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## **WHITMAN AND THE SEDUCTION OF THE READER**

We would not be discussing Walt Whitman today if we had not felt the enormous attractive power of his poetry, how it takes hold of us and leads us to spiritual and aesthetic heights. My question in the present context, then, is how Whitman grapples us so closely—what techniques does he use to make us his loyal and fervent readers?

Another way to approach this subject is to ask where this author places himself in his poems. How does Whitman choose to relate to the reader, with the text now as his medium or substitute? Literary criticism is rightly concerned with the question of where the author places himself or herself in the text. Theoretically it is impossible to read a text without this being clear, without the reader coming at least to some implicit decision about this relationship. With Whitman, the reader cannot be in doubt.

Whitman clarifies his intended relationship to the reader at many points, telling exactly how we should read him. His approach is consciously and blatantly seductive. He presents his book as his physical person and his purpose as a sexual relationship with the reader. Each reader is invited to enter into a relationship with Whitman such as he has never had with a poet before. It is, for many, an uncomfortable and disturbing relationship, as Whitman predicted it would be.

One of the “Calamus” poems of 1860 is addressed to “Whoever you are holding me now in hand” (LG, 115). The non-resisting reader will experience a moment of shock when he realizes that he is now holding this book as if it were a human being he held in his lap. The poem, in fact, immediately charges any reader who cannot abandon himself to this seductive writer to “let go your hand from my shoulders” (116).

If the reader does give in to Whitman’s solicitation, he is invited to accept the reward of kissing this book. The kiss is specified as erotic, not some reverential kiss such as one might give to the Bible in a liturgical ceremony. It is “the comrade’s long-dwelling kiss or the new

husband's kiss." Now that he has accepted the book as a real person and an erotic partner, the sympathetic reader is invited to a more permanent relationship: "thrust me beneath your clothing," Whitman says, "where I may feel the throbs of your heart . . ." (116).

Whitman perfected the technique of reader-seduction long before Roland Barthes wrote the theoretical treatise on it (*Le plaisir du texte*, 1973). Whitman did not, of course, invent erotic literature, but he did invent the text which is itself erotic and self-consciously seductive. The last line of the last "Calamus" poem reads "Be it as if I were with you. (Be not too certain but I am now with you)"—reminding the reader who has gone this far that he has agreed to take the book along as a permanent erotic partner.

This seduction of the reader is no small or partial aspect of the poetry, no momentary mood. It appears throughout his work. The famous "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," for example, is another important statement in Whitman's campaign to seduce his reader. In this poem, Whitman once more presents his book to the reader as his physical body: "Closer yet I approach you," he announces as the poem begins to mount to its climax; "Who knows but I am enjoying this?/ Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot see me?" Whitman as author lurks in the shadows of his text, yearning for the moment of sexual contact. This authorial presence, at once physical and invisible, urges upon the reader a relationship that is undeniably sexual union: he insists at the climax of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" that it is a relation "which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you" (163-64).

The technique of reader-seduction served Whitman well in later collections, such as "Drum-Taps." It is here that Whitman imagines himself and his reader as individuated drops from the great ocean of life, momentarily separated but destined to merge again into final unity. These poems are written, he tells the reader, "for your dear sake my love" (107). The writer presents himself disguised as the book the future reader is holding: "(As I glance upward out of this page studying you, dear friend, whoever you are)" (322).

Whitman is quite explicitly aware that the sexual activity he

proposes to the reader is regarded by many as evil: depending on the societal context such activity is either unconventional, immoral, or illegal. The most dangerous of all of his poems begins "As I lay with My Head in Your Lap Camerado." In this seductive situation he warns: "The confession I made I resume, what I said to you and the open air I resume . . . I know my words are weapons full of danger, full of death,/ For I confront peace, security, and all the settled laws, to unsettle them . . . And the threat of what is call'd hell is little or nothing to me,/ And the lure of what is call'd heaven is little or nothing to me" (322).

Whitman is a disturbing and demanding presence in his poetry. He confronts his reader with all of the dangers of illicit sexual encounter, and all of the potential ecstasy as well.

Whitman's erotic relationship with his reader received special emphasis in the middle editions of *Leaves of Grass*. The following poignant lines were placed in a dramatic position, at the ending of both the 1860 and 1867 editions:

Now lift me close to your face while I whisper,  
What you are holding is in reality no book, nor part of a book;  
It is a man, flush'd and full-blooded—It is I—*So Long!*  
—We must separate awhile—Here! take from my lips this kiss;  
Whoever you are, I give it especially to you;  
*So long!*—And I hope we shall meet again. (604)

This is reluctant parting of lovers, at the conclusion of what must surely be America's most personal book.

