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STRATEGIES OF SEX IN WHITMAN'S POETRY

He wanted to be liked, to be thought of as a good companion, shirt open at the neck, hand on hip, a saunterer in the crowd. He would be "no stander above men and women or apart from them."[1] Only Pharisees and hypocrites would find anything to murmur at in Walt Whitman's tolerance of an opium-eater or a common prostitute. If he stood up for the stupid and crazy, was this not the way laid down by the founder of Christianity?

But homosexuality was different. In the nineteenth century deviant sexual behavior was regarded as a vice — so abhorrent that it was scarcely ever mentioned . . . certainly not in polite society. It was as though the reading public did not know what homosexuality was until, in 1895, Oscar Wilde brought his libel suit against Lord Queensberry and "the Love that dare not speak its name" was made plain.[2] Whereupon there was a tremendous outcry and Wilde was put on trial and sentenced to two years at hard labor.

Whitman was fully aware of the peril in which he stood — there were those who would severely condemn what he called love. In the poem titled "As if a Phantom Caress'd Me" the poet is walking with a lover. Here as elsewhere the gender of the lover is not specified, but the lover is the active partner and I think there can be no question that the lover is a man.

> As if a phantom caress'd me,
> I thought I was not alone walking here by the shore;
> But the one I thought was with me as now I walk by
> the shore, the one I loved that caress'd me,
> As I lean and look through the glimmering light, that
> one has utterly disappear'd,
> And those appear that are hateful to me and mock me.

He was afraid of the hateful mockers. If he wished to write about love he would have to do so in a manner that would be acceptable to the public. And he did want to write about love — he thought a great deal about love, especially the love of one man for another.

One way to make it acceptable would be to make it general — not the love of one man for another but of men for one another. This would defuse the sexuality — no one objects to men being friends together. He would speak of a new kind of consciousness, a bonding between men.

> I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon,
> I will make divine magnetic lands,
> With the love comrades,
> With the life-long love of comrades . . . .
>
> I will make inseparable cities with their arms about each other's
> necks,
> By the love of comrades,
> By the manly love of comrades.

And this love would be quite acceptable — indeed, for the good of the state. This poem, "For You O Democracy," concludes with the line,

> For you these from me, O Democracy, to serve you ma femme!

The great female Democracy would be pleased to see men with their arms about each other's necks.

Whitman frequently expresses this hope — the passage in "Song of Myself" where the woman spies on the young men bathing is a dramatic rendering of the theme.

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

You know how it goes.

> An unseen hand also pass'd over their bodies,
> It descended tremblingly from their temples and ribs.

This, then, is what he will do: make the love of man for man a general love — not the kind that lurks in corners but the kind that goes swimming and frolics in the open air. Women will accept it, and the

hateful mockers will be silenced.

But only if it is made to seem innocent . . . just holding hands and putting their arms about each other's necks. Now, whether Whitman himself had such platonic relations, or believed that they would come into being and be generally accepted, I have no way of knowing. I am concerned with his poems, how they are written and what they appear to say. And I think that many people have a mistaken idea of Whitman. For example, they think he spoke frankly on the subject of sex. I think they have swallowed his bait, hook, line, and sinker.

Consider these lines from "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand," in which, it is said, Whitman reveals his homosexuality. He invites the reader,

> . . . first watching lest any person
> for miles around approach unawares, . . .
> Here to put your lips upon mine . . .
> With the comrade's long-dwelling kiss or the new
> husband's kiss,
> For I am the new husband and I am the comrade.

It may seem that he is declaring his homosexuality, for the kiss of the comrade is the same as a kiss between husband and wife. But let us suppose a reader who could hardly imagine that such a thing as homosexual love existed — that is, the common reader in Whitman's day. What then would be the effect of the passage? Rather than conveying the idea of sex between men would the effect not be to make the comrade's kiss seem chaste? The idea of a male comrade behaving like a husband is too far-fetched — it must be a figure of speech. One is accustomed to seeing such figures of speech in Scripture — is not Christ spoken of as a bridegroom? The "comrade's long-dwelling kiss," therefore, is a gesture of affection only — not desire.

