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DEATH AS REPRESSION, REPRESSION AS DEATH: A READING OF WHITMAN'S "CALAMUS" POEMS

In a desperate and comical moment several years before his death in 1892, Whitman wrote to his English admirer John Addington Symonds that he had fathered six children, referred to a grandson, a "fine boy, who writes to me occasionally," and generally sought to rebuff Symond's persistent inquiries. Symonds wrote,

> In your conception of Comradeship, do you contemplate the possible intrusion of those semi-sexual emotions & actions which no doubt occur between men? I do not ask, whether you approve of them, or regard them as a necessary part of the relation? But I should much like to know whether *you are prepared to leave them to the inclinations & the conscience of the individuals concerned?*

A mild enough question, but Whitman responded emphatically,

> Ab't the questions on Calamus pieces &c: they quite daze me . . . . 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 same time entirely undream'd & unreck'd possibility of morbid inferences—wh' are disavow'd by me & seem damnable.

After describing his broken health and explaining that "The writing and rounding of L of G. has been to me the reason-for-being, & life comfort," Whitman explained, "My life, young manhood, mid-age, times South, &c: have all been jolly, bodily, and probably open to criticism," by which he meant that he had been something of a hedonist and a seducer of women. Admitting that he had never married, he then concocted the whopper about his progeny.[1] As he told Edward Carpenter, another English admirer, there was indeed something *"furtive"* in his nature, "like an old hen."[2]

Symonds was perhaps the first to confront Whitman directly about the homosexual implications of the "Calamus" sequence, but he was

not the first to ask Whitman about his erotic history. During the late 1850s, Mrs. Abby Price, in whose home Whitman spent many happy hours—he considered her a surrogate mother—asked him "if he had ever been in love." According to her daughter Helen E. Price,

> After a long pause he answered somewhat reluctantly, I thought, "Your question, Abby, *stirs a fellow up."* Although he would not admit that he had ever been "really in love," he took from his pocket a photograph of a very beautiful girl (remember, he was still in his thirties) and showed it to us. That is all we ever knew about the original of the picture either then or afterwards, but I well remember the girl's exceptional beauty.

Helen E. Price was a teenager at the time, but she remembered this episode in part because of Whitman's habitual reticence about himself. "Self-revealing as his poems are in many respects," she commented, "he was an undemonstrative, reserved, and reticent man in things that lay deepest within him." Helen Price recalled another story which tended to confirm this impression.

> He once—I forget what we were talking about; friendship I think—said that there was a wonderful depth of meaning at second or third removes, as he expressed it, in the old tales of mythology. That of Cupid and Psyche, for instance; it meant to him that the ardent expression of affection in words often tended to destroy it. It was like the golden fruit which turned to ashes upon being grasped or even touched.
>
> As an illustration he told of the case of a young man whom he was in the habit of meeting every morning where he went to work.
>
> He said there had grown up between them a delightful, silent friendship and sympathy. But one morning when he went to the office the young man came forward, shook him violently by the hand and expressed in heated language the affection he felt for him.
>
> All the subtle charm of their unspoken friendship was from that time gone.[3]

On no occasion, then, did Whitman ever sanction a homosexual reading of the "Calamus" sequence. On the contrary. He went to great lengths to portray himself as having had at least one sweetheart, beginning as far back as the late 1850s, as we have seen in Helen Price's memoir. He pasted the picture of an attractive young woman in one of his private notebooks;[4] told Nelly O'Connor that he was prepared to marry a married woman other than herself;[5] authorized John Burroughs to state that during his young manhood "he sounded all experiences of life, with all their passions, pleasures, and abandonments";[6] wrote to his close friend and executor Richard Maurice Bucke about wishing (but in vain) that his two illegitimate dead children could be buried with him—they were to be disinterred from "down South";[7] tantalized his friend and biographer Horace Traubel with a tragic erotic secret presumably having to do with these children;[8] and pleased his housekeeper by displaying the portrait of a woman with a "charming, winning face" on his mantelpiece. Whitman called her "an old sweetheart of mine."[9] He was also furious when a newspaper interviewer reported him as having said, "I am an old bachelor who never had a love affair" and denied that he had said it.[10] The closest Whitman ever came to authorizing a homosexual reading of "Calamus" was his comment to Traubel, after Symonds had backed off, "I often say to myself about 'Calamus'—perhaps it means more or less than what I thought myself—means different: perhaps I don't know what it all means—perhaps never did know."[11] For Whitman, this statement was a significant concession.

