‘This Terrible, Irrepressible Yearning’: Whitman’s Poetics of Love

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In the 1876 preface Whitman asserted that a major purpose of Leaves of Grass was to ‘express . . . the eternal body composite, cumulative’ and the ‘natural character’ of the poet. He then added a ‘full confession’ of his own emotional vulnerability and his excruciating need to be loved by the reader:

I also sent out Leaves of Grass to arouse and set flowing in men’s and women’s hearts, young and old, endless streams of living, pulsating love and friendship, directly from them to myself; now and ever. To this terrible, irrepressible yearning, (surely more or less down underneath in most human souls) — this never-satisfied appetite for sympathy, and this boundless offering of sympathy . . . I have given in that book, undisguisedly, declaredly, the openest expression.¹

Poetry is a means to ‘arouse’ the reader erotically, but it is the artist who most needs love. Whitman, who in his great sequence of love poems ‘Calamus’ had identified himself as ‘the tenderer lover’, recognises that he is doomed never to be satisfied romantically.

In the 1855 preface Whitman also cast the poet in the role of lover, but here we find no hint of unsatisfied love:

The known universe has one complete lover and that is the greatest poet. He consumes an eternal passion and is indifferent which chance happens and which possible contingency of fortune or misfortune and persuades daily and hourly his delicious pay. What balks or breaks others is fuel for his burning progress to contact and amorous joy. Other proportions of the reception of pleasure dwindle to nothing to his proportions. All expected from heaven or from the highest he is rapport with in the sight of the daybreak or a scene of the winter woods or the presence of children playing or with his arm around the neck of a man or a woman. His love above all love has leisure and expanse . . . he leaves room ahead of himself. He is no irresolute or suspicious lover . . . he is sure . . . he scorns intervals. His experience and the showers and thrills are not for nothing. Nothing can jar him . . . The sea is not surer of the shore or the shore of the sea than he is of the fruition of his love and of all perfection and beauty. (11–2)

Like the sun, the confident poet-lover radiates a passionate heat by converting into fuel for love the disappointments that ‘balk or break others’.

Between the 1855 and 1876 prefaces Whitman’s emotional landscape has totally changed. The erotic exuberance of ‘Song of Myself’ gives way to the later poetry’s chastened acknowledgment of the implications for love of rejection and death. Thematically, this compelling body of love poetry grows in complexity. Whitman’s implicit avowal of homosexuality in the ‘Calamus’ poems (1860) introduces a complicating dimension in the search for a satisfying love relationship. In 44 (later ‘Here the Fairest Leaves of Me’) he refuses to speak explicitly: ‘I shade down and hide my thoughts— I do not expose them’. And yet, Whitman recognises that language does not lie; even indirectly, words reveal the deepest self one way or another. His ‘Calamus’ poems, he knew, ‘expose me more than all my other poems’ (1860, 377). Whitman implicitly directs the reader’s attention to that which he himself does not name, what in 36 (‘Earth, My Likeness’) he calls that ‘something fierce and terrible in me, eligible to burst forth, / I dare not tell it in words — not even in these songs’ (1860, 374). Whitman’s inability to go beyond the indirect confession of ‘Here the Fairest Leaves of Me’, marks the effective end of the powerful body of love poetry that he published in the editions of Leaves of Grass of 1855, 1856, and 1860.

In the poetry up until ‘Calamus’ (1860) love is expressed primarily in autoerotic terms. As extensive and wide-ranging as is the love-making in ‘Song of Myself’, never does it involve a particular human being, a recognisable lover. The poet’s sexual partners — ‘Winds whose soft-tickling genitals rub up against me, it shall be you, / Broad muscular fields, branches of liveoak, loving loungin
my winding paths, it shall be you'—are drawn from the natural world, which is to say that they are self-projections (51). Remarkably the adult poet calls to mind and explores an early stage of development, which reminds us of Freud's description of that 'time in the development of the individual at which he unifies his sexual drives (which have hitherto been engaged in autoerotic activities) in order to obtain a love-object; and he begins by taking his own body as his love-object, and only subsequently proceeds from this to the choice of some other person than himself'. As Bice Benvenuto and Roger Kennedy have written in commenting on this passage, presumably, the ego in this scheme is formed at the stage of narcissism, between the stage of auto-eroticism and object love, while itself being taken as a love object. But it is not clear in Freud what is this new psychical action that brings about ego formation, though we are told that the ego first picks out objects by identification and by incorporating objects into itself. Hence one is dealing with fundamental dilemma in analytic theory. Our job as readers of Whitman's love poetry is not to worry about the niceties of analytic theory, but rather to see that in these early poems Whitman's loving attention to his own body (and his pervasive identification with the external world, becoming what he sees and caressing and incorporating everything into the self) has its source in a recognisable stage of development. For Whitman then, the imaginative reconstruction of an earlier stage serves as a vehicle for a loving and simultaneous exploration of the poet's own body and the external world.

