

## Patricia Falk

### WHITMAN'S MOTHER-IMAGE: FEMINIST, WITH RESERVATIONS

She's a "fierce," "strong deliveress:" a "savage old mother incessantly crying;" and "old crone" who hisses, moans, rocks, and stalks. In her more benign moments she is nonetheless a force to revere: "dark mother always gliding near with soft feet," the "ideal woman, practical, spiritual, of all the earth, life, love . . ." for whom the poet must chant "a chant of fullest welcome" and "glorify . . . above all." Perhaps the most representative image of the mother appears in "By Blue Ontario's Shores" when the poet exclaims "Mother! . . . with naked sword in your hand." This, says E. H. Miller, is an "extraordinary bisexual image . . . in which the 'fierce' power ordinarily associated with the male warrior is transposed to the maternal figure." (64) Whitman, however, has no need to "transpose" male power to the mother, for his poetics assumes the mother's strength and "fierceness" as intrinsic to her self-as-woman. Another reading of the image is therefore in order, wherein the mother's power, symbolized by the sword, is an intense, forcefully projected female perception: she has an "eye to pierce the deepest deeps and sweep of the world." She may have a "soul of love," but a "tongue of fire." Rather than call the image of mother-with-sword bisexual, I would call it feminist.

It is, moreover, the power of woman that Whitman seems to transpose to man:

Unfolded out of the strong and arrogant woman I love, only  
thence can appear the strong and arrogant man I love,  
Unfolded by brawny embraces from the well-muscled woman  
I love, only thence come the brawny embraces of the man,  
Unfolded out of the folds of the woman's brain come all the  
folds of the man's brain, duly obedient . . .  
First man is shaped in the woman, he can then be shaped in  
himself.

"Unfolded Out of the Folds"

For Whitman, the mother occupies a central and leading place in cosmic creation. She is a source of incipient creation from which all “unfolds” and to which all returns (Burke, 297). Unlike the stunned and passive Leda, Whitman’s Mother directs conception and birth. Hers is an active, assertive, projection of perception, engendering a process paralleling female reproduction.

More specifically, in her relationship with the earth and its people, the mother, who can “pierce the deepest deeps and sweep of the world,” becomes the awesome, invigorating and regenerative power of Mother Nature, responsible for the recycling activity of the earth. And, related to this, when the poet himself stands in direct perceptual relationship to the Mother, an extraordinary mimetic process is initiated. More than muse or mere inspiration, the Mother is Maker and source of poetry: “Unfolded out of the inimitable poems of woman come the poems of man, (only thence have my poems come).” The Mother’s poetry, since “inimitable,” must be translated by the poet-son, a task possible only through identification both with the Mother and the creative process she embodies. Her projected perception, then, becomes a medium of identification which the poet then translates into his figurative and literal “leaves of grass.”

In the following paper, I will focus intensely on the poem, “Pensive on Her Dead Gazing, I Heard the Mother of All,” tracing the Mother’s role in the regenerative process: first, her role as source of mimetic identification and esthetic translation by the poet; then, in a larger context, her role in natural creation. Because of her self-directed power, in this and other poems, we can see the Mother as nothing less than *feminist*, as the term has come to be associated in our current semantic codes. However, we need, too, to examine some of the other images of woman depicted by Whitman in comparison to the Mother: as the second part of this paper explores, Whitman’s *Mother* may be feminist, but when the poet perceives Woman as sexual being, a whole, new misogynist process unfolds.

#### I. “Pensive on Her Dead Gazing, I Heard the Mother of All”

“Pensive” opens with a marvelous example of grammatical and syntactic ambiguity identifying the poet with the mother. The poem then unravels, detailing the mother’s intense perceptual projection, its

transference to the poet, and his translation of it. At work is a process of regeneration which is, in essence, the “key” to death, life and poetry of which the poet speaks in “Out of the Cradle.” It is a perceptual key that unlocks the door to identification with the maternal principle. Although the poem is, on one level, a drama involving the Mother and dead soldiers spread upon a battlefield, the esthetic setting is the tomb/womb (the “sovereign, dim illimitable grounds”). The time: a split second of suspended perception spanning post-death and pre-conception.

