester Graham's that encouraged women to lie still during sex so that the male could perform his part of the act without losing any more "vital fluid" than necessary. It may have been "sex, sex" that Whitman was advocating to Traubel, in *Democratic Vistas*, and as far back as "A Woman Waits for Me" (1856) and Section 11 of "Song of Myself," but it appears to be sex with a purpose that threatened to preempt the woman's competition in those other "departments" of professional life which the male had thus far dominated. We have to ask, therefore, how *Leaves of Grass* was "essentially a woman's book."

In making that declaration, Whitman admitted that women were "by no means" always on his side, but when they were "they were." What seemed to attract such female readers as Sara Parton and Anne Gilchrist, for example, was the poet's lifting of the veil to reveal their feminine vitality, their desire to be co-equal lovers instead of objects of male sexual (and social) utility. "Walt Whitman, the effeminate world needed thee," wrote Parton, better known to the literary world as Fanny Fern. "I confess I extract no poison from these 'Leaves' — to me they have brought only healing. Let him who can do so shroud the eyes of the nursing babe lest it should see its mother's breast."¹¹ Such reviews sound more like love letters that addressed the poet directly. "O dear Walt, did you not feel in every word the breath of a woman's love?" Gilchrist asked in reference to her 1870 essay entitled "An Englishwoman's Estimate of Walt Whitman."¹² Parton, Gilchrist, and others were not responding to a call to give up their femininity in exchange for male equality; they were answering one to validate it as an equal part of what Whitman called in "Song of Myself" the "procreant urge" that animated everything else — inside the home or out. The world was sexually charged, whether the Victorian Age would admit it,

and women were both subject and object of its "body electric." "Finally and decisively," Gilchrist told Whitman, "only a woman can judge a man, only a man a woman, on the subject of their relations."¹³ If this sounds too heterosexual for what many now view as the Good *Gay* Poet, it must be remembered that Mrs. Gilchrist's love letter was rejected by Whitman the man and accepted only by the poet he had invented in *Leaves of Grass*. "My book is my best letter," he told her, "my response, my truest explanation of all. In it I have put my body & spirit."¹⁴

Here may lie the key not only to Whitman's idea of women but to the source of his literary awakening in the 1850s. There are many such "keys" or theories which explain Whitman's extraordinary development as a poet during his "foreground" and focus on the original aspects of his "language experiment," but one innovation that made his poetry clearly different from the competition was his open and "fraternal" treatment of women. He still encouraged them to bear children, of course, and to raise them — though today he would perhaps agree with the behaviorists who argue that "nature" stops with childbirth and that offspring can be "mothered" by either parent, depending on which one occupies the primary domestic role. Yet in sorting out emotional priorities in the late 1840s and early 1850s, he must have been at a loss, given his emerging homosexuality, as to his attitude towards the so-called "weaker sex." Whitman's earliest-known (and only recently discovered) letters indicate a conventionally thinking male at ages twenty and twenty-one — if not a young man clearly interested in the opposite sex, at least one who was interested in becoming involved in the social mix of men and women.¹⁵ As his bachelor life became more pronounced in the 1840s, however, he apparently became a "bachelor" in the literary sense as well and began to study poetically the women he would never know sexually. His clearly unrealistic engagement with them in the poetry suggests the seductions of a god rather than the lovemaking of a man. As a "free companion" to all, including women, he boasts:

I turn the bridegroom out of bed and stay with the bride myself,
I tighten her all night to my thighs and lips.¹⁶

Such assignations are as far-fetched as Whitman's description in

Section 5 of “Song of Myself” of the libidinous embrace of Body and Soul. “Unscrew the locks from the doors!” he announces later in the poem. “Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!” In this vicarious encounter with women, nothing is impossible.