Despite the efforts of several early biographers to track down Whitman's progeny and more generally to highlight the importance of his New Orleans "romance," since 1892 the biographical evidence that Whitman's sexual practice was primarily heterosexual has come to seem very scant indeed.[12] His brother George, for example, said that "I am confident I never knew Walt to fall in love with young girls or even to show them marked attention. He did not seem to affect the girls."[13] And Peter Doyle, who was nurtured and loved by Whitman during their post-Civil War Washington years explained, "I never knew a case of Walt's being bothered up by a woman. In fact, he had nothing special to do with any woman, except Mrs. O'Connor and Mrs. Burroughs. His disposition was different. Woman in that sense never came into his head."[14]

If "Woman in that sense never came into his head," Whitman certainly came into the head of many women. To one of them, Mrs. Anne Gilchrist, yet another English admirer, Whitman made the mistake of sending a ring, in August 1873, when he was deeply distraught because of his recent paralysis and bereavement (his mother had died several months previously). He wrote, "If you could look into my spirit & emotions you would be entirely satisfied & at peace . . . . The enclosed ring I have just taken from my finger & send you with my love."[15] During calmer days, Whitman tried to discourage her from emigrating, but she moved to Philadelphia in 1876 with the hope of becoming his wife and bearing him children. Mrs. Gilchrist's credulity is perhaps understandable; even Edward Carpenter believed in Whitman's children and subscribed to the New Orleans romance theory. Like Symonds, Carpenter was an English homosexual; with Symonds's posthumous blessing, he printed Whitman's "six children" letter in a 1902 article and reprinted it in *Days with Walt Whitman: With Some Notes on his Life and Work* (1906). In his chapter "Walt Whitman's Children," Carpenter carefully sifted the available biographical evidence, stressed the change in Whitman's behavior during his middle years when, according to Carpenter, "*liaisons* with the fair sex . . . . ceased to play a part in his life," and concluded that "Walt's attitude in 'Leaves of Grass' towards men or women is . . . singularly uniform. Both sexes seem to come equally within the scope of his love."[16] Previously, however, Carpenter had suggested that "in his poems we find his expressions of love towards men and towards women put practically on an equality—if anything indeed the references to the former are the more frequent and the more passionate."[17]

We know much more about Whitman's biography than his contemporaries did and are no longer beguiled by his fictive progeny. We understand that, as Whitman told Nelly O'Connor, he "did not envy men their wives but he did envy them their children."[18] As we have turned away from naive readings of Whitman's sexual boastfulness, whose compensatory function has become painfully apparent; as we have begun to wince when we read, "No dainty dolce affetuoso I," (in the opening poem of the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, later called "Starting from Paumanok");[19] as we have begun to recognize the obsession of Whitman's literary culture with "manliness" and to deplore Whitman's introjected homophobia;[20] there has been a

corresponding devaluation, or so it seems to me, of the emotional impact of the "Children of Adam" poems. They no longer seem as believable, hence brave, as they once did.[21] Female readers in particular seem unimpressed with these poems, which purport to reunify the physical and psychological components of heterosexual love for the good of the individual and the race. While students of both sexes are quick to notice the difference between Whitman's descriptions of the male and female body in "I Sing the Body Electric," for example, to notice how much more passion Whitman expends on the male body, female students tend to be troubled by this disparity. Whitman's women, it seems, are not as "well-hung" or as "fully equipt" as his men, despite the occasional robustness of their nipples and the prominence of their wombs.