In 'Calamus', however, the poet, having left behind this early stage of self-involvement, searches for a love relationship with another. He discovers that he must have 'a friend, a lover, near', as he writes in 20 ('I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing'):

I saw in Louisiana a live-oak growing,  
All alone stood it, and the moss hung down from the branches,  
Without any companion it grew there, uttering joyous leaves of dark green,  
And its look, rude, unbending, lusty, made me think of myself,  
But I wondered how it could utter joyous leaves standing alone there, without its friend, its lover near— for I knew I could not,  
And I broke off a twig with a certain number of leaves upon it, and twined around it a little moss,

And brought it away—and I have placed it in sight in my room,  
It is not needed to remind me as of my own dear friends,  
(For I believe lately I think of little else than of them,)  
Yet it remains to me a curious token—it makes me think of manly love;  
For all that, and though the live-oak glistens there in Louisiana, solitary, in a wide flat space,  
Uttering joyous leaves all its life, without a friend, a lover, near,  
I know very well I could not.

(1860, 364–5)

A symbol of the poet's former self, the tree is self-sufficient in its creativity, able to 'utter joyous leaves' without depending upon another. But through this leave-taking of his former self, Whitman confesses that he is no longer self-sufficient in love and in poetry. 'Calamus' explores the surpassing joys and crushing loss of romantic love. But it was primarily through the autoerotic poems before 'Calamus' that Whitman discovered his voice, a poetic language which could speak the language of love and desire.

I

'Spontaneous Me' (1856) glories in autoeroticism, which Whitman implicitly links to poetic creativity. In the 1860 edition Whitman included the poem in the 'Children of Adam' sequence, which ostensibly celebrates heterosexual love, and the poet does boast of 'the oath of procreation I have sworn, my Adamic and fresh daughters, / The greed that eats me day and night with hungry gnaw, till I saturate what shall produce boys when I am through'. Yet no other person, male or female, figures significantly in the poem. The opening reference to a lover is merely a part of setting the scene. 'Spontaneous Me, Nature, / The loving day, the mounting sun, the friend I am happy with, / The arm of my friend hanging idly over my shoulder'. Shortly the 'friend' disappears as the poet engages in a 'spontaneous' masturbatory fantasy:

The curious roamer the hand roaming all over the body,  
the bashful withdrawing of flesh where the fingers soothingly pause and edge themselves,  
The limpid liquid within the young man,
The vex'd corrosion so pensive and so painful,  
The torment, the irritatee tide that will not be at rest,  
The like of the same I feel, the like of the same in others,  
The young man that flushes and flushes, and the young woman that  
flushes and flushes,  
The young man that wakes deep at night, the hot hand seeking to  
repress what would master him,  
The mystic amorous night, the strange half-welcome pangs,  
visions, sweats,  
The pulse bounding through palms and trembling encircling  
fingers, the young man all color'd red, ashamed, angry;  
The sousette upon me of my lover the sea, as I lie willing and naked.

The wholesome relief, repose, content,  
And this bunch pluck'd at random from myself,  
It has done its work – I toss it carelessly to fall where it may.

(261-2)

At a time when onanism was considered immoral and self-destructive, this daring poem is a risky act. Initially ‘ashamed’ and ‘angry’, the speaker allows his ‘encircling fingers’ to bring him ‘wholesome relief, repose, content’. And with a play on words he asserts that his masculine ‘bunch’ has brought him at once the semen and the poem.

The ‘spontaneous’ expression of his sexuality opens to Whitman a perception of the ‘spontaneous’ generativity of nature. ‘Willing and naked’, he envisages a delicious world bound together by love:

Love thoughts, love-juice, love-odor, love-yielding, love-climbers,  
and the climbing sap,  
Arms and hands of love, lips of love, phallic thumb of love, breasts  
of love, bellies press’d and glued together with love,  
Earth of chaste love, life that is only life after love,  
The body of my love, the body of the woman I love, the body of the  
man, the body of the earth,  
Soft forenoon airs that blow from the south-west,  
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.

At once erotic and innocent, sexual and yet protected, this is a world which has the ‘mother never turning her vigilant eyes’ from her ‘twin babes that crawl over the grass’ and where the ‘great chastity of paternity’ ‘match[es] the great chastity of maternity’. Nothing compels the speaker to risk the rejection that a romantic encounter with another person might bring.

To possess this world requires a re-conceiving of poetry as itself a sexual act:

Beautiful dripping fragments, the negligent list of one after another  
as I happen to call them to me or think of them,  
The real poems, (what we call poems being merely pictures,)  
The poems of the privacy of the night, and of men like me,  
This poem drooping shy and unseen that I always carry, and that  
all men carry . . .

(260-2)

Rejecting the sexless work of his contemporaries as ‘merely pictures’, Whitman insists that ‘real poems’ are phallic; only such a sexual poetry is capable of possessing in love the ‘body of the world’. While ‘Spontaneous Me’ dramatises the most solitary of acts, Whitman succeeds in involving the reader, who joins imaginatively with the poet as he exuberantly fuses himself to the world’s body. Through the act of reading he completes the poet’s masturbatory fantasy, discovering in the process that creativity and love of the natural world begin with love of one’s own body.