Heterosexual intercourse is exaggerated beyond all sense of reality — as in the case of the nymphomaniacal “lady” in Section 11 of “Song of Myself” whose desire requires a month of sex all at once. It has been argued that she is inserted in the poem as an aristocratic contrast to the healthy working-class woman who gives herself willingly to motherhood.¹⁷ A “lady” instead of a woman, “the twenty-ninth bather” represses her sexual desire, only to realize it in her fantasy. Yet it is important to note that her descent upon the twenty-eight male swimmers is as bizarre as the poet’s rape of the bride in Section 33 of the poem. There is nothing “natural” about either encounter, nothing so “healthy” as the sex which was supposed to produce a Herbert Spencer Harned or a Walt Whitman Whatever. These were males named for males. Three of Whitman’s brothers carried the namesake of American patriots (George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson), and Walt had been named for his father. It was the “natural” extension of the stock for Walter Whitman, Jr., if not the poet “Walt,” who required no progeny from his sexual acts. The poet is so sufficient unto himself, so autoerotic as it were, that he can enter the bridal chamber unseen and unencumbered, and by the same token his female persona can caress twenty-eight young men at once without their knowledge:

The young men float on their backs, their white bellies bulge 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.¹⁸

Leaves of Grass may be a woman’s book because it celebrates sex in the subjunctive, which frees the female *as well as the male* from the burden of her fecundity.

Whitman cherished motherhood, as does also his persona in the poem, who states that “there is nothing greater than the mother of

men,” but in praising the mother he also calls out the woman in her own right as the lover of men. Perhaps only a homosexual could celebrate that capacity so *unpossessively*. In any case, Whitman consciously suppresses the male tradition in western civilization which celebrates wars instead of the “female” virtue of peace. “Let the age and wars of other nations be chanted . . . ,” he states in the 1855 Preface. “Not so the great psalm of the republic. Here the theme is creative,”¹⁹ not destructive, and his heroics include the man *and* the woman.

Those heroics are best exemplified in “A Woman Waits for Me,” an evangelical call for sexual partners in the democracy of the future. The final version of the poem is somewhat misleading with regard to Whitman’s androgynous purpose, for in saying in the title (and first line) that a woman waits for *him*, he is imposing the traditional male paradigm upon a theme which calls for sexual equality. Originally the opening line read, “A woman America knows (or shall yet know) — she contains all, nothing is lacking.”²⁰ This is quite different from “A woman waits for me, she contains all, nothing is lacking.” The woman waits not for a particular male but for a time when her sexual equality in America is fully recognized. Just as in “Song of Myself” the body is not complete without the soul (“lack one lacks both”),²¹ in “A Woman Waits for Me” “all were lacking if sex were lacking.” This is not a description of hegemonic male sexual activity but one of communion between genders. It is not a question of subject and object found in the Petrarchan love tradition but one of balance and reciprocity:

Without shame the man I like knows and avows the deliciousness
of his sex,
Without shame the woman I like knows and avows her.²²

The division of sexual labor and satisfaction is underscored by the point of view in the poem, but without its original opening lines the poem celebrates the role of the man from the vantage point, again, of a god. As the poet had entered the bridal chamber in “Song of Myself,” he becomes “the robust husband” of *all* impassioned women in “A Woman Waits for Me.”

“I draw you close to me, you women,” he says, using the plural. Is this not as unrealistic and thus godlike as the action of the twenty-ninth

bather? She passes her unseen hand over the bodies of twenty-eight young men, and he draws close to legions of impassioned women. Such carnal omniscience produces the safest sex in America. "I dare not withdraw till I deposit what has so long accumulated within me," the narrator of "A Woman" announces. "Through you I drain the pent-up rivers of myself." He describes here not the individual sexual encounter (or its expectation) of the "me" of the original first line in the poem but the eroticism of America. "For these States," he admits, "I press with slow rude muscle."²³ If Dreiser or Hemingway had written the poem, it would come off (these days) as vulgar and sexist. But Whitman is clearly not a flesh-and-blood player in the libidinous game he describes. He said, of course, that he was "both in and out of the game," yet his view of the game — like that of Emily Dickinson's — is essentially an androgynous, outsider's view. Neither poet becomes exclusively the heterosexual subject or object. What they recount is not their personal ecstasy but the ecstasy of the game which involves two consenting adults. And what they consent to is mutuality, which is to say that women are just as (sexually) robust as men. "They are not one jot less than I am," the poet announces as the composite American male. "They are tann'd in the face . . . ultimate in their own right . . . [and] calm, clear, well-possessed of themselves."²⁴

