David S. Reynolds

WHITMAN AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY VIEWS OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Studying Whitman against the background of nineteenth-century views of gender and sexuality reveals that Whitman's erotic images were, in large part, a poetic response to representations of sexuality in American popular culture. In an essay entitled "A Memorandum at a Venture" Whitman identified two predominant viewpoints toward sexuality in America. The first, he wrote, was "the conventional one . . . of good folks and good print every where, repressing any direct statement" of sexuality and viewing it as something "sneaking, furtive, mephitic." The second view, "and by far the largest," he emphasized, was visible in the "wit, of masculine circles, and in erotic stories and talk," stories that dwelt on "merely sensual voluptuousness." Denouncing both views, Whitman declared that sex was a proper literary theme only when it was what he called "normal and unperverted," and asked for "a new departure — a third point of view," one that placed sex in the realm of "sanity" and "nature."[1]

Whitman's description of two conflicting viewpoints was in fact quite accurate. Having surveyed the total range of popular novels and newspapers in antebellum America, I have found that there were two main types of popular literature, what I call the Conventional and the Subversive, which represented opposing views of sexuality and gender issues. Conventional literature — such as popular domestic novels, religious tracts, and genteel poetry — typified that sensibility which Whitman attacked for being prudish, repressive, and furtive. Designed mainly for a female audience, Conventional literature valorized woman's powerful role as mother and moral exemplar and made little mention of her sexuality or her need for greater political or social rights.

As popular as this literature was, it is misleading to say, as many scholars have, that it dominated the literary scene in Whitman's day. Whitman was justified in claiming that "by far the largest" point of view toward sexuality was embodied in the "erotic stories and talk" of masculine circles. I have found that in the fifteen years just prior to the

first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the highly wrought, adventurous volumes published in America actually outnumbered the Conventional ones by nearly two to one. In the hands of such popular writers as George Thompson and George Lippard, this literature became notably Subversive in its nightmarishness, its political radicalism, and its rampant eroticism.

The Subversive writers were generally working-class advocates driven by a ferocious impulse to expose the American upper classes as rotten to the core. In order to do this, they wrote scathing novels and journalistic pieces that pictured the so-called "idle" rich engaged in various forms of sexual misbehavior. Many Subversive novels pictured upper-class men, such as clergymen or lawyers, who used every tool of manipulation and treachery to seduce young women, whose physical charms were inevitably described in detail. Others dramatized the intrigues of wealthy, sexually insatiable women, who demanded many lovers. There was nothing clean or genuine about relations between the sexes for Subversive radical democrats like George Thompson, who in his nearly 100 novels portrayed all varieties of sex: incest, sadomasochism, homosexuality, group sex, child sex, mass orgies. In the twisted world of Subversive fiction, sex was unconnected with love. Instead, it was governed by violence, entrapment, manipulation.

Whitman feared that such popular literature was contributing to what he regarded as America's alarming moral decline. He once wrote in his notebook: "In the plentiful feast of romance presented to us, all the novels, all the poems really dish up only one . . . plot, namely, a sickly, scrofulous, crude, amorousness."[2] Similarly, in *Democratic Vistas* he said that in most popular fiction and plays he saw only "the same endless tangled and superlative love-story," more highly seasoned than any previous sensational literature (*WCP*, 974, 975).

This love plot, Whitman believed, was at the very root of the problem of popular culture, for it was full of unhealthy distortions. In an 1857 newspaper article he wrote: "Who will underrate the influence of a loose popular literature in debauching the popular mind?"[3] He incorporated his protest against the love plot in his poetry, most overtly in "Song of the Exposition," in which he writes:

> Away with novels, plots, and plays of [...] the intrigues, amours of idlers,
> Fitted for only banquets of the night where dancers to late music slide,
> The unhealthy pleasures, extravagant dissipations of the few,
> With perfumes, heat and wine, beneath the dazzling chandeliers.

In opposition to this sensational popular literature, he wanted to treat sex as natural and genuine, free of hypocrisy and gamesmanship. He wrote in *Democratic Vistas* that the test of the great writer is "the absence in him of the idea of the covert, the lurid, the maleficent, the devil" (*WCP*, 982) — all of which Whitman saw in American sensational writings. American culture could be rescued, he believed, only through a new generation of poets who absorbed their culture but at the same time purified it and transformed it into something better.