By writing a frankly erotic poem, by writing with the penis, Whitman overcomes the abstractions of conventional poetry and, by association, the repression of language itself. Elizabeth Wright has summarised the insight of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan on this point: ‘The structures of language are marked with societal imperatives – the Father’s rules, laws and definitions, among which are those of “child” and “mother”. Society’s injunction that desire must wait, that it must formulate in the constricting word whatever demand it may speak, is what effects the split between conscious and unconscious, the repression that is the tax  
exact by the use of language.’ In ‘Spontaneous Me’ Whitman explicitly rejects the imprisoning language of abstractions of his contemporaries in favour of a liberating speech written directly out of the ‘spontaneous’ sexual self.

As I have indicated above, autoeroticism figures prominently in
‘Song of Myself’, Whitman’s great poem of self-transformation and liberation, a love poem to the entire universe. The reader finds none of the conventional features of love poetry: courtship, proposals, lovers’ quarrels and reconciliations. Other human beings are not presented with any depth and yet, as Whitman’s early readers recognised, the poem is powerfully erotic.

From this perspective the critic Leslie Fiedler has commented that while ‘Song of Myself’ can be read as ‘a heroic poem intended to define the ethos of a nation’, it is also a love poem: simultaneously a love song, a love affair (the poet’s only successful one) and a love child (the only real offspring of his passion). Yet, interpreting ‘Song’ as a poem of failed love, Fiedler asks, ‘who is the poet’s beloved, the Beatrice he could never leave off wooing, the Penelope to whom he could never return?’ Fiedler concludes that Whitman’s ‘loneliness becomes a symbol of the alienation of the modern artist and of modern man in a godless universe. He lived, after all, at a moment when some thinkers were declaring the death of God, and wrote at a time when poets grew increasingly unsure of whom they were addressing’.4

But is Whitman’s a ‘godless universe’ and is he ‘a symbol of alienation? In the 1855 preface he did assert that the ‘work’ of the priests ‘is done’. But in the void left by the collapse of traditional religion he saw arising a ‘new breed of poets’ who would function ‘as interpreters of men and women and of all events and things’. Finding their inspiration in real objects today, symptoms of the past and future’, the new breed are poets of the body capable of using the language of desire (25). The universe of ‘Song of Myself’ is not, then, godless but rather reconstituted in a radically new way. Here the world of man with all his desires takes on a numinous quality: ‘I do not despise you priests; / My faith is the greatest of faiths, and the least of faiths, / Enclosing all worship ancient and modern . . . Dancing yet through the streets in a phallic procession . . . rapt and austere in the woods, a gymnosophist . . . ’ (77). And in the stanzas that would become section 44, the phallic poet-prophet rewrites the creation story from the perspective of modern scientific theory and finds cause not for ‘lamentation’, but celebration: ‘All forces have been steadily employed to complete and delight me. / Now I stand on this spot with my Soul’ (80).5

Certainly, however, Fiedler is right in asserting that ‘Song of Myself’ is, paradoxically, a love poem which lacks a beloved. But the Whitman of ‘Song of Myself’ is devoted to demonstrating that love takes many forms. Even without a human beloved, ‘Song of Myself’ is a passionate, sexual poem, one whose rhythms are based on ‘the procreative urge of the world’. The poet ecstatically joins the creative and generative powers of his own body with the analogous energies in the external world, the ‘voluptuous and coolbreathed earth’: ‘Prodigal! you have given me love . . . therefore I to you give love! O unspeakable passionate love!’ (47). But where does this love come from and what is its object?

The poet’s starting point is self-love. Before we can share our bodies with others, he implies, we must first learn to love them ourselves. In the passages he would label section 5, body and soul come together in a passionate act of love-making:

I believe in you my soul . . . the other I am must not abase itself to you,
And you must not be abased to the other.

Loafe with me on the grass . . . loose the stop from your throat,
Not words, not music or rhyme I want . . . not custom or lecture, not even the best,
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice.

I mind how we lay in June, such a transparent summer morning; You settled your head athwart my hips and gently turned over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my barestript heart,
And reached till you felt my beard, and reached till you held your feet.

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and joy and knowledge that pass all the art and argument of the earth;
And I know that the hand of God is the elderhand of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the eldest brother of my own,
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers . . . and the women my sisters and lovers,
And that a kelson of the creation is love.

(30-1)

The consummation brought about through the ‘marriage’ of body and soul brings sexual fulfilment and the insight that ‘a kelson of the creation is love’. In this ecstatic act of self-love Whitman turns the tables on the great Cartesian dualism, demonstrating that
knowledge of the other as love begins with the loving—and sexual—
exploration of one's own body, giving birth to a self capable of
responding to the entire cosmos in love.