Pensive on her dead gazing, I heard the Mother of All  
Desperate on the torn bodies, on the forms covering the  
battle-fields gazing,  
As she call’d to her earth with mournful voice, while she stalk’d,  
Absorb them well O my earth, she cried, I charge you lose not  
my sons, lose not an atom,  
And you streams absorb them well, taking their dear blood,  
And you local spots, and you airs that swim above lightly,  
And all you essences of soil and growth, and you my rivers’  
depths,  
And you mountain sides, and the woods where my dear  
children’s blood trickling redden’d,  
And you trees down in your roots to bequeath to all future trees,  
My dead absorb—my young men’s beautiful bodies absorb—  
and their precious, precious, precious blood.  
Which holding in trust for me faithfully back again give me  
many a year hence,  
In unseen essence and odor of surface and grass, centuries  
hence,  
In blowing airs from the fields back again give me my darlings,  
give me my immortal heroes.  
Exhale me them centuries hence, breathe me their breath, let  
not an atom be lost,  
O years and graves! O air and soil! O my dead, an aroma sweet!  
Exhale them perennial sweet death, years, centuries hence.

From *Leaves of Grass*, 1871 edition

The grammatical and syntactic ambiguity in the first line sets off a complex process of identification:

Pensive on her dead gazing I heard the Mother of All

One reading suggests that it is the mother who is gazing, perceiving the dead bodies strewn all over the field. As such, *her* refers to the noun, *dead*, or the “torn bodies” of line two. *Dead*, however, also functions as an adjective, describing the verbal, *gazing*: “Pensive on her . . . gazing,” the gaze itself qualified as *dead*. Thus, the quality and substance of the mother’s perception, or “gazing,” is identical with that which she perceives: the dead (as forms, objects), or death (the movement by perception of the dead). Initiating a process of objects-in-flux, the mother perceives, assimilates, and embodies death. At the same time, to the poet, the “I” of the poem, she projects it. For while the mother pensively gazes, the poet “hears” her—simultaneously perceiving and identifying with the mother and the process she embodies.

The poet’s identification with the mother is suggested by a second reading of the first line. The opening phrase, “pensive on her dead gazing,” is a dangling participle whose action can be attributed to the subject, “I,” as well as to the object, “Mother,” in the second half of the line: “I heard the Mother of All.” It is also the poet, then, who is “Pensive on her [the mother’s] dead gazing.” And again, the ambiguity of the phrase, *dead gazing*, suggests multiple interpretations. The poet is pensively perceiving the literal, dead bodies (objects); he is also perceiving the mother’s gaze, qualified as dead. There is a sense, too, that the poet is joining the mother in the act of “gazing:” “Pensive on her dead, gazing, I heard the Mother of All” (commas supplied where pauses are indicated). Grammatically and syntactically, then, perceptual transference and identification occur in the word, *gazing*.

The process can be regarded as empathy, consubstantiation, transcendence, or the dynamics of psycho-linguistics. In general, however, it is a complex dialectic in which perception of and identification with the mother and/or death becomes motivation for poetic creation. The mother’s rhetoric is a perception moving through the dead, identifying with death, assimilating it, and transferring it over to the poet. Synesthetically, (from visual “gazing” to aural perception), the poet picks up the same perception of objects-in-flux initiated by the mother. The mother does not symbolize death itself, and she is associated with it only insofar as she has the capacity to perceive, assimilate, embody and move through death while creating life. The poet’s job is to trans-

late his perception (or rather, his perception of *her* perception)—a task possible only through sustained synesthetic perception.

Pensive on her dead gazing I heard the Mother of All  
Desperate on the torn bodies, on the forms covering the battle-  
fields gazing,  
As she called to her earth with mournful voice, while she stalk’d.

The action of the first three lines takes place in a single perceptual moment, but it is translated by the poet through a prolongation of that perception. The vision is sustained first by repetition of the word *gazing*, flowing through the poetry from mid line one to the end of line two: “Pensive on her dead gazing . . . gazing.” Indeed, by the time we reach the second “gazing” it seems to apply more to the poet’s perception than the mother’s: “. . . gazing, as she called to the earth.” By this time, transference between the mother and poet is complete, and the concrete, substantial quality of *gazing* as a noun has liquified into complete verbal action. Line three, with its conjunctions *as* and *while*, further prolongs the perception: the poet is hearing and gazing at the same time—*as* and *while*—the mother is gazing, calling and stalking. The mother’s perceptual power is drawn out in the translation process from incipient “vision,” to language, to action: the mother gazes, calls, then stalks; the poet gazes, hears, then translates—all within a sustained moment of identification.