To counteract what he saw as the corruptions and inhumanity of the love plot, Whitman borrowed sanitizing images from modern sciences and from new American religious movements that permitted a spiritual redefinition of sexual mores. The most useful sciences for him were physiology and phrenology. The 1840s and 1850s produced several books on human physiology that lent a new objectivity to the exploration of human sexuality. As editor of the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* Whitman approvingly reviewed several physiological books, and in his poetry he tried to supplant the grotesque distortions of the love plot with the frank freedoms of physiology. In the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass* he denounced literature "which distorts honest shapes" and wrote: "Exaggerations will be revenged in human physiology" (*WCP*, 19). The first full passage on sex in "Song of Myself" shows him taking care to place his persona in the objective, clean realm of physiology, distant from what he considered the nasty arena of sensational sex:

> Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and clean,
> Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and none shall be less familiar than the rest.

Throughout his poetry, his exploration of sexual organs and

functions is guided by his impulse to remove sex from the lurid indirections of the popular love plot. When in his poetry he sings praise to the naturalness of copulation, to jetting sperm or cohering wombs, or when he lovingly records the private parts of men and women, he displays his prevailing interest in ushering sex from the coarsely sensational to the honestly physiological. "Of physiology from top to toe I sing," he wrote in the 1867 edition. This idea is linked directly to his distaste for sensational fiction in his 1860 poem "Says," which contains the lines:

> And [I say] that exaggerations will be sternly revenged in your own physiology, and in other persons' physiology also;
> And that clean-shaped children can be jetted and conceived only where natural forms prevail in public, and the human face and form are never caricatured;
> And I say that genius need never more be turned to romances,
> (For facts properly told, how mean appear all romances.)

Of equal use to Whitman in combating the luridness of popular romances was phrenology, the pseudoscience that attributed human impulses to distinct organs of the brain. Leading phrenological theorists, such as Whitman's friends Orson and Lorenzo Fowler, had underscored the naturalness of sexuality when they had argued that the two most powerful brain organs were amativeness (sexual love between men and women) and adhesiveness (comradely affection between people of the same sex). For Whitman, phrenology provided another means of dealing with sex with combined candor and tact. He wrote confidently: "I know that amativeness is just as divine as spirituality — and this which I know I put freely in my poems" (*NF*, 40). Elsewhere he wrote that the underlying qualities of his poetry were "a powerful sense of physical perfection, strength and beauty, with great amativeness, adhesiveness . . . " (*NF*, 66). He justified his most openly sexual poetry sequences, "Children of Adam" and "Calamus," by specifying that the former was designed to illustrate "amativeness," or heterosexual love, and that the latter focused on "adhesiveness," or comradely fellowship.[4]

Whitman also profited from another antebellum phenomenon associated with sexuality: what I call sexual antinomianism, or the

effort to redefine sexual norms according to moral or religious belief. This period was a particularly fertile one for sexual antinomians of various kinds: the Mormons, the spiritualists, the Oneidan perfectionists, the Fourierists, and the free-love advocates all introduced highly unconventional sexual codes based upon personal belief. Varied as these groups were, all of them were convinced that bold sexual experimentation could go hand in hand with spiritual righteousness. They introduced a special vocabulary that described sexual experience in terms of mysticism and electrical, magnetic attraction. Often in his poems Whitman uses the mystical or electrical terminology of the sexual antinomians to uplift passages that otherwise might be scabrous. In his famous self-portrait in "Song of Myself" of his persona as "hankering, gross, mystical, nude," the word "mystical" gives a spiritual tinge to this otherwise shocking line. The free fusion of the sexual and the spiritual is evident in many Whitman poems, such as "I Sing the Body Electric," which begins with the sexually antinomian lines:

> I sing the body electric,
> The armies of those I love engirth me, and I engirth them, . . .
> And discorrupt them, and charge them full with the charge of the soul.

The images in "Children of Adam" and "Calamus" of the "divine nimbus" around the human form, or the "divine list" of female body parts, or "the divine wife" and "the divine husband" engaged in "the act divine" all fuse intense spirituality and sexuality in the vocabulary of the sexual antinomians.

Whitman's unifying imagination produced not only inventive combinations of popular sexual beliefs; it also engendered a wholly original fusion of sex and nature images. Since his overriding goal was to absorb his popular culture's shocking images but at the same time to purify them, he repeatedly used what might be termed *cleansing rhetoric*; that is, the yoking together of refreshing nature images and sensational ones in an effort to overcome prurient sexuality. Cleansing rhetoric dominates the famous opening section of "Song of Myself," in which he moves from a rejection of "Houses and rooms full of perfumes" (reminiscent of the entrapment and artifice Whitman

always associated with popular romances) through a cleansing line that fuses sex and nature images ("Echos, ripples . . . . loveroot, silkthread, crotch and vine") to a tentative sexual passage ("A few light kisses . . . . a few embraces . . . . the reaching around of arms") to a completely joyous picture of health in nature ("The feeling of health . . . . the song of me rising from bed and greeting the sun").