The poet's courageous avowal of his own sexuality, of the penis,
also gives birth to a physical poetic speech. As in 'Spontaneous Me',
the new poetry demands an act of repudiation, but here Whitman
goes beyond repudiating the abstract 'pictures' of conventional
poets to disclaim language itself: 'Not words, not music or rhyme
... not custom or lecture, not even the best'. Paradoxically, then,
Whitman wishes to return to the very origin of speech as sound, the
point before the self has been restricted by language's repressive
categories: 'Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice'. The
palpable silence which is heard in the word 'lull' issues into a bare
'hum', a pre-verbal sound which in this context is 'pregnant' with
meaning. To be able to speak directly of desire, Whitman demon-
strates, one first repudiates the conventional face of language, the
language of injunctions and prohibitions, so that he can return to
the infant's pre-verbal world and develop, through contact with the
unconscious, an authentic speech of the body. Such a speech
combines the unfiltered immediacy of the child's utterance with the
linguistic skill and awareness of the adult poet.

Through a series of rhetorical questions, Whitman makes similar
demands of the reader, that he imaginatively return to a point of
origin: 'Have you practised so long to learn to read? / Have you felt
so proud to get at the meaning of poems?' The customary forms of
interpretation, the poet suggests, must be put aside for a form of
reading which enables the reader, much as had the poet, to return to
a hypothetical starting point, of himself, of the cosmos and of
language itself to discover there his own self as if for the first time.
Through such a radically new form of reading, the poet promises,
'you shall possess the origin of all poems', 'no longer take things at
second or third hand... nor look through the eyes of the dead... nor
feed on the spectres in books, / You shall not look through my
eyes either, nor take things from me, / You shall listen to all sides
and filter them from yourself' (28).

It is only through such direct seeing that the reader too can
disclaim the conventional status of poetry as abstract symbols and
comprehend the poet's language in a way that allows him to
perceive the sexual energy of the world's body: 'There never was
any more inception than there is now, / Nor any more age than
there is now; / And will never be any more perfection than there is
now, / Nor any more heaven and hell than there is now'. Whitman,
then, returns the reader to a point of origin, an original state where
language can speak directly of desire, of 'inception' and 'Urge and
urge and urge, / Always the procreant urge of the world' (28).

The reader becomes a partner with the poet in creating a poetry in
which the world's body speaks a newly physical language: 'A child
said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands; / How
could I answer the child?... I do not know what it is any more than
he' (31). Though the speaker rejects any attempt in a conventional
sense to name the external world, he absorbs all into him, becoming
'the caresser of life wherever moving... backwards as well as
forward slung' (37). Poetic meaning springs through and from the
body: 'the press of my foot to the earth springs a hundred
affections, / They scorn the best I can do to relate them' (38). The fact
is, of course, that the 'best' the speaker can do to 'relate' those
'affections' of the natural world is quite effective, as he later
confesses: 'My voice goes after what my eyes cannot reach, / With
the twirl of my tongue I encompass worlds and volumes of worlds, / Speech is the twin of my vision... it is unequal to measure itself'
(52-3). What that poetic voice, born in the loving acceptance of self
in the ecstatic union of body and soul, 'goes after' is the entire
cosmos, which it embraces in love.

So at one with this delicious natural world is the poet's body that
to explore one is to explore the other and to find oneself brought to a
sexual-verbal ejaculation:

If I worship any particular thing it shall be some of the spread of
my body;
Translucent mould of me it shall be you,
Shaded ledges and rests, firm masculine coulter, it shall be you,
Whatever goes to the thilt of me it shall be you,
You my rich blood, your milky stream pale strippings of my life;
Breast that presses against other breasts it shall be you,
My brain it shall be your occult convolutions,
Root of washed sweet-flag, timorous pond-snipe, nest of guarded
duplicate eggs, it shall be you
Mixed tussled hay of head and beard and brawn it shall be you,
Winds whose soft-tickling genitals rub against me it shall be you,
Broad muscular fields, branches of liveoak, loving loungier in
my winding paths, it shall be you,
Something I cannot see but upward libidinous prongs,
Seas of bright juice suffuse heaven.

The sexual climax also brings new vision: the ‘bright juice’ of his ejaculation ‘suffuse[s] heaven’. Sexual energy is the metaphorical vehicle for the speaker’s loving exploration of the universe.

The speaker develops a self of such extraordinary powers that he is able to strengthen the weak and restore the ill. As Whitman had rejected the conventional poetic language of ‘pictures’, so he rejects all of the usual sources of aid to the unfortunates, good words and good deeds. He gives instead the full measure of his love: ‘What I give I give out of myself’. He is thus empowered to elevate the despised – ‘To a drudge of the cottonfields or emptier of privies I lean . . . on his right cheek I put the family kiss, / And in my soul I swear I never will deny him’ – and to restore the dying: ‘I seize the descending man . . . I raise him with resistless will’ (72–3).

The reader is an active participant with the poet in his loving exploration of the external world. Indeed, Whitman ‘conceives’ the poem as a means of ‘bestow[ing]’ and ‘infold[ing]’ himself on the reader. He does ‘not give lectures or a little charity, / What I give I give out of myself’, he declares and commands the reader to receive him: ‘You there, impotent, loose in the knees, open your scarfed chops till I blow grit within you, / Spread your palms and lift the flaps of your pockets, / I am not to be denied . . . I compel . . . I have stores plenty and to spare, / And anything I have I bestow’. The athletic poet-lover does not even ‘ask’ the reader’s identity: ‘You can do nothing and be nothing but what I will infold you’ (72). The reader has no choice but to accept the poet’s compelling act of love. Its promise is imaginative, if not physical, potency.