There are exceptions, of course. There is the "full-grown lily's face" in the wonderful 1855 poem "Faces":

> She speaks to the limber-hipp'd man near the garden pickets,
> *Come here* she blushingly cries, *Come nigh to me limber-hipp'd man,*
> *Stand at my side till I lean as high as I can upon you,*
> *Fill me with albescent honey, bend down to me,*
> *Rub to me with your chafing beard, rub to my breast and shoulders.*[22]

There are numerous passages in the even more wonderful 1855 poem "The Sleepers." There is the lyrical sexual proof-text from the 1855 poem "I Sing the Body Electric," which was later transferred to the new "Children of Adam" section:

> 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.[23]

And, surely one of the longest lines Whitman ever wrote, there is "The hairy wild-bee that murmurs and hankers up and down, that gripes the full-grown lady-flower, curves upon her with amorous firm legs, takes his will of her, and holds himself tremulous and tight till he is satisfied,"

in the 1856 poem later called "Spontaneous Me," when it too was transferred to the "Children of Adam" cluster.[24] The image of bee and flower—an image much beloved by Emily Dickinson—portrays "nature" as resolutely heterosexual and sexist.

The "Children of Adam" poems, then, are not as popular as they once were—but even Mrs. Gilchrist was more deeply moved by the "Calamus" poems than by the "Children of Adam" cluster, and could not quite shake off her suspicion that in the "Children of Adam" poems Whitman had violated what she called "the truth that our instincts are beautiful facts of nature, as well as our bodies; and that we have a strong instinct of silence about some things."[25]

Yet as Symonds appears to have observed, the poet who resolved to "tell the secret" of his "days and nights" in the "Calamus" sequence and "to celebrate the need of comrades" employed a style that was both confessional and anticonfessional. Whitman's contemporaries, though in varying degrees disturbed by what they viewed as the self-congratulatory heterosexual lust, licentiousness and brutality of the "Children of Adam" poems, were largely unaware of the homosexual context that organizes the psychological tensions of the "Calamus" sequence. But if the disguised homosexual sensibility of the "Children of Adam" poems is highly problematized, so too is the more overtly homosexual sensibility of the "Calamus" cluster. Thus sensitive contemporary readers continue to puzzle over some of the regressive or morbid elements of the sequence that appear to contradict Whitman's bold intention, announced in the opening poem, "to escape from all the [heterosexual] standards hitherto publish'd."

Especially puzzling is Whitman's apparently perverse attraction to death, so that, for example, in the second poem of the sequence, he toys with the curious proposition that "the high soul of lovers welcomes death most." By reading the "Calamus" sequence in the context of Whitman's great vocational ode, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," I shall propose a fuller understanding of his elegiac themes and tone. As the title of this essay suggests, the "Calamus" sequence associates death with sexual repression, and sexual repression with death. Whitman uses death tropes both to deny the fulfillment of his eroticism and to affirm its vitality in the face of social and psycho-

logical oppression. This insight will, I hope, enable us to distinguish more finely between the homosocial, homoerotic, and homosexual elements that inform Whitman's conception of his gender identity. Ultimately, such distinctions will, I believe, lead to a fuller understanding of the tonal and psychological range of the "Calamus" lover, and of the social context within which he to some extent functions.

"Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" was first published with the title "A Child's Reminiscence" in late December 1859, though there is some evidence to suggest that Whitman read the poem aloud to the Price family at some time in 1858, when he was still employed as editor at the Brooklyn Daily *Times*.[26] Certainly, the internal chronology of the poem does not correspond to the known facts of Whitman's growth as a poet.[27] The textual child is on the verge of puberty; as a latent adolescent, Whitman was learning the printer's trade and there is no evidence to suggest that he already aspired to a career as a poet. The poem reveals the psychological truth of Whitman's experience as he understood that experience in about 1858-59, when he was living through the critical "Calamus" emotions that the sequence itself embodies. As Whitman understood his life in about 1858-59, the vocation of poet and the vocation of lover were both harmoniously fused and mutually antagonistic. To be a poet was to be the tenderest lover and to be a poet was to be no lover at all.