The key passage in "Song of Myself," it is almost unanimously agreed, is Section 5 because it celebrates through sexual imagery the co-equal status of Body and Soul — and by implication the mutuality of the male and the female. The emphasis, however, is on mating without the thought or possibility of offspring, though one critic has suggested that the section describes Whitman's "birth as a poet."²⁵ In the words of another critic, the union is "mystical in kind" and "sexual [only] in idiom."²⁶ Even the physical aspect Whitman depicts here is flawed with regard to the possibility of offspring because the engagement involves fellatio instead of copulation.²⁷ With the tongue as the agent of insemination, the offspring brought forth is a voice that transcends "all the argument of the earth." That includes not just philosophical and religious questions but society's expectations for the impassioned and orgiastic sexual encounter, which is the transformation of the woman from active sexual partner to passive loving mother. Rather, Whitman's heterosexual encounters never reach closure but (especially in this instance) become abstracted into quasi-mystical

states that preserve the ecstasy of the past. In the words of James M. Cox, "The famous description is a pastoral memory into which the present tense of the poem dissolves The act of conception and creation in which the disembodied tongue or soul of the poet weds the body is a complete fusion which in turn democratizes and articulates the body."²⁸ It also frees the body — the female body — from the earthly burden of its gender. For this is no "cold pastoral" Whitman carves on his urn but a warm and passionate scene which allows the woman to retain not only her existence as a woman but her equality as one.

That equality, as Whitman knew, derived from her sexuality, which in Henry Adams' symbology is equated with strength. It was Adams who first articulated this central point in Whitman's poetic vision. He began to ponder, as he wrote in *The Education*, "asking himself whether he knew of any American artist who had ever insisted on the power of sex, as every classic had always done; but he could think only of Walt Whitman." Through Walt Whitman's "procreant urge" is always to be born the word of life in *love* rather than in *labor*. Here the woman, like Adam's Old World dynamo, is always fecund and never forgotten, always perceived as force instead of sentiment. "Why was she unknown in America?" Adams asked. "When she was a true force, she was ignorant of fig-leaves, but the monthly-magazine-made American female had not a feature that would have been recognized by Adam."²⁹ Nor by Whitman, it should be added, who uses the "valved voice" of poetry to reenact the equality of Adam and Eve in the Garden. In Whitman, remarks R.W.B. Lewis, "we must cope with the remarkable blend . . . whereby this Adam, who had already grown to the stature of his own maker, was not less and at the same time his own Eve, breeding the human race out of his love affair with himself."³⁰

In celebrating female sexuality, therefore, the poet of *Leaves of Grass* becomes not only Adam the Namer, but the namer of the namer who has created Adam and Eve in the poem. Beyond gender, as it were, he can from his lofty position risk even the appeal of a common prostitute. He can speak to her as "Walt Whitman, liberal and lusty as Nature"³¹ and yet wait until she has put away her sex before accepting her as a lover. What he awaits is her passion and not her sex as a marketable commodity. In other words, she is a *common* prostitute.

The adjective has always struck me as redundant, but becomes less so when we consider that “prostitution” is common to all persons who barter their sex for social reasons instead of *using* it for selfish reasons. He promises “an appointment” with her when she will be “worthy” to meet him — or rather to re-encounter herself as a woman instead of a “lady” and a whore. The poet refuses to recognize her until she recognizes herself as an unpaid and impassioned lover, who will by preparing to meet him on his terms come to him on her *own* terms.

This brings me back to the matter of motherhood and Whitman’s development as a poet. Motherhood was probably the only female role he knew well enough to write about. It was real, whereas female sexuality was not, except as a prerequisite to motherhood. Whitman had “unfolded”³² out of the folds, as he wrote, but he never became a male “unfolder” or father (notwithstanding his claim for six illegitimate children)³³ — only a son who could celebrate the mother. Her past in sex was as remote to him as the sex in *The Scarlet Letter*, which ends before the story begins. Hence, without direct involvement with the woman’s sexuality, he could romanticize it as much as Hawthorne romanticized the past of Arthur and Hester. In Hawthorne’s case (as I have argued elsewhere),³⁴ the author confused himself with his “Arthur.” Yet in Whitman’s case, it was the most disinterested literary voice in America that celebrated the woman’s sexuality. This is why we have no totally persuasive feminist study of this writer, or even a credible attack upon him as a “male chauvinist.”