Perhaps the very fact that the poet’s energies in ‘Song of Myself’ are not absorbed by a romantic relationship enables him to explore with such dazzling powers other forms of love. This is the case with ‘The Sleepers’, which also appeared in 1855. Whitman brilliantly treats the hesitant growth of the adolescent’s capacity to love, focusing on his challenge of crossing the bridge between childhood and adulthood.

Whitman begins with the tentativeness and gravity of the adolescent, describing himself as ‘Wandering and confused . . . lost to myself . . . ill-assorted . . . contradictory’. His emotional state reflects the difficulties of many of those he describes in the ensuing dream-vision, including the ‘wretched features of the ennupees, the white features of corpses, the livid faces of drunkards, the sick-gray faces of onanists’. Distressingly, these men are as ‘ill-assorted’ as himself. Yet, they have crossed the bridge, and under the cover of darkness and in their company, the speaker discovers the imaginative power of sympathy: ‘I dream in my dream all the dreams of the other dreamers, / And I become the other dreamers’.

The darkness that enables him imaginatively to experience the sexuality of the sleepers stimulates him to discover his own. His ‘clothes . . . stolen while I was abed’, he is ‘thrust forth’ and has no place to find cover:

Pier out from the main, let me catch myself with you and stay . . . I will not chafe you:
I feel ashamed to go naked about the world,
And am curious to know where my feet stand . . . and what is this
flooding me, childhood or manhood . . . and the hunger that
crosses the bridge between.

The cloth laps a first sweet eating and drinking,
Laps life-swelling yolk . . . laps ear of rose-corn, milky and just
ripened:
The white teeth stay, and the boss-tooth advances in darkness,
And liquor is spilled on lips and bosoms by touching glasses, and
the best liquor afterward.

The boy intuitively understands that the night, which brings him
the sexual release that enables him to envisage adulthood, has the
power to restore the other sleepers as well. Now he can envisage
adulthood confidently.

The speaker’s passage enables him to affirm that ‘the myth of
heaven indicates peace and night’ and that ‘the myth of heaven
indicates the soul’. His vision of a world transformed through love
is an analogue to the boy’s state of sexual innocence. Coming from
‘its embowered garden’, his soul makes ‘perfect and clean the
genitals – previously jetting, and perfect and clean the womb
cohering’. The speaker rediscovers the peace of childhood while
retaining the phallic excitement of his newly awakened sexuality.

This unique perspective enables the speaker to envisage a world
restored through love: ‘The sleepers are very beautiful as they lie
unclothed, / They flow hand in hand over the whole earth from east to west as they lie unclothed; / The Asiatic and African are hand in hand . . . the European and American are hand in hand, / Learned and unlearned are hand in hand . . . and male and female are hand in hand; / The bare arm of the girl crosses the bare breast of her lover . . . they press close without lust . . . his lips press her neck, / The father holds his grown or ungrown son in his arms with measureless love . . . and the son holds the father in his arms with measureless love’. In a world where such love reigns, every division and source of suffering is overcome: all ‘pass the invigoration of the night and the chemistry of the night and awake’. The final image is of the night as a nurturing, loving, god-like mother, presiding over a world where there is no suffering or loss and where the awakening adolescent can be confident that he will become an adult lover (107–17).

II

But in the great ode ‘Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking’ (published in 1859 as ‘A Child’s Reminiscence’) the poet faces a world where love, for all its magic, is unable to restore loss. Recalling a childhood experience, the poet becomes the boy on the Long Island shore who witnesses the arrival of two birds from Alabama and vicariously experiences first their great love and happiness as they create their nest and then the surpassing pain of the male bird with the disappearance of his mate. Calling in vain for his mate to return, the he-bird knows loss and death:

O past! O happy life! O songs of joy!  
In the air, in the woods, over fields,  
Loved! loved! loved! loved! loved!  
But my mate no more, no more with me!  
We two together no more.

Powerless to summon back his lover, the he-bird knows a grief which is the more intense because it erupts suddenly and in a world everywhere inflamed with love. He cannot, as had Whitman’s ideal poet of the 1855 preface, be ‘indifferent which chance happens and which possible contingency of fortune or misfortune’. The he-

bird’s ‘songs of joy’ are transformed into songs of loss. The cries of this ‘singer solitary’ awake in the boy ‘a thousand songs, clearer, louder and more sorrowful than’ those of the bird, as he realises that a major poetic challenge will be to find a way to reconcile himself to ‘the low and delicious word death’. The boy’s sudden insight into the tragic impermanence of love and life, then, awakens him to an understanding of his poetic vocation: ‘O you singer solitary, singing by yourself, projecting me, / O solitary me listening, never more shall I cease perpetuating you, / Never more shall I escape, never more the reverberations, / Never more the cries of unsatisfied love be absent from me, / Never again leave me to be the peaceful child I was before . . . ’ His understanding of life completed by his insight into death, the poet accepts a new ‘destiny’ as the singer of ‘unsatisfied love’ (388–94).