Though Whitman himself insisted that the poem was founded on a "real incident,"[28] the artifice of the story recounted by the speaker of "Out of the Cradle" is immediately apparent, dependent as that story is on Whitman's identification with a psychologically distressed bird, a bird who is love-stricken. Indeed, the turbulent psychological sincerity of the text is highlighted by Whitman's need to distance himself from the narrative that he has himself created. The speaker purports to be educated by the natural world and devoutly wishes to be educated by such a world. What he demonstrates, however, is that even as a textual child he cannot recapture the innocence of the 1855 poem "There Was a Child Went Forth," in which "the first object he look'd upon, that object he became." Rather, the psychologically later speaker of "Out of the Cradle," "A man, yet by [his] tears a little boy again," uniter not only of "here and hereafter" but even more crucially of here and before, looks upon objects that become *him*. In visiting nature's house, he

discovers only himself, which is to say that he reenacts the stages of his love-bereavement, even as he attempts to sublimate those bereavements through the poem.

As Stephen E. Whicher has remarked, "Out of the Cradle" presents an extreme example of "dramatic foreshortening," so that there are a number of key ellipses we encounter in our experience of the text.[29] Thus the epiphany that transforms the speaker immediately after the conclusion of the male bird's song is in no sense an inevitable or a predictable response to the bird's plight. The psychology behind this epiphany seems to me to be the poem's central crux, and I am suggesting that in the interior space of the poem where the fiction of a realistic, erotic occasion is no longer credible, the disruptive power of a suspended erotic occasion threatens the sanity of the text.

After the bird has come to recognize not only the permanence of this erotic bereavement but also the futility of his song insofar as that song is designed to effect the return of his female mate, Whitman writes,

> The aria sinking,
> All else continuing, the stars shining,
> The winds blowing, the notes of the bird continuous echoing,
> With angry moans the fierce old mother incessantly moaning,
> On the sands of Paumanok's shore gray and rustling,
> The yellow half-moon enlarged, sagging down, drooping, the face of the sea almost touching,
> The boy ecstatic, with his bare feet the waves, with his hair the atmosphere dallying,
> The love in the heart long pent, now loose, now at last tumultuously bursting,
> The aria's meaning, the ears, the soul, swiftly depositing,
> The strange tears down the cheeks coursing,
> The colloquy there, the trio, each uttering,
> The undertone, the savage old mother incessantly crying,
> To the boy's soul's questions sullenly timing, some drown'd secret hissing,
> To the outsetting bard.[30]

Why the epiphany? The outsetting bard has constructed a scene that signals the death of the nuclear family and of heterosexual love, portrayed under its most idyllic sign. A male bird loses his female mate, is unable to recapture her, and finally recognizes that her loss is irretrievable, despite the beauty of his seductive song. Why is the boy's response to this woeful scene ecstatic? What constellation of feelings compels him to name himself "the outsetting bard," now that he has unrepressed "some drown'd secret"? These questions move us toward the shadowy edges of the "Calamus" poems, where drowned secrets are very much at issue. Whitman discovers his vocation in "Out of the Cradle" when he acknowledges the death of his heterosexual aspirations and the birth of his homosexual identity. Discovering the seductiveness of the bird's song, he discovers his vocation as the "outsetting bard of love."[31] But he also discovers that he is to be the poet of unsatisfied love, when he is unable to develop and to sustain his highly elliptical fantasy of himself as the male bird's lover. Because of the absence at the poem's center and at the heart of Whitman's erotic experience, in discovering his potential sexual identity the speaker discovers "the low and delicious word death." This word symbolizes "The love in the heart long pent, now loose, now at last tumultuously bursting," and its chaotic, even maddening lack of focus.[32]