At the same time, if the reader were homosexual he would see the kiss of the comrade for what it actually was — an expression of homosexual feelings. So Whitman could have his cake and eat it too —safeguard his reputation and express his hidden, illicit feelings to those who felt as he did.

The strategy worked, and he used it frequently. Gestures of love between men are made to seem just friendly. The confusion of love with friendship appears in "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing." The oak is

> Uttering joyous leaves all its life without a friend a lover near.

"I am he," Whitman declares in "Song of Myself," "attesting sympathy." Sympathy is not sex. He is

> Extoller of amies and those who sleep in each other's arms . . .

Who could find fault with such friendly relations? It is just affection and keeping warm.

In order to make the common reader think that "the dear love of comrades" is innocent, that is, asexual, Whitman defuses sex altogether — he makes the love of man and woman innocent too. There is no erotic attraction. Yes, I know what he has to say in "I Sing the Body Electric," how painstakingly he describes sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. I shall return to this later — for the moment I shall only say that the description is unconvincing. In several places Whitman makes the woman a comrade like the male. She is not an object of desire, for all bodies, male and female, are the same, and the difference that creates desire has been eliminated. In "I Sing the Body Electric," he asks,

> Have you ever loved the body of a woman?
> Have you ever loved the body of a man?
> Do you not see that these are exactly the same to all in all nations
> and times all over the earth?

The audacity of this is breathtaking — not because it is frank but because it lies so bravely, telling the reader to disregard what he knows, the evidence of the senses. In passages such as this Whitman is a very chaste poet — it would seem that, as Paul urged, he has made himself a eunuch for Heaven's sake, for his vision of a new consciousness, a nation of men openly loving one another.

It is, however, a mask, and sometimes the mask slips. Then we see that there is another side to the "love of comrades," that it is actively sexual. These lines from "Native Moments" in the "Children of Adam" section of *Leaves of Grass* describe a band of homosexuals on a bender.

> Give me now libidinous joys only,
> Give me the drench of my passions, give me life coarse and rank,
> Today I consort with Nature's darlings, tonight too,
> I am for those who believe in loose delights, I share the midnight orgies of young men,
> I dance with the dancers and drink with the drinkers,
> The echoes ring with our indecent calls, I pick out some low person for my dearest friend . . .

Such admissions, however, are few and far between, and only the occasional reader would know what Whitman was talking about. To most readers Whitman's keeping low company would seem no more than that — disreputable, perhaps, but not a vice.

There is no sex about it — "brethren and lovers" are the same. All bodies are the same:

> The body of my love, the body of the woman I love,
> The body of the man, the body of the earth . . .
>
> ("Spontaneous Me")

When two are sleeping side by side:

> . . . the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in the cool night . . .
>
> ("When I Heard at the Close of the Day")

who is sleeping by me? Man? Woman? It doesn't matter, for

> Do you not see that these are exactly the same to all in all nations and times all over the earth?

"It is a painful thing," he writes, "to love a man or woman to excess, and yet it satisfies, it is great." ("Starting from Paumanok") But nowhere does he show the love of a particular man for a particular man, or of a man for a woman, or a woman for a woman. As I have said, and D.H. Lawrence said long ago, love in Whitman is always general — it is never love for an individual. Love for the individual, that is, passionate love, is sometimes mentioned, but it does not have a face. Whitman gives us descriptions, and they are superb in their way, but he does not show the drama of individuals loving and hating. There can be no drama for there is no passion, and there is no passion because the element of sex that affects human behavior in all sorts of dramatic ways has been eliminated.