Whereas ‘Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking’ treats the loss of love through death, the ‘Calamus’ sequence confronts areas of loss within romantic love itself. The delicious abandonment of romantic love is threateningly countered by the irresistible demand of such love that the individual change his identity. How can one know what self will emerge from merging with another? The uncertainty of romantic love intensifies the uncertainty of personal and sexual identity. To love as Whitman does in these poems is to leave oneself vulnerable both to painful self-knowledge and rejection. Yet it is no longer possible to turn around and re-cross the bridge to childhood, to return to the satisfying autoerotism of the earlier work. Only by accepting the risk of change, of exploring ‘in Paths Untrodden’, can one hope to discover the liberation of romantic love, which demands that one be prepared to free himself from his former, socially conditioned identity. ‘From all the standards hitherto published – from the pleasures, profits, conformities, / Which too long I was offering to feed my Soul’ (1860, 341).

In ‘Calamus’ Whitman speaks of his need for love and his need to express that unstandard, unconventional love which he came to recognise was his: ‘I proceed, for all who are, or have been, young men, / To tell the secret of my nights and days, / To celebrate the need for comrades’ (1860, 342). While for the most part Whitman glories in the love experience, there is also evidence that he did not fully accept and openly avow a homosexual identity. He writes passionately of his love for a man or several men, and the poems seem to promise biographical revelation. Yet they remain, he admitted in 44 (‘Here the Frailest Leaves of Me’) ‘baffling’.
Here my last words, and the most baffling,
Here the frailest leaves of me, and yet my strongest lasting,
Here I shade down and hide my thoughts — I do not expose them,
And yet they expose me more than all my poems.

(1860, 377).

Whitman later removed the first line; its reference to 'last words' implies that he had decided to give up poetry, so threatening was the exposure of his emotions. If as Geoffrey Hartman, drawing on Lacan, has written, 'psychic development is therefore a balance between the hope of immortality and the continuous fear of mortal exposure', Whitman has reached the limit of what he can reveal. And yet these 'frailest leaves', which call attention to that which the poet ostensibly wishes to conceal, are a moving exploration, from multiple points of view, of love. These are poems of love desired and love achieved, of celebration of love's joy and grief over its loss.

The core of the 'Calamus' sequence is a group of twelve poems which, we know from manuscript evidence, Whitman wrote first and grouped under the heading 'Live Oak with Moss'. According to Fredson Bowers, these poems 'appear to be highly-unified and to make up an artistically complete story of attachment, crisis, and renunciation.' These twelve poems were not published in their original order in the 1860 'Calamus', as Whitman devised a new ordering scheme for the entire body. But the original sequence, as Gay Wilson Allen has observed, 'tells such a story as might have been found in an Elizabethan sonnet sequence, which was perhaps its archetype.' We might say of this extraordinary sequence what W. H. Auden observed of Shakespeare's sonnets, many of which are addressed to a young man: 'That we are confronted in the sonnets by a mystery rather than an aberration is evidenced for me by the fact that men and women whose sexual tastes are perfectly normal but who enjoy and understand poetry, have always been able to read them as expressions of what they understand by the word love, without finding the masculine pronoun an obstacle.' In these intense twelve poems Whitman recounts a love of such passion that the lover is rendered powerless before its consuming power.

In the first, 14 ('Not Heat Flames Up and Consumes'), not even the most powerful of natural forces, heat, sea-waves, or wind is more powerful than the 'flames of me, consuming, burning for his love whom I love!' So intense is this love that the soul of the poet, like the 'high rain-emitting clouds' and 'the white down-balls of myriads of seeds' is 'borne through the open air... Wafted in all directions, O love, for friendship, for you' (1860, 360). Love takes the lover where it will. The next, 20 ('I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing'), defines the consequences of such love. Now the speaker is unable to exist, as does the tree, without his lover.

Love is so inherently satisfying that all other rewards, including those of the public realm, pale beside its possession. Despite the poet's success in 11 ('When I Heard at the Close of Day') in winning 'plaudits in the capitol' and accomplishing all his 'plans', still he is 'not happy' because his lover is absent. Only when he learns that his 'dear friend, my lover, was on his way coming, O then I was happy'. With his arrival,

I heard the rustle of the liquid and sands as directed to me,
whispering, to congratulate me,
For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in the cool night,
In the stillness, in the autumn moonbeams, his face was inclined toward me,
And his arm lay lightly around my breast — and that night I was happy.

So intensely passionate is the poem: even the 'trite word 'happy', which Whitman uses four times, comes to assume fresh meaning. Indeed, the poem might be said to be an exercise in the definition of 'happiness', which appears in the first line and is the last word in the poem. Happiness is possible only when 'the one I love most lies sleeping by me under the same cover in the cool night' (1860, 357–8).