It is probably true that as a person Whitman was — in his argument for women — “trapped by his own rhetoric.” This is the conclusion of Myrth Jimmie Killingsworth, who sees the poet as never quite escaping a Victorian culture which mystified and glorified the mother-son bond.³⁵ Its ideology rendered the female politically inferior by proclaiming her superior as a mother and thus the keeper of social mores and religious principles. As a poet, however, Whitman could speak of the “perfect equality of the female with the male,” as he does in “By Blue Ontario’s Shores,” the poem based on the 1855 Preface. In celebrating her sexual capacity in his poems, he focuses more on the act than on its teleological purpose. As a good Transcendentalist, he celebrates her present as much as he does the male’s. In other words, the female is equal *now* if “superior” and hence inferior physically and

intellectually later. Her future as a mother is more often the subject of the prose. This is not to say that mothers are absent from “Song of Myself” and the other great poems of the first three editions of *Leaves of Grass*; they are not. Rather, it is to argue that the women, mothers included, generally escape the sentiment ascribed to them by Victorian consensus. This includes even the Indian girl of Section 10 of “Song of Myself,” who is probably already pregnant and will no doubt become subservient to her husband, the white male trapper. “She had long eyelashes, her head was bare,” the poet writes, “her coarse straight locks descended upon her voluptuous limbs and reach’d to her feet.” The spinster “lady” in the next section can be seen “dancing and laughing along the beach,” her ladyhood completely abandoned for the womanhood of the moment.³⁶ Even the prostitute in Section 15 is deemed as worthy as the president. The point is that Whitman’s rendering of women is a poetical fantasy that ignores the reality of their future which has already come true in the present — ignores the fact that since women *will* in most cases become mothers, their identities as women instead of ladies are already preempted. His vision is no more viable than his concept of a “divine average” in a nation where everyone is encouraged to become the best. More precisely, it is the male fantasy of a son who never became a father and husband, of the homosexual who became heterosexual and indeed omnisexual in poetry. *Leaves of Grass* is “essentially a woman’s book” because the males in it are instructed by women instead of mothers and wives, partners instead of propagators. “Before I was born out of my mother,” Whitman insists in Section 44, “generations guided me.”³⁷ He was, in other words, the product of the “procreant urge” that made men and women equal in the creation of life and not the son whose adult life made them unequal.

It was, in fact, *as* a son that Whitman responded to most if not all real-life overtures from women. “Walt,” wrote Fanny Fern upon reading *Leaves of Grass* in 1856, “what I assume, *you* shall assume.”³⁸ Whitman’s reply (if any) is not known, but the thirty-six-year-old poet did become friendly with the forty-five-year-old Fern, to the extent that her thirty-four-year-old husband, James Parton, lent the poet \$200.³⁹ Apparently, Whitman never repaid the debt to Parton’s satisfaction, but Whitman may have blamed Fern for her husband’s threatened lawsuit to collect the money. A year later, in the Brooklyn

Daily Times of 9 July, he wrote that "One genuine woman is worth a dozen Fanny Ferns."⁴⁰ The unsatisfied loan has been cited as the cause of the rupture in the Fern-Whitman relationship, one that had been as professional as it had been personal, given the similarity in cover designs of *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Port-Folio* (1853) and *Leaves of Grass* (1855). Obviously, Fern had been pleased not only by Whitman's celebration of women but also by Whitman himself, whom she had described earlier (before reading his book) as having a "muscular throat" and shoulders "thrown back as if even in that fine ample chest of his, his lungs had not sufficient play-room." "Mark his voice!" she continued, "rich — deep — and clear, as a clarion note. In the most crowded thoroughfare, one would turn instinctively on hearing it, to seek out its owner."⁴¹ The thrice-married, middle-aged Fern was clearly taken with Whitman the man as well as Whitman the poet.⁴² It was a confusion of big Walt with little Walter, but the attraction apparently displeased Parton, who married Fern in 1856. Otherwise, why would Parton never have forgiven Whitman the debt, which was satisfied with goods whose value exceeded the amount of the loan? As late as 1878, years after Fanny's death, he still bore the poet ill-will.⁴³

Just as a woman (and a wife) may have been the principal cause for Whitman's 1872 quarrel with his old friend and literary ally William Douglas O'Connor,⁴⁴ one was also at the center of the Whitman-Parton controversy. In both cases, Whitman failed to respond to the advances of a married woman. No *ménage à trois*, the Whitman-Parton-Fern triangle was twisted in ways that made all parties losers. Yet the record indicates that Fern did not share her husband's antipathy for the poet, even after his verbal assault on her in the Brooklyn *Daily Times*. One has only to read *Ruth Hall* (1855) to understand why. A lachrymose tale in which the only "friendly" males are dead, avuncular, or otherwise uncompetitive, its plot allows the female room to grow beyond the traditional limits of her sex without also abandoning her female identity. Overcoming a series of male exploitations (from her father, father-in-law, and brother) as well as the condemnation of females that advances that exploitation, this widowed mother of two surviving children becomes the famous writer of witticisms and common sense that Sara Willis (Parton) became as Fanny Fern after the publication of her first book in 1853. *Ruth Hall* is sentimental not because it necessarily dwells in part on the domestic

problems of householding and childrearing, but because it is a fantasy-come-true. Not only does Ruth succeed in the male literary world, but she retains her eligibility for the storybook possibilities of connubial bliss.