Significantly, it is not the mother’s voice we hear in these first three lines, but the poet’s describing it to us in a cool, objective, observant tone. The tone then turns into a subjective outburst of rhetoric taking the form, on the poet’s part, of narrative translation; and taking the form, on the mother’s part, of a monologue. Identification is complete and translation continues: Mother Nature’s power becomes language, and she speaks through the poet:

Absorb them well O my earth, she cried, I charge you lose not  
my sons, lose not an atom,  
And you streams absorb them well, taking their dear blood,  
And you local spots, and you airs that swim above lightly,  
And all you essences of soil and growth, and you my rivers’  
depths,

And you mountain sides, and the woods where my dear  
 children's blood trickling redden'd  
 And you trees down in your roots to bequeath to all future trees,  
 My dead absorb—my young men's beautiful bodies absorb—  
 and their precious, precious, precious blood.

Images of creation abound in the mother's speech. She invokes three of the four basic elements: "Absorb them well O my earth . . . and you streams . . . and you airs." For the fourth element, fire, Whitman draws on electrical allusions. "I charge you lose not an atom," says the mother. Her electric "charge" becomes a life-giving stimulus, and the dead "sons," strewn on a battlefield-cemetery, become "Adams" in a pastoral setting. *Atom* is less a pun on *Adam* than the result of metaphoric cross currents in Whitman's symbolism. His is a poetics biologically oriented in which each particular "atom" in the "body electric" can be substituted with ease for any "Adam" in the garden.

As the grave becomes the garden, the tomb becomes the womb. Repetitious rhythms infused with images of blood suggest a preconceptual, almost menstrual buildup of blood. The streams and roots keep absorbing the "dear blood" until, with a momentum that can only be described as *pumping*, the mother says: "My dead absorb—and my young men's beautiful bodies absorb—and their precious, precious, precious blood." Just as repetition of *gazing* in the beginning of the poem creates a sense of sustained perception, here the repetition of *absorb* prolongs the process of assimilation, building up to the climactic "precious, precious, precious blood." Its quick, iambic feet and bilabial alliteration (p/b), together with images and rhythms of sopping, holding and pumping, bring the poem to a high pitch and release of energy.

Mother Nature's power—or perceptual penetration—leads to creation only after fragmentation. As she penetrates the dead, she must break them apart in order to unite them with the elements. In the opening line of the poem, the mother was "pensive on" the dead, in direct subject-object relationship of eye to surface of form. Now her speech is directed toward the earth, air and waters, charging them to "absorb" the "forms." Simultaneous assimilation and fragmentation is implemented as she moves deeper from the superficial landscape into

the "essences of soil and growth," into the "river's depths," and the roots of the trees. Her energy, pushing into and through the dead, forces the bodies in the direction of her speech—toward the various elements, shredding, scattering, tearing the bodies apart. Hence the "torn bodies" of line two—a result, in part, of the previous war that had killed soldiers, but a suggestion as well of the forms upon which the mother was "desperate." As both presider over burial and creator of life, the mother churns, mixes, pushes and pumps, moving like liquid veins into the earth.

In the process, the elements absorb not only the dead forms, but the mother's "charge" or life-giving energy as well. As her power moves through death, the elements absorb her force, filling up while she expands and penetrates. Now full to capacity with the dead, death, life and the mother's power, the earth must "hold" it all in stasis:

Which holding in trust for me faithfully back again give me  
 many a year hence,  
 In unseen essence and odor of surface and grass, centuries hence,  
 In blowing airs from the fields back again give me my darlings,  
 give my immortal heroes,  
 Exhale me them centuries hence, breathe me their breath, let  
 not an atom be lost,  
 O years and graves! O air and soil! O my dead, an aroma sweet!  
 Exhale them perennial sweet death, years, centuries hence.