If the possession of love alone brings such happiness, why not devote oneself exclusively to it? In 8 ('Long I Thought that Knowledge Alone Would Satisfy Me'), a poem later removed from Leaves of Grass, Whitman explicitly renounces his former goals: knowledge, patriotism, 'songs of the New World', and even a 'life... spent in singing'. 'Indifferent to my own songs', the lover devotes himself entirely to 'him I love... It is enough for us that we are together — We never separate again' (354–5). Such is the transforming power of love that it threatens all other pursuits, even that of art. But 32 ('What Think You I Take Pen in Hand to Record') takes something back. If he is to be a poet, Whitman will not write
about conventional subjects, but only of love, which he captures in
the concluding image of "two simple men I saw to-day... parting
the parting of dear friends; / The one to remain hung on the other's
neck, and passionately kissed him; / While the one to depart,
tightly prest the one to remain in his arms" (1860, 372–3).

In the 1855 preface Whitman had asserted that as poet he was
the most powerful and potent lover, implying that love is a vehicle for
art. But here the connection between love and art is put into
question. Now Whitman prefers to be known not as poet, but as
'the tenderest lover', as he writes in 10 ('Recorders Ages Hence'). He
requests that future poets remember him as one 'who was not
proud of his songs, but of the measureless ocean of love within him
—and freely poured it forth', a man whose happiest days were with
his lover. He wishes us to 'hang up my picture as that of the
tenderest lover, / The friend, the lover's portrait, of whom his
friend, his lover, was fondest' (1860, 356–7).

But this is a story of unrequited love, and in 9 ('Hours Continuing
Long'), Whitman presents the reversal at exactly the right moment,
after the lover, moved by love's transforming happiness, has
renounced all his former goals. His lover is now lost to him, and he
knows 'hours discouraged, hours distracted — for the one I cannot
content myself without, soon I saw him content himself without
me'. The man who had identified himself as 'the tenderest lover'
now must ask, 'Is there even one other like me — distracted — his
friend, his lover, lost to him?' In the anguish of rejection, Whitman
confronts a new, disturbing identity: 'Sullen and suffering hours! (I
am ashamed — but it is useless — I am what I am;') As Gay Wilson
Allen has written, this poem carries unusual conviction, being
'neither imaginary nor symbolical, but written out of shame and
remorse.' Not only has he been rejected by one he had loved
unconditionally, but Whitman also must accept a sexual identity
that brings him shame. But it is 'useless', he courageously admits,
to attempt to change what one fundamentally is: 'I am what I am'
(1860, 356–7).

The final four poems search for a means to resolve the pain. One
way, recounted in 34 ('I Dreamed in a Dream'), is to imagine a 'new
City of Friends' where nothing is more prized than the quality of
robust love — it led the rest' (1860, 373). However satisfying such a
wish may be, still love is of the body. In 43 ('O You Whom I Often
and Silently Come'), addressing his secret beloved, he confesses
that he knows the constant pain of unsatisfied sexual desire, 'the
subtle electric fire that for your sake is playing within me' (1860,
p. 377). Yet, for all the power of his desire, Whitman cannot directly
avow his love; paradoxically, the only outlet for such physical
desire is art.

And yet, Whitman uses the idea that art has its limits as a way of
emphasising the power of a love that exceeds all limits. In 36 ('Earth!
My Likeness!') he does not 'dare... tell... in words — not even in
these songs', that something 'fierce and terrible in me, eligible to
burst forth', the attraction he feels for the 'athlete... enamoured
of me'. Whatever the resolution of his love affair, sexuality, now
more intense even than the 'subtle electric fire' of the previous poem,
remains a part of his being. The poem, by identifying the sexual
power which it claims cannot be spoken, suggests its power. And so
in 42 ('To a Western Boy'), the final poem of the initial group,
Whitman, addressing the young man wishing to 'become eleve of
mine', affirms a legacy of love: 'If you be not silently selected by
lovers, and do not silently select lovers', it will be useless for him to
be his pupil. Although Whitman implicitly reconciles himself to a
life without a romantic love relationship in this world, he concludes
by affirming its value.

In this regard the poem points toward the works that Whitman
would add to 'Calamus'. In the 1876 preface he claimed that
'important as [the poems] are... as emotional expressions of
humanity, the special meaning of the 'Calamus' cluster of Leaves of
Grass... mainly resides in its political significance', which he
described as 'this old, eternal, yet ever-new interchange of
adhesiveness, so filly emblematic of America' (1011). ('Adhesiveness'
is a term borrowed from phrenology.) Some of the 'Calamus'
poems, such as 24 ('I Hear It Was Charged Against Me'), where
Whitman speaks of 'the dear love of comrades' as forming a new
institution in American life, do reflect such a purpose. But the
essential concern of the best of the 'Calamus' poems is to understand
the mystery which is romantic love.

'Calamus' 7 ('Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances') describes
the doubt that we all face in philosophical questions, the 'uncer-
tainties after all / That may-be reliance and hope are but specula-
tions'. The question of how we know what we know is complex, as
this reference to our perceptions dramatises: 'May-be they only
seem to me what they are, (doubtlessly they indeed but seem,) as
from my present point of view — And might prove, (as of course they
would,) naught of what they appear, or naught any how, from
entirely changed points of view. But in a world where there is love, why should such metaphysical questions concern us? ‘I walk or sit indifferent – I am satisfied, / He ahold of my hand has completely satisfied me’ (1860, 362–3).