Like the women in *Leaves of Grass*, Fern's character has it both ways: she caps her worldly success by remaining available for a successful marriage. Fern did the same by marrying the prototype of the "gentlemanly, slender, scholar-like looking" male in *Ruth Hall* (James Parton), but she endured, unlike Ruth, a stormy marriage from the very outset.⁴⁵ Indeed, it seems to be the rule in female fiction of the nineteenth century that the woman's unconventional activity never disqualifies her (as it does Hawthorne's Hester or James's Isabel, for example) from personal or domestic happiness. Even the heroine of Lydia Maria Child's *Hobomok* (set in Colonial times, no less) wins back her white male suitor after marrying and having a child with an Indian.⁴⁶ In both Whitman's and Fern's case for women, the success in exercising their freedom is unrealistic for the times (indeed, for all times in Whitman's vision). Yet the work of Fern and most of her compatriots has been dismissed as sentimental, whereas Whitman's has been celebrated as romantic. The difference is that Fern's fantasy in *Ruth Hall* sets up the woman independently in society, while Whitman's vision reinforces the frontier ideal in which the woman, though equal, stands "behind" her male counterpart in the making of American society. Furthermore, while Fern's tale is linear because its drama, like most utopian plots or social visions, is based on wishful thinking about the future, Whitman's presentation is at least two-dimensional because it also reflects the ideology about the present.

That ideology depicted the woman as a mother-lover who nurtured the genius of the American male. She nurtured him in order to mate with him in the making of the American future. We encounter the downside of this New World relationship in the prose of *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Portrait of a Lady*, but in the poetry of *Leaves of Grass* the American male is always being created to create — or procreate:

Unfolded out of the folds of the woman man comes unfolded,
and is always to come unfolded,
Unfolded only out of the superbest woman of the earth is to come

the superbest man of the earth,
 Unfolded out of the friendliest woman is to come the friendliest
 man,
 Unfolded out of the perfect body of a woman can a man be
 form'd of perfect body,
 Unfolded only out of the inimitable poems of woman can come
 the poems of man, (only thence have my poems come;)
 Unfolded out of the strong and arrogant woman I love, only
 thence can appear the strong and arrogant man I love,

 First the man is shaped in the woman, he can then be shaped in
 himself.⁴⁷

The celebration in this poem is ultimately about the nativity of the son
and the poet who will reinscribe the mother as a lover.

This is precisely Whitman's accomplishment in *Leaves of Grass* and why it is "essentially a woman's book." By focusing on her fecundity—that is, the woman's *becoming* a mother—he temporarily liberates the female body from its future motherhood. In "Unfolded Out of the Folds," Whitman calls the woman's sexuality the poem from which his own poems come. In a word, the woman is nature, the wellspring (Whitman had learned from Emerson) of all poetry. With her exclusive ability to conceive life, she was Whitman's symbol of human growth, her sexuality the means to it. His book is a woman's book because its strength and vision come from the belief in nature as always creating us anew, always waking us up to life's passion—its "procreant urge" to be unfolded out of the folds of our existence. What the woman did afterwards *as* a mother was also worthy of inclusion in his poems, but her primary claim to his attention lay in the passionate act of creativity. She might even, like Ruth Hall if not Fanny Fern (who had no children), compete in a man's world and be included in the older poet's admiration of her, if not so clearly in the 1855 poet's depictions. For the younger Whitman, it was in nature and not society that the woman first flourished, in a state of innocence before the fall into intellect and the news that we existed as fathers and mothers instead of sons and daughters, mortal instead of immortal. Whitman never became a father himself, except to his siblings and the series of "sons" he collected in his old age. In his strong poetry, he wrote as the son who

never commits himself to a female lover. He might "turn the bridegroom out of the bed and stay with the bride" himself, but the other self remained back with the woman "aft the blinds of the window." Ever the voyeur (and the virgin), Walter sent Walt into a world of women that had existed—like Emerson's poetry—"before time was."