These concluding lines mark a transition in movement and direction of the mother's rhetoric. Up to this point, she has pushed her energy as far as possible, sending the dead into the "essences," uniting mankind with elemental nature. Now, having assimilated the dead, their blood, and the mother's power to capacity, the womb-like elements are directed to "hold" it all until, like a sponge, all will be returned "back again." The action pivots and hangs upon the conjunction *which*, referring back to all that has been interred and absorbed. Then, by invoking the future and ordering elemental nature to return the dead, the mother's power reverses direction, drawing life back out of the elements. A regenerative cycle in time and space ("years and graves") is thus completed: the mother first inters and unites mankind with the elements, gives it her life-giving "charge," and finally pulls the life back out again. Her "immortal heroes," then, are dying and

reviving gods only so long as Mother Nature's power—as casual agent and conductor of humanity's cyclical destiny—keeps flowing.

The mother completes a cycle of her own. "Exhale me them," she says, meaning exhale them to me and exhale me through them. Her life, or the perpetuation of her power, depends on the return process since she is part of that which has been assimilated. Vampire-like, she thrives on the "breath" of "death," "an aroma sweet." Her identity, as defined in the first line of the poem, is that of perceptual process—a force moving from behind and through dead form while creating life. Without the dead through which to move and which moves her, her rhetoric has nowhere to go. Cyclical in nature, she depends on death because without it there would be no regeneration, and without regeneration there would be no need of her.

Significantly, the mother is not associated with the sea in "Pensive" because the time and space through which she moves is post-death and pre-fetal womb. She makes promises of renewal, predicting and directing the future, but she does not deliver. The sea "whispers" the poet in "Out of the Cradle" because the maternal principle, personified as a "fierce old mother," rocks the sea with her "folding" and "unfolding" rhetoric. "Moaning" in labor, she gives birth to the poetic sensibility through the womb-like waters. "Death" is the "key," or the "word" up through the waves from which life springs—due, as in "Pensive," to the movement and power of the "fierce old mother." While the rhetoric in "Out of the Cradle," then, issues from the same maternal principle as the Mother of All who penetrates death in "Pensive," it is the stage of regeneration that is different. "Out of the Cradle" results in birth; "Pensive" gives a closer, microscopic view of the process of regeneration, depicting an extended perceptual, "inimitable" but translatable transition between death and life.

## II. *Woman as Sexual Being*

In contrast to many traditional images and assumptions regarding woman's role in creation, Whitman's Mother does not passively absorb when conceiving. Although she does assimilate that which she perceives—the dead—she projects that perception and moves through it to create life. In "Pensive," the receptive, acquiescent elements—earth, air and water—take on a womb-like function, subject to the direction

of the female of which they are a part. The Mother, in essence, orders creation in a dual sense: First, her rhetoric is demanding, forceful, authoritative. "I charge you . . . lose not an atom" she says. Who would dare deny her imperative? Second, she puts things into order, directing, in regenerative cycles, the comings and goings of the human race. Given this image of a woman so powerful, who, unlike her mythic sister Leda, controls and directs her own and human destiny, we may with some assurances call Whitman's Mother feminist.

But what about Whitman?

It is significant, I think, that the poems in which the Mother is strongest are the ones containing the least graphic sexual imagery. It is as if the moment Whitman associates *Woman* with *power*, she is transformed into *Mother*. This may be a result, as Robert Duncan so aptly puts it, of the poet's "longing for a woman not as a lover but as a mother to his fathering desire," (96), although one might also see it as the poet's longing for a woman with whom to identify to satisfy his "mothering" desire.

In any event, rarely do we find a powerful, non-maternal woman in Whitman's poetry. She is a procreative—not sexual—being. At times of most explicit sexual imagery, in fact, Woman functions solely as a *passage* to the "greater" woman—the Mother, her value determined by her capacity and potential to produce offspring. For example, in "A Woman Waits For Me," the poet pours his "love-spendings" "on," "in," and "through" the female form during sexual intercourse:

It is I, you women, I make my way,  
I am stern, acrid, large, undissuadable, but I love you,  
I do not hurt you any more than is necessary for you,  
I pour the stuff to start sons and daughters fit for these States,  
    I press with slow rude muscle,  
I brace myself effectually, I listen to no entreaties  
I dare not withdraw till I deposit what has so long accumulated  
    within me.