The sentiment of this poem must have met with Whitman's approval, with his feeling of how the collection should end, since he incorporated a powerful version of the same seduction at the end of all later editions of *Leaves of Grass*, in the poem which came to be called "So Long!" Here the poet finally drops his book-disguise.

Camerado, this is no book,  
Who touches this touches a man,  
(Is it night? are we here together alone?)

It is I you hold and who holds you?  
I spring from the pages into your arms—

This final poem of *Leaves of Grass* then comes to be one of the most erotic of all of Whitman's seduction poems. The long-dead poet seems now to depend on the active living presence of the future reader to guide him through the complete sexual act. The author becomes the passive partner and the reader is expected to take the active part in their love-making. He continues:

O how your fingers drowse me,  
Your breath falls around me like dew, your pulse lulls the  
tympan of my ears,  
I feel immersed from head to foot,  
Delicious, enough.

Then, as a passive, manipulated lover who rises towards climax and satiation, he continues:

Enough O deed impromptu and secret,  
Enough O gliding present—enough O summ'd-up past.

The parting must then finally come; but it is the parting, Whitman insists, of lovers who have shared a sexual experience:

Dear friend whoever you are take this kiss,  
I give it especially to you, do not forget me . . . . (505-06)

Quite likely, no reader has ever had to cope with this kind of authorial demand before, with so intense an involvement with a writer.

## II.

Whitman's seduction of the reader is no minor adjunct to his poetic work. It is thoroughly appropriate and even essential in view of his major theme. In the first poem of the earliest edition of *Leaves of Grass*, he solicited the attention of the serious reader, addressing him as the one who is "so proud to get at the meaning of poems." In fact, he

proclaimed that he would reveal to this careful reader something of the greatest value: "Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems." Whitman went on to specify what he thought this origin might be: "Urge and urge and urge, / Always the procreant urge of the world." Whitman grew clearer and bolder the next year. In his second edition of *Leaves of Grass*, he repeated himself: "Always the procreant urge of the world," and then added the phrase, "always sex."

The proclamation—that the sexual urge is the origin of poetry—stands like a great arch at the beginning of *Leaves of Grass*, orienting us towards a proper understanding of its content. This is the gateway through which can be seen the profound and pervasive sexuality of the collection as a whole. The theme is repeated at several points. In his poem called "From Pent-Up Aching Rivers," in a catalogue that seems to include everything, Whitman declares that sex is the warp and the woof of the whole fabric. In "A Woman Waits for Me," he says that for a human being "all were lacking if sex were lacking." And in still another poem he will always be wandering the earth and singing, "Immortal . . . Bathing my self, bathing my songs in sex" ("Ages and Ages Returning at Intervals"). For Whitman, the sexual drive and the artistic creative drive are the same, and sexuality is the major subject of his art.

This proclamation both of the sexual origin of his poetry and of its sexual subject matter will stand unchanged in "Song of Myself" through all of its many printings. Whitman, in fact, goes on to fill his first edition of *Leaves of Grass* with descriptions of a great variety of sexual experiences which had never been described before in public writings. We can profitably spend a few minutes sampling the contents of just the first edition.

The poem that would become "Song of Myself" begins with the intensely realized scene of oral sexuality. The scene is highly charged with the symbolic energy that will carry the long poem through to its conclusion. The poem then rises to a first crisis: a group of frolicking young men suddenly become mean and dangerous as they turn all of their sexual play upon one of their group. This is also the poem, of course, in which Whitman acts out a role as the female voyeur, watching the 28 bathers and then imagining herself, unseen, swimming

and playing intimately with them. Still later in the poem, contact even with the earth is an extreme sexual experience: "Prodigal! you have given me love! . . . therefore I to you give love! / O unspeakable passionate love!" Then some lines later: Something I cannot see puts upward libidinous prongs, / Seas of bright juice suffuse heaven." Even the experience of listening to a soprano is intensely erotic. "She convulses me like the climax of my love-gripe."

The next poem in *Leaves of Grass*—one that would later come to be called "The Sleepers"—describes not only the sexual manipulation of sleeping persons, but solitary masturbation and an assignation with a lover on the beach as well.

The first-edition poem which would come to be called "I Sing the Body Electric," and which would become the most important poem in the "Children of Adam" collection, deliberately eroticizes the human body, featuring the sexually arousing details first of the male and then of the female body. This is no merely aesthetic studio exercise; the poem ends with a vivid description of lovemaking: "lovesh swelling and deliciously aching, / Limitless limpid jets of love hot and enormous . . . quivering jelly of love . . . white blow and delirious juice, / Bridegroom night of love working surely and softly into the prostrate dawn . . ." It is also in this poem, "I Sing the Body Electric," that Whitman imagines himself sharing the mother's breast with her infant, as he continues to explore a very broad range of sexual experiences. He watches a parade of firemen, for example, and his eye comes to focus on what he calls "the play of the masculine muscle through the cleansing trowsers and waistbands."