Notes

¹ John S. Haller, Jr., and Robin M. Haller, *The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), pp. 55-56; and *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, ed. Horace Traubel (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1915), II, 331.

² *The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America*, 38.

³ *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition*, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 74.

⁴ *Leaves of Grass*, 102.

⁵ *Walt Whitman: Prose Works 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1964), II, 389.

⁶ *Walt Whitman and the Body Beautiful* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 211.

⁷ *Prose Works 1892*, II, 389, 364.

⁸ Aspiz, 215.

⁹ *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, ed. Horace Traubel (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914), III, 452-53.

¹⁰ *The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America*, 62-63.

¹¹ Gay Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman* (New York: New York University Press, 1955), 177.

¹² *Walt Whitman: The Correspondence*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1961), II, 137.

¹³ *Correspondence*, II, 136.

¹⁴ *Correspondence*, II, 140.

¹⁵ Arthur Golden, "Nine Early Whitman Letters, 1840-1841," *American Literature*, 58 (October, 1986), 342-60.

¹⁶ *Leaves of Grass*, 65, 52.

¹⁷ Aspiz, 223.

¹⁸ *Leaves of Grass*, 39.

- ¹⁹ *Leaves of Grass*, 712.
- ²⁰ *Leaves of Grass*, 101.
- ²¹ *Leaves of Grass*, 31.
- ²² *Leaves of Grass*, 101.
- ²³ *Leaves of Grass*, 102.
- ²⁴ *Leaves of Grass*, 102.
- ²⁵ James M. Cox, "Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, and the Civil War," *Sewanee Review*, 69 (Spring, 1961), 185-204.
- ²⁶ R.W.B. Lewis, *Trials of the Word: Essays in American Literature and the Humanistic Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 12.
- ²⁷ Michael Orth, "Walt Whitman, Metaphysical Teapot: The Structure of 'Song of Myself,'" *Walt Whitman Review*, 14 (March, 1968), 16-24.
- ²⁸ "Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, and the Civil War," 187-88.
- ²⁹ *The Education of Henry Adams*, ed. Ernest Samuels and Jayne N. Samuels (New York: Library of America, 1983), 1070-71.
- ³⁰ *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 52.
- ³¹ *Leaves of Grass*, 387.
- ³² *Leaves of Grass*, 391.
- ³³ *Walt Whitman: The Correspondence*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1969), V, 73.
- ³⁴ Hawthorne chapter in work-in-progress.
- ³⁵ "Whitman and Motherhood: A Historical View," *American Literature*, 54 (March, 1982), 28-43.
- ³⁶ *Leaves of Grass*, 37-38.
- ³⁷ *Leaves of Grass*, 81.
- ³⁸ William White, "Fanny Fern to Walt Whitman," *American Book Collector*, 11 (May, 1961), 9.
- ³⁹ Milton E. Flower, *James Parton: The Father of Modern Biography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1951), 48.
- ⁴⁰ *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, III, 235-36; and *Ruth Hall and Other Writings*, ed. Joyce W. Warren (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 384.
- ⁴¹ "Peeps from under a Parasol" in *Ruth Hall and Other Writings*, 272.
- ⁴² See Justin Kaplan, *Walt Whitman: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), 216-17.
- ⁴³ Flower, 242.

⁴⁴ Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman's Champion: William Douglas O'Connor* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1978), 100-2.

⁴⁵ Flower, 38; see also Harriet Prescott Spofford, "James Parton," *Writer*, 5 (November, 1891), 231-34. Spofford, a neighbor of Parton in his later years, states that the marriage was a difficult one: Parton "had married Fanny Fern in a moment of chivalrous impulse Before a month had passed he discovered his mistake. Generous, noble, and true, Fanny Fern had suffered trials which made her morbid and difficult; and he had the hot, impetuous temper of youth. Separating at once but coming together out of regard to propriety and expediency, they lived under the same roof, sometimes in friendly habit, sometimes in a state of armed neutrality." Flower doubts that the couple actually separated but accepts Spofford's description of their turbulent marriage.

⁴⁶ *Hobomok and Other Writings on Indians*, ed. Carolyn L. Karcher (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986).

⁴⁷ *Leaves of Grass*, 391.