The possession of love makes us conscious of its loss, and, as Whitman revealed in ‘Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking’, we are led to confront death itself. This is the theme of the mysterious 2 (‘Scented Herbage of My Breast’). Addressing the ‘Tomb-leaves, body-leaves, growing up above me, above death’, Whitman admits that he does not understand their meaning – except that they suggest the unfathomable connection between love and death:

Death is beautiful from you – (what indeed is beautiful, except Death and Love?)
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.

Death is a presence behind the ‘mask of materials’ waiting ‘patiently’ to ‘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’ (1860, 342–4). Paradoxically, it is through that most intense presence which is love that the absence that is death becomes a palpable presence in our imaginations.

And yet the major symbol of these poems is not the ‘tomb-leaves’ but the calamus root, which symbolises the persistence of love, as Whitman reveals in 4 (‘These I, Singing in Spring’). Through love the poet becomes a godlike presence, traversing ‘the garden, the world’ and then ‘pass[ing] the gates’ to the next, to ‘collect for lovers’ a procession of individuals. Passing out such potent flowers as the lilac, live-oak, pinks and laurel leaves, the god-lover leads the awakened spirits to the pond-side, where his followers exchange the calamus root. ‘Compassed around by a thick cloud of spirits’, Whitman concludes by bestowing his transforming gift, ‘but only to them that love, as I myself am capable of loving’ (1860, 347–8). The visionary, hopeful quality of this springtime poem carries a numinous meaning; love overcomes death and rejection.

Yet Whitman was unable to find a way to unify the many diverse, sometimes contradictory themes of ‘Calamus’. In 44 (‘Here My Last Words’), as we have seen, he came to the point where he could reveal no more. But that meant that he could no longer write what in ‘Spontaneous Me’ he called ‘real poems, (what we call poems being merely pictures)’ The poems of the privacy of the night, and of men like me / This poem drooping shy and unseen that I always carry ...’. Not willing to explore his ‘fairest leaves’, Whitman now lacked access to that potent and true language of desire that had propelled his art.

In ‘Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances’ Whitman recognised the complexity of the interpretive act, that what one sees depends upon his point of view and things may prove ‘naught of what they appear, or naught anyhow, from entirely changed points of view’. It is wise to keep these cautionary words in mind in trying to reach a comprehensive interpretation of the ‘Calamus’ sequence itself. With their shifting intentions and multiple concerns, these poems are responsive to many readings, depending upon the reader’s starting point, his point of view. But as poetry expressing the surpassing joy of love and crushing despair at its loss and love’s mysterious connection with death, ‘Calamus’ takes its place as perhaps the greatest poetic treatment of love in American literature.

In the opening poem of the 1860 edition, ‘Proto-Leaf’ (later ‘Starting from Paumanok’), he signifies his desire to escape the pain of love by celebrating instead religion: ‘It is a painful thing to love a man or woman to excess, and yet it satisfies, it is great, / But there is something else very great, it makes the whole coincide, / It, magnificent, beyond materials, with continuous hands sweeps and provides for all’ (181). That ‘something else’ is ‘the greatness of Religion’. But to the extent that Whitman elevated love to the level of such abstractions as religion and democracy, then physical passion, ‘the subtle electric fire’ of ‘Calamus’ 43, would be lacking from his poetry. Whitman may have found a way to transcend the suffering of love through turning his attention instead to democracy and religion, but the artistic price that he paid was severe. The power of his writing, his access to the power of the unconscious, which Lacan asserted is structured like a language, had been made possible by his rejection of the language of abstractions. But now, in subsuming this powerful language of desire under the abstraction of religion, Whitman emasculated it. Romantically, the only place he had to go was the confession in the 1876 preface of a ‘terrible,
irrepressible yearning ... this never satisfied appetite for sympathy'.

In the concluding poem of 'Calamus', 45 ('Full of Life Now'), Whitman addresses his 'yet unborn reader' whom he envisions 'seeking me, / Fancier how happy you were, if I could be with you, and become your lover; / Be it as if I were with you. Be not too certain but I am now with you' (1860, p. 378). In his intimate, intensely physical approach to the reader, Whitman found a relationship that did not fail him. And it was finally for the reader, whom he thought of as his responsive lover, that he gave the best of himself in a poetry that was also an act of love. In 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' ('Sun-down Poem' in the 1856 edition), after recalling that 'I too had receiv'd identity by my body, / That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be I knew I should be of my body', Whitman infuses his meaning, which is inherently sexual, into the reader, whom he approaches in an act of love:

What Gods can exceed these that clasp me by the hand, and with voices I love call me promptly and loudly by my highest name as I approach?
What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man that looks in my face?
Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?

We understand then do we not?
What I promis’d without mentioning it, have you not accepted?
What the study could not teach – what the preaching could not accomplish is accomplish’d, is it not?

(307–13)

Notes