Another strategy was pretending to be a lover of women. I have mentioned the description of heterosexual intercourse in "Children of Adam":

> This is the female form,
> A divine nimbus exhales from it from head to foot,
> It attracts with fierce undeniable attraction . . .
>
> ("I Sing the Body Electric")

The description of intercourse follows. This must be one of the passages that offended reviewers of *Leaves of Grass.*

> Hair, bosom, hips, bends of legs, negligent falling hands all diffused, mine too diffused,
> Ebb stung by the flow and flow stung by the ebb, love-flesh swelling and delicious aching . . .

It is, however, only a description — there is no passion in it for, as I have said, there are no faces. The speaker might as well be describing gymnastics.

> Without shame the man I like knows and avows the deliciousness of his sex,
> Without shame the woman I like knows and avows hers.
>
> ("A Woman Waits for Me")

All right then, let us have sex without shame. But what about privacy? What about the wish of one particular individual to be with another particular individual? Without privacy there is no passion, and when Whitman describes heterosexual love one has the impression that he got the positions right but the feelings wrong. As Lawrence says, "This poet with the private soul leaking out of him all the time. All his privacy leaking out in a sort of dribble, oozing into the universe."[3]

Woman in Whitman's poems is a receptacle and a vessel.

I pour the stuff to start sons and daughters fit for these States . . .

("A Woman Waits for Me")

She is part of the machinery of state, the part that has the liquid poured in and produces children.

I press with rude muscle,
I brace myself effectually, I listen to no entreaties . . .

Poor woman! Obviously, having sex is no fun for her — it is positively painful.

I dare not withdraw till I deposit what had so long
accumulated within me.

This is, in fact, a description of rape. Yet there are those who think that Whitman was a pioneer, a liberator in matters of sex! I do not think that any woman reading these passages would think so.

Of course he did not mean to be insensitive — the trouble came of pretending to be what he was not. And in his case there was a pressure to show all sides of life — he was the poet of democracy. So he must also write about married love — but how clumsy and offensive this writing is!

Compare the lines I have been reading with these:

I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning,
How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd
over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your
tongue to my bare-stript heart,
And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you
held my feet.

("Song of Myself")

This is tender and authentic. It is private, as the description of heterosexual love was not — I feel that it is, for I feel that I am intruding. The speaker is not going at sex like a pile-driver — on the contrary, he seems to be the passive partner. We do not know the gender of his lover, but I am quite sure that this is a description of homosexual love. It is altogether superior — there is no talk here of the States, no bragging of his virility. He seems to be quite overwhelmed by the memory of the experience. It proves nothing — it simply is.

But the lines I have quoted are immediately followed by these:

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge
that pass all the argument of the earth,
And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and
the women my sisters and lovers . . .

Did you think it was sexual intercourse? It was a mystical experience in which the soul merged with God and the whole human race.

So he defuses the sex, and *honi soit qui mal y pense.*

The movement from sex to God may have been quite natural. Whitman may have felt just as he says, and apart from his own feelings there was an ancient tradition of mixing sex with God. Consider the Bible:

His left hand is under my head, and his right
hand doth embrace me.

Consider the terms in which John Donne speaks to God:

Take me to you, imprison me, for I
Except you enthral me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

In George Herbert's poem Christ is a gentleman paying a call on his fiancée.

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
"Who made the eyes but I?"

We do not think habitually in figures of speech, as people did in other times. We are literal-minded, and inclined to think that a mind that expresses religion in terms of sex is more concerned with sex than religion. But Whitman's reader, unless he were an initiate, would have read the passage as a description of a religious or mystical experience, no more.

The same is true of this passage:

As the hugging and loving bed-fellow sleeps at my side
through the night, and withdraws at the peep of the
day with stealthy tread,
Leaving me baskets cover'd with white towels swelling the
house with their plenty . . .