Even his own sexual origins are described and celebrated, in the poem that would become "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." This is the poem in which the artist attempts to find his earliest self, to swim back up the stream of life to his origins. He comes finally to his father and his own beginnings: "he that had propelled the father stuff at night, and fathered him . . . and she that conceived him in her womb and birthed him . . ."

In the poem "Trickle Drops," also in the first edition, Whitman asserts that poetry is seminal fluid; readers had already found the same

figure in the preface to this revolutionary new book.

For Whitman, then, the newly discovered area of sexual experience is both the cause of his new poetry and the main subject that the new poetry describes and celebrates in this first edition.

### III.

None of the traditional studies of Whitman accounts for this fullness and intensity of his poetry. Most of Whitman's critics and biographers have been extraordinarily shy about the revolutionary sexuality explored in his work. There has been something overly sanitized and genteel in the academic handling of Whitman, which has left this central theme of his writing virtually untouched. Critics and biographers have preferred to write books and articles about Whitman's debts to opera or phrenology, his supposed illegitimate children; they have discussed Whitman and other writers, his religion, his politics, or his catalogues—thus missing the central point he labored a lifetime to express. Academic critics have bent Whitman's poetry away from his intent, have finally trivialized a great writer by refusing to read the main message of his manifesto. They do not begin to describe the powerful energies set up in his poetry.

But the Whitman I have been describing does seem to belong to an old tradition in American poetry, a tradition with origins in Emerson himself. Emerson spoke of "the ejaculations of a few imaginative men" (Whicher, 237) creating all of the religions of the world. The orator, the singer or the poet ejaculated "Logos" or the sacred "Word" (239), according to Emerson. All of these "words and deeds," he declared, are "modes of the divine energy" (225), as Whitman would also affirm. These phrases are from his famous essay "The Poet," a version of which Whitman heard and on which he had reported, at the beginning of his own poetic career. In his journal Emerson cried out, "give me initiative, spermatic, prophesying, man-making words" (Porte, 271). But this tradition of poetry was not locked away in secret. James Russell Lowell's famous essay on Emerson, in the February 1861 issue of *The Atlantic*, praised his "masculine faculty of fecundating other minds." This is the poetic tradition to which Whitman belongs, a tradition that a new generation of critics will look at with more ease.

#### IV.

Compared with our day, Whitman's was an era of dark ignorance and crippling misinformation concerning sexual facts, concerning even rudimentary physiology. There existed for him and for his readers no body of concepts and fixed terminology. No scientific data had been collected, nor any helpful compilations of sociological statistics; there was no reasoned discourse or open debate, no public vocabulary in general use. There were in fact no words describing sexual experiences that could be publicly spoken! All were wrapped in whispers and shame; all were vague and some were actually misleading. The medical and clerical establishments, in their advice to boys or to young women about to be married, were so circumspect that it was virtually impossible to tell what the manuals were speaking for or warning against. Doctors who were interested in the subject had to write in Latin, ransacking the antique vocabulary of a dead language for words to describe current human experiences. Sexuality was the subject still waiting to be born in those pre-Freudian days.

Whitman came as an explorer into a field that was a vast white space on the map of human behavior. As Robert K. Martin has said, Whitman's was the first book of its kind in 2000 years. Readers can easily excavate striking new images and names for experiences that had never been described before, at least in America. Whitman can be forgiven the enthusiastic reports of an explorer and discoverer. A single poem like "From Pent-up Aching Rivers," for example, yields fresh images, new fantasies, and emotive words for experiences that had not yet been described. Sexual experience is the armature on which Whitman wound the long strings of his words. The poet who sang the body electric would approve of the electrical figure.

In conclusion, let me recapitulate some of these thoughts and insights in three points: (1) Whitman declared the origin of poetry to be the sexual drive; (2) the subject matter of his poetry is primarily the exploration and definition of a variety of sexual experiences; (3) his method of relating to the reader throughout his poetry is primarily by sexual seduction, achieved by placing himself within the text as an erotic partner for the reader. His work comes to us as a manifesto (in an age of manifestoes) of sexual description and exploration. He would

overwhelm us with a richly complex but unified and forceful experience.

#### Note

All quotations are from *Walt Whitman: Leaves of Grass: A Comprehensive Reader's Edition*, edited by Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: W. W. Norton Co., 1965).