The self-discovery of the "Calamus" poems is even more daring than Whitman's discovery in "Out of the Cradle" of his tragicomic project of erotic sublimation, which enabled him to be both the tenderest lover and no lover at all. In "Out of the Cradle," Whitman discovered "the fire, the sweet hell within," which was not only "the destiny of me" but "The unknown want," a want unknown because it lacked a limited social objective. In short, it lacked the full consciousness of its need for an other. In the "Calamus" sequence, however, Whitman committed himself to a more radical sexual posture and to greater self-awareness, though this is not to imply that the psychological texture of the sequence is simple or monolithic, or even that the "Calamus" sequence is more profoundly moving to the common reader. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, the sequence depends on a very elaborate set of psychological checks and balances, so that Whitman is apt to counter his most straightforward confessions of homosexual love and especially of homosexual fulfillment with emotionally barren and socially acceptable apostrophes to some version of "Democracy, ma

femme."[33] Primarily, then, Whitman shades and bares his thoughts and this process can be tracked by observing the multiple uses to which he puts his death tropes.

Because of time considerations, it seems best now to concentrate on a single poem that is especially rich in its use of thanatopic and antithanatopic metaphors, the poem "Scented Herbage of My Breast." This second poem of the sequence, to which I referred earlier, begins,

> Scented herbage of my breast,
> Leaves from you I glean, I write, to be perused best afterwards,
> Tomb-leaves, body-leaves growing up above me above death . . .[34]

Whitman associates the poem's somewhat indeterminate central symbol with nature, with his body, with his poetry, and with his sexual suffering. As an act of faith, he asserts that all of these interrelated and inseparable forces will flourish after his death: after the relationship or relationships that inspired the poem have ceased to matter to the poet or even after Whitman himself has ceased to exist. The opening lines suggest that the poet is also one of his own readers, so that he too anticipates, accepts, or seeks to adopt a post-experiential perspective on his life and poetry. Paradoxically, however, that life is viewed as both over and in process. More clearly, Whitman states that he no longer anticipates the mass audience that still held a dominant place in his affections even in "Out of the Cradle": "O I do not know whether many passing by will discover you or inhale your faint odor, but I believe a few will." Extending the botanical metaphors that recall the more sharply defined botanical symbolism of "Song of Myself," especially in its brilliant sixth section, the poet develops the notion that he himself is baffled by his emotions and by their expression in his art. This theme highlights the confessional sincerity of his verse and tends to emphasize the power of his unconscious, but its truth value is difficult to assess. The poem does not, I think, enable us to determine whether Whitman means what he says, though the speaker's sincerity is not to be questioned.[35]

As the speaker continues to unpack the highly compressed opening lines 1-3, in which he juxtaposes "Tomb-leaves" and "body-leaves growing up above me above death," he continues to associate death

with love, making this association explicit in line 11. There follow the problematic lines,

> O I think it is not for life I am chanting here my chant of lovers, I think it must be for death,
> For how calm, how solemn it grows to ascend to the atmosphere of lovers,
> Death or life I am then indifferent, my soul declines to prefer,
> (I am not sure but the high soul of lovers welcomes death most.)[36]

As Donald Pease has recently observed in another context, "When one has no personal identity to lose, death cannot be experienced as a loss in this world."[37] Given the speaker's extreme alienation from the society that has caused him to sacrifice his passional life, he cannot sustain the ordinary language distinction between "life" and "death." Neither, however, is he yet ready to renounce this distinction entirely. After all, the poem and his life are still in process, though it has been necessary for him to abstract himself from the relationship or relationships that inspired it, a necessity that calls to mind Thoreau's stoical lament, "My life has been the poem I would have writ,/ But I could not both live and utter it."[38]