Cleansing rhetoric also uplifts the long sexual passage in "Song of Myself," describing the rich woman's erotic fantasy about the twenty-eight young men she sees bathing in a nearby stream. This scene might be viewed as Whitman's cleansing of popular sensational images, for many sensational novels of the day depict wealthy women who fantasize about having numerous lovers. Like the sensationalists, Whitman stresses that the woman is wealthy, that her sexual fantasies are secretive, that she fantasizes about many lovers. But Whitman revises the voyeuristic eroticism of the popular writers in ways that make it natural and redemptive rather than selfish or destructive. There is absolutely no seduction or manipulation involved in the scene of the woman viewing the bathers. Indeed, there is no sexual contact, since the bathers do not even see her staring at them. Voyeuristic fantasy is stripped of malice and is conveyed through refreshing, baptismal images of nature. Not only are the splashing men the picture of fun and health, but the woman's rising orgasmic excitement is made pure and beautiful because it is adeptly fused with cleansing nature images. Whitman writes:

> 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.

The carefree sport of the bathers precludes any sort of machination or intrigue, and the dazzling final image, in which the spray of water is fused metaphorically with the spray of orgasm, weds the sexual act with frolic in nature.

Throughout his poetry Whitman adopts sexual images common in sensational literature but converts them into lovely metaphors for his

aesthetic enjoyment of nature. Instead of gloating lasciviously over a woman's "snowy globes," as did many popular writers, he writes, "Press close barebosomed night!" Instead of smacking his lips over a voluptuous woman, he declares himself the lover of the "voluptuous coolbreathed earth." Instead of portraying sex as a violent game that thrives on sham and broken homes, he emphasizes that his rapturous union with nature is a consecrated marriage in which the partners "hurt each other as the bridegroom and bride hurt each other." This fusion of sex and nature is equally evident in many other images in his poetry, such as the "winds whose soft-tickling genitals rub against me," "the clasping and sweet-flesh'd day," or "the souse of my lover the sea, as I lie willing and naked."

In his most daringly sexual poems, such as "From Pent-Up Aching Rivers," "A Woman Waits for Me," and "Spontaneous Me," Whitman interweaves images from phrenology, physiology, sexual antinomianism, and nature in a wholesale effort to use *all* his cultural arsenal for ridding sex of tawdriness and overcoming the iniquities of the popular love plot. His intention to revise the treatment of sex is made clear in opening lines of "Pent-Up Aching Rivers," in which he calls sex that which "I am determin'd to make illustrious, even if I stand sole among men." Sex does become illustrious in the poem, which is earnestly passionate instead of licentious, which sings praise to the phallus and procreation in physiological terms, which celebrates "the act divine" by "divine" husbands and wives in the spiritual language of sexual antinomianism, which creatively mixes frankly sexual images of fondling and copulation with exhilarating pictures of the sights and smells of nature. "A Woman Waits for Me" advertises sex "without shame" for both men and woman, as Whitman tries mightily to overcome prurient furtiveness by glorifying healthy sexuality in which sexual prowess is fused with patriotism: "I pour the stuff to start sons and daughters fit for these States, I press with slow rude muscle." In "Spontaneous Me" Whitman again weaves a subtle tapestry of sex and nature images, creating a dialectic between the two and above all omitting any reference to the popular love plot that he so fiercely detested.

In conclusion, Whitman's treatment of sex can be profitably viewed as a response to the literary context within which he was writing.

Realizing that "by far the largest" view toward sex was expressed in the "merely sensual voluptuousness" of "erotic stories and talk," he succeeded in creating what he called "a new departure — a third point of view," one that placed sex in the realm of natural passion and aesthetic perception. By creating rich poetic alternatives to the sensationalized eroticism of his day, Whitman became our most *genuinely* erotic poet.

NOTES

[1]Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982) [hereafter cited as *WCP*], 1031, 1032.

[2]Walt Whitman, *Notes and Fragments*, ed. Richard Maurice Bucke (Ontario: A. Talbot & Co., n.d.) [hereafter cited as *NF*], 146.

[3]Walt Whitman, *I Sit and Look Out: Editorials from the Brooklyn Daily Times*, ed. Emory Holloway and Vernolian Schwartz (New York: AMS Press, 1966), 113.

[4]Walt Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, ed. Edward F. Grier (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), I, 413.