The passion, action and sexuality emanate solely from the poet in this scene of rape. The woman is passive and receptive, absorbing the poet's "pent up aching rivers" merely to "beget babes . . . perfect men and woman out of" the poet's "love-spendings." She may as

well be Leda or Helen for all the control of creation she has. But, says Whitman, she should "be not ashamed," privileged to "enclose" and "contain"—both physically as a woman enclosing the male member and child, and metaphysically, as the cyclical process enclosing and containing human destiny. Woman is vaginal and metaphysical passage leading to the unknown terrain of "more than India," to that place of identification with the Mother, the "Maternal Mystery" of regeneration. It is only once he gets there and identifies with the Mother that we can enjoy the image of a strong, perceptive, creative woman "with naked sword" in hand. The Mother may be feminist, but much mysogyny must be transcended in order to reach her.

Whitman was himself aware of the need to transcend traditional images of woman in order to reach what he considered "divine maternity." In *Democratic Vistas*, while calling for equality of the sexes (a vital ramification of his all-pervading "democratic esthetic"), he suggests the possibility that woman may be even "greater" than men. He talks of the

idea of the women of America . . . developed, to become the robust equals, workers, and, it may be, even practical and political deciders with the men—greater than the men, we may admit, through their divine maternity, always their towering, emblematical attribute—but great, at any rate, as man, in all departments; or rather, capable of being so, soon as they realize it, can bring themselves to give up toys and fictions, and launch forth, as men do, amid real, independent, stormy life (422).

Images of women Whitman depicts in *Democratic Vistas* are, indeed, portraits of "independent" and "strong" women, including the "wife of a mechanic . . . never abnegating her own proper independence" (436), and a woman known as "Peacemaker," an old, uneducated, "domestic regulator judge, settler of difficulties, shepherdess, the reconciler in the land" who has a "peculiar personal magnetism" (437). These portraits, he says, are "frightfully out of line from those imported models of womanly personality—the stock feminine characters of the current novelists, or of the foreign court poems (Ophelias, Enids, princesses or ladies of one thing or another) which fill the envying dreams of so many poor girls, and are accepted by our men, too, as supreme ideals of feminine excellence to be sought after." (437).

Yet Whitman's own "supreme ideal" for woman—the mother—may also threaten a creative, feminist-identified sensibility. Adrienne Rich, for example, sees the social and esthetic confinement of woman to motherhood as counterproductive to a total, feminist-oriented creative identity:

The ancient, continuing envy, awe, and dread of the male for the female capacity to create life has repeatedly taken the form of hatred for every other female aspect of creativity. Not only have women been told to stick to motherhood, but we have been told that our intellectual or aesthetic relations were inappropriate, inconsequential, or scandalous, an attempt to become 'like men,' or to escape from the 'real' tasks of adult womanhood: marriage and childbearing. (40)

If feminist readers of Whitman are turned off by his poetry, it is probably due in large measure to his nearly exclusive portrayal of woman as mother.

This issue is exceedingly problematic when dealing with Whitman's poetry, however, since theoretically he is a feminist, but when we get down to concrete sexual imagery, he is not. Much has to do with the age-old traditional problem of the split between body and mind, between spirit and form, a tradition of which Whitman was very much a part. While his is a poetics proclaiming sexuality, it is structured on the procreation metaphor. Thus for Whitman it is a given that female creativity is one and the same as maternity—an equation used less to restrict woman to motherhood than to celebrate female creativity in its broadest sense. Any "envy" Whitman might have harbored for the "female capacity to create life" he managed to transcend through identification with and emulation (or translation) of what he regarded the female principle. But it is this necessity of "transcending"—be it the female form, sexuality, or negative attitudes toward both—that seems to result in the bitter irony we find in Whitman and much other eros-originated poetry: the split between spirit and form. For while in the abstract (metaphorically, metaphysically, spiritually), Whitman's Mother looms large and powerful as a creative principle, in concrete sexual imagery woman is powerless and objectified.

Whitman is, at least, visionary and pre-feminist when he predicts, in light of the images and assumptions of woman and sexuality of his

time, "something more revolutionary . . . the day when the deep questions of woman's entrance amid the arenas of practical life, politics . . . will not only be argued all around us, but may be put to decision, and real experiment" (*Democratic Vistas*, 438). What Whitman foresaw in 1850 and what many feminists enjoy today is, in part, embodied in his "fierce old mother." She is a powerful, perceptive and creative voice emerging from the *Leaves of Grass*; but more, she has the opportunity to become a human, sexual force permeating a social and esthetic patriarchy.

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