As the poem progresses toward its intellectually challenging conclusion, Whitman's thanatopic metaphors take on a life of their own and two core meanings emerge. In this poem as in some other poems in the "Calamus" sequence, Whitman anticipates a heroic death that will liberate him from the death-in-life which he associates with erotic bereavement and with sexual repression; as a marginally living human being, however, he continues to associate death with pain and especially with the pain of sexual self-alienation or repression. Whitman's "Calamus" poems, then, affirm "the real reality," the vitality of this passional life in the face of the social oppression to which he, as a homosexual poet, was subject.[39] Like other "Calamus" poems, "Scented Herbage of My Breast" seeks to negotiate between Whitman's sense of himself as a representative American bard and his sense of himself as a member of a sexual minority, small in our own day and minuscule in his, by invoking the notion of comradeship. But Whitman's most acute psychological assessments of the complexity of his passional stance drove him to create a new vocabulary of "death." If

he could redefine the meaning of "death," he could also redefine the meaning of "life."

> Give me your tone therefore O death, that I may accord with it,
> Give me yourself, for I see that you belong to me now above all, and are folded inseparably together, you love and death are,
> Nor will I allow you to balk me any more with what I was calling life,
> For now it is convey'd to me that you are the purports essential,
> That you hide in these shifting forms of life, for reasons, and that they are mainly for you,
> That you beyond them come forth to remain, the real reality,
> That behind the mask of materials you patiently wait, no matter how long,
> That you will one day perhaps take control of all,
> That you will perhaps dissipate this entire show of appearance,
> That may-be you are what it is all for, but it does not last so very long,
> But you will last very long.[40]

And so too, we might add, will the poem.

Notes

[1] *The Correspondence of Walt Whitman,* ed. Edwin Haviland Miller, 6 vols. (New York: New York University Press, 1961-77), 5:72-73. Subsequent references to this work will be abbreviated as *Corr.*

[2] As quoted in Edward Carpenter, *Days with Walt Whitman: With Some Notes on his Life and Work* (London: George Allen, 1906), 43.

[3] Helen E. Price, "Reminiscences of Walt Whitman," *The Evening Post,* New York, Saturday, May 31, 1919.

[4] *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman,* ed. Emory Holloway, 2 vols. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1921; rpt. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1972), 2:70.

[5] Ellen M. O'Connor (Calder), as cited in *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman,* 1:lviii-ix.

[6] As cited in Emory Holloway, "Whitman Pursued," in *On Whitman: The Best from American Literature,* ed. Edwin H. Cady and Louis J. Budd (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1987), 110-11.

[7] *Corr.* 5:202-03.

[8] There is an excellent discussion of Whitman's relationship with Traubel in Justin Kaplan, *Walt Whitman: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), 41-44, and passim, chapter 2.

[9] This dialogue is quoted in Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (Boston: Small Maynard, 1906), 389.

[10] As quoted in Kaplan, *Walt Whitman,* 43-44.

[11] As quoted in Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden,* 76.

[12] The most persistent of these biographers has been Emory Holloway, whose findings are admirably summarized in "The Growth of Walt Whitman Biography," in Gay Wilson Allen, *The New Walt Whitman Handbook* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), especially 34-36.

[13] "Notes from Conversations with George W. Whitman, 1893: Mostly in his Own Words," by Horace L. Traubel, in *In Re Walt Whitman,* ed. by Horace Traubel, Richard Maurice Bucke, and Thomas B. Harned (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1893), 34.

[14] *Calamus: A Series of Letters Written During the Years 1868-1880,* ed. Richard Maurice Bucke (Boston: Laurens Maynard, 1897), 25.

[15] *Corr.* 2: 234-35

[16] *Days with Walt Whitman,* 150-51.

[17] *Ibid.*, 149.

[18] Ellen M. Calder, "Personal Recollections of Walt Whitman," *Atlantic Monthly* 99 (June 1907), 830.

[19] *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum of the Printed Poems,* ed. Sculley Bradley, Harold W. Blodgett, Arthur Golden, William White, 3 vols. (New York: New York University Press), 2: 287. Subsequent references to Whitman's poems refer to this edition by volume and page number.