("Song of Myself")

The stealthy bedfellow who withdraws at dawn sounds like a male lover, but whatever the lover may be, the passage is immediately defused of its sexual implications. The "baskets cover'd with white towels" are a figure of speech such as one might find in the Bible. These baskets are from the Lord who provides

wine that maketh glad the heart of man, and oil to
make his face to shine, and bread which strengtheneth
man's heart.[4]

* * *

Whitman's ways of writing about "the dear love of comrades" were effective — no one seemed to know what this dear love implied. Some early reviews of *Leaves of Grass* blamed the author for coarseness and indecency, but not the kind of indecency that, a generation later, would bring Wilde to picking oakum and working a treadmill. The *Cosmopolite* of August 4, 1860, says that the book may be shocking, but "It is the poet's design, not to entice to the perversion of Nature, which is vice, but to lead us back to Nature, which in his theory is the only virtue."[5]

A hostile review in the *Cincinnati Commercial* described Whitman as "A person of coarse nature, and strong, rude passions," even "uncleanness," but nowhere was it suggested that he was recommending homosexual relations.[6]

In 1866 William Douglas O'Connor defended Whitman against the charge of indecency brought by James Harlan. Harlan had said that *Leaves of Grass* was "full of indecent passages" and that the poet was "a very bad man" and a "Free-Lover." "A better man in all respects," said O'Connor, "or one more irreproachable in his relation to the other sex, lives not upon this earth."[7]

His "relation to the other sex"! What about his relation to his own? O'Connor could not have written in this way had not Whitman disguised his meaning.

But the disguise could be seen through. There were signals from Whitman to the reader who shared his feelings, just as there had been in the street:

O Manhattan, your frequent and swift flash of eyes
offering me love . . .

("City of Orgies")

Yet comes one a Manhattanese and ever at parting kisses
me lightly on the lips with robust love.

("Behold this Swarthy Face")

and,

an athlete is enamour'd of me, and I of him.

("Earth, My Likeness")

How could such signals be missed by anyone? Very easily. Homosexuality was not a matter of general knowledge — as we have seen, not even book-reviewers recognized it, and these were well informed.

There was, however, a sexual underground, men who knew one another at a glance.

I perceive one picking me out by secret and divine signs.

("Among the Multitude")

The good O'Connor missed the signals. He was meant to miss them, along with the majority. But they would be seen by others. When Whitman says,

The sisters sleep lovingly side by side in their beds,
The men sleep lovingly side by side in theirs.

("The Sleepers")

there are two levels of meaning. One is for the common, heterosexual reader — the decent citizen who, if he knew what was really going on, could turn into a hateful mocker. This reader would hardly object to

men who slept side by side like sisters. As a matter of fact, men did commonly sleep side by side, especially if they were poor. This lasted well into the present century. I do not recall, when I was a boy, anyone's suggesting that Laurel and Hardy were lovers. But among Whitman's readers there were some who would have known what was intended.

I am not finding fault with Whitman for concealing his sexual preference. Consider the words of Mr. Justice Wills to Oscar Wilde: ". . . that you, Wilde, have been the centre of a circle of extensive corruption of the most hideous kind among young men, it is . . . impossible to doubt."[8] One cannot blame Whitman for protecting himself against this kind of humiliation and disgrace.

The character named Walt who appears in *Leaves of Grass* seems to speak his mind freely. But the author was not free, and at times he disguised his meaning, and at times played a part. Whitman was a great artist — the misconceptions about him are a tribute to his art.

Notes

[1] "Song of Myself." This and other quotations of Whitman's poetry are taken from Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose,* ed. James E. Miller, Jr. (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959).

[2] Lord Alfred Douglas used the phrase in a sonnet. Wilde explained it to the court as "a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan." H. Montgomery Hyde, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (New York, Dover Publications, 1973), 200, 201.

[3] D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (Garden City, New York, Doubleday and Company, 1953), 178.

[4] *Psalms*, 104.

[5] *Walt Whitman: the Critical Heritage*, ed. Milton Hindus (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), 103.

[6] Ibid., 105-109.

[7] Ibid., 119.

[8] Hyde, 272.