[20] On manliness, see David Leverenz, "The Politics of Emerson's Man-Making Words," *PMLA* 101 (January 1986), 38-56. On homophobia, see "Toward the Twentieth Century: English Readers of Whitman," in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 201-17.

[21] An exception here is Meridel LeSueur, whose essay "Jelly Roll" (1980) bestows high praise on "I Sing the Body Electric." More generally, LeSueur observes that "I would have become a midwest Christian ghost without Walt Whitman. He gave me the courage to demand and get a body." See "Jelly Roll," in *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song,* ed. Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom, Dan Campion (Minneapolis: Holy Cow!, 1981), 353. In part LeSueur is recalling a girlhood (to which she is still faithful) long ago.

[22] *Leaves* 1: 136.

[23] *Leaves* 1: 126.

[24] *Leaves* 1: 258.

[25] Anne Gilchrist, "An Englishwoman's Estimate of Walt Whitman," in *Anne Gilchrist: Her Life and Writings,* ed. Herbert Harlakenden Gilchrist (London: T. Fisher, Unwin, 1887; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1973), 289.

[26] Helen E. Price, as quoted in Richard Maurice Bucke, *Walt Whitman* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1883; rpt. New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1970), 29. Gay Wilson Allen, in *The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman* (New York: New York University Press, 1955; revised edition, 1967), 233, accepts her date.

[27] The first chapter of Allen's *The Solitary Singer* provides a thoroughly detailed account of Whitman's early life. Allen's facts have not been substantially altered by subsequent biographical research.

[28] "One day, in 1858 I think, he came to see us, and after talking awhile on various matters, he announced, a little diffidently I thought, that he had written a new piece. In answer to our inquiries, he said it was about a mocking bird, and was founded on a real incident." Helen E. Price, as quoted in Bucke, *Walt Whitman,* 29.

[29] Stephen E. Whicher, "Whitman's Awakening to Death: Toward a Biographical Reading of 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.'" *Studies in Romanticism* 1 (Autumn 1961), 24.

[30] *Leaves* 2: 349.

[31] This phrase appears in the poem's 1860 version, but the important qualifying words "of love" were eliminated after 1871 in an unfortunate revision.

[32] The emphasis on insanity is somewhat clearer in the 1860 version of the poem, in which the following lines appear after the plea, "O give me some clew! / O if I am to have so much, let me have more!":

> O a word! O what is my destination?
> O I fear it is henceforth chaos!
> O how joys, dreads, convolutions, human shapes, and all shapes, spring as from graves around me!
> O phantoms! you cover all the land, and all the sea!
> O I cannot see in the dimness whether you smile or frown upon me;
> O vapor, a look, a word! O well-beloved!
> O you dear women's and men's phantoms! (*Leaves* 2: 350n)

[33] "Whitman's Sexual Utopia," Modern Language Association, New York, December 1987. The paper forms part of a larger study, currently in progress, of gender themes in Whitman's life and work. The quotation is from the poem currently positioned as the fourth in the "Calamus" sequence, "For You O Democracy."

[34] *Leaves* 2: 365-66.

[35] In "Whitman's Achievements in the Personal Style in 'Calamus' " *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review,* 1 (December 1983), 36-47, M. Wynn Thomas emphasizes "the considerable degree of deliberate choice and conscious control with which, as there is ample evidence, Whitman labored to compose both individual poems and the collection as a whole." Though he does not address this point head on, Thomas seems to argue against the belief that the poems reflect "any immediate crisis in Whitman's private life" (38).

[36] *Leaves* 2: 366.

[37] Donald E. Pease, "Walt Whitman and the Vox Populi of the American Masses," in *Visionary Compacts: American Renaissance Writings in Cultural Context* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 153.

[38] *Collected Poems of Henry Thoreau,* ed. Carl Bode (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1964), 85.

[39] Robert K. Martin effectively traces the critical history of this oppression in "Walt Whitman," in *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), 3-8. See also 33-89, passim.

[40] *Leaves* 2: 367.