Walt Whitman’s Mystical Ethics of Comradeship

Homosexuality and the Marginality of Friendship at the Crossroads of Modernity

Juan A. Herrero Brasas
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Juan A. Herrero Brasas
For my mother, whom I love and admire so much, and for aunt Pilar, whose kindness and loving care will always stay with me.
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In their introduction to David Kuebrich’s *Minor Prophecy: Walt Whitman’s New American Religion* (1989), Catherine Albanese and Stephen Stein complain about the total absorption of Whitman’s figure by the literature departments as much as about its abandonment on the part of religious scholars. They point out that Kuebrich is the first one to offer an extended analysis of Whitman’s work from the perspective of religious studies.¹ The abandonment Albanese and Stein denounce should certainly attract our attention, given that throughout his writings Whitman insists on the primarily religious character and purpose of his poetry. In the cluster of poems entitled “Starting from Paumanok,” he says “I too, following many and follow’d by many, inaugurate a religion, I descend into the arena,” and in all three different prefaces to *Leaves of Grass* the poet unequivocally states the fundamentally religious purpose of his work. Thus, for example, in his preface to the 1872 edition, he writes that from the time he began elaborating the plan of his poems, and throughout the many different shapes it took, “one deep purpose underlay the others, and has underlain its execution ever since—and that has been the Religious purpose. Amid many changes and a formulation taking far different shape from what I had first supposed, this basic purpose has never been departed from in the composition of my verses.”²

Whitman’s literary activity resulted in the establishment of a new religion of mystical overtones, which served as a source of authority and a vehicle for the implementation of his new morality, the morality of comradeship. Religion, Whitman writes in *Democratic Vistas*, is at the core of every worthy enterprise: “Is there a great moral and religious civilization—the only justification of a great material one?”³ *Leaves of Grass* was meant to be a new gospel, the sacred scripture of a new religion: “I will write the evangel-poem of comrades and of love [. . .] Know you, solely to drop in the earth the germs of a greater religion,/ The following chants each for its kind I sing.”⁴ Whitman, indeed, was seen by his initial, and enthusiastic, followers, fundamentally as a religious figure, as the founder of a new spirituality, that of comradeship:
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My comrade!
For you to share with me two greatnesses, and a third one
rising inclusive and more resplendent,
The greatness of Love and Democracy, and the greatness of
Religion.

(“Starting from Paumanok,” 10)

Despite such explicit statements, the fact remains that, for most of the
twentieth century and through the present, Leaves of Grass has been un-derstood by a majority of scholars and by the general reader mostly as strictly a
literary exercise. This is all the more surprising in light of Whitman’s emphatic
warning that no one would understand his verses who insists upon viewing
them merely as a literary performance. Such warnings on the part of the poet
have disconcerted many a literary critic. Paul Zweig, for example, believes
Whitman made it hard for the reader to understand the meaning and purpose
of his poems, “[o]ne either ‘adhered’ to his book, as his circle of fervent friends
(‘the hot little prophets,’ as they came to be known) put it during his last years
in Camden; or one did not.” Zweig concludes that this intense partisanship
resulted in overheated minds and defensive worship. The “hot little prophets”
that Zweig mentions played a crucial role in advancing Whitman’s religious
message during his lifetime and after his death. Through their activities and
missionary writings, they carried out what I will refer to as Whitman’s mes-sianic project.

In the religion Whitman inaugurated, he himself played the central role;
he was its high priest, its prophet. According to Roger Asselineau, one of Whit-
man’s most authoritative twentieth century scholars, Whitman “dreamed
himself as a prophet of a new evangel and it was in that aspect that he por-
trayed himself.” Whitman intended Leaves of Grass to be an earth-shattering
book. As part of his religious enterprise, he was to be acknowledged as the
bard America had been longing for. To be accepted and acknowledged—that,
indeed, was to be the unmistakable proof of his vocation as a poet. He ended
the preface to the first edition of Leaves of Grass by expressing such a convic-
tion: “The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as
he absorbs it.” Whitman, however, was never fully absorbed by his country
during his lifetime, and it was perhaps for that reason that the above statement
was deleted in later reprints of the 1855 preface.

During Whitman’s lifetime, America to some extent repudiated his poet-
ry. He was repeatedly accused of writing obscene literature, to the point
that the sixth edition of Leaves of Grass (1881) was suspended by the editor
under the threat of a lawsuit by the district attorney, who considered the book
obscene. In 1865, Whitman was even fired from his government job when he
was found to be the author of Leaves of Grass (an “indecent book,” according
to his superior). Some parts of Leaves of Grass “are disagreeable to say the
least, simply sensual,” Thoreau wrote in a letter to H. G. O. Blake, as part of
an otherwise favorable comment about Whitman’s book. To which he added: “He does not celebrate love at all. It is as if the beasts spoke.” Emerson himself asked Whitman to suppress some passages of his work, which Whitman refused to do. In any case, the message contained in Leaves of Grass seemed to most of the poet’s contemporaries a far cry from religion. Whitman was well aware of this, but rejected the suggestion that his poetry was “wanting in religion.” In old age, he declared to Horace Traubel, one of his closest disciples:

People often speak of the Leaves as wanting in religion, but that is not my view of the book—and I ought to know. I think the Leaves the most religious book among books: crammed full of faith. What would the Leaves be without faith? An empty vessel: faith is its very substance.

The character of the new religion that Whitman sought to found was such that only his initiates seemed to understand the underlying message of Leaves of Grass. We know that he attracted homosexual men to his inner circle, with some of them becoming his most passionate disciples and missionaries of his gospel of comraderie. Interestingly, however, it was certain passages in sections of “Children of Adam,” the cluster of poems devoted to heterosexual love, which lacks the emotional intensity of “Calamus,” the homoerotic cluster, that were originally the subject of attack on moral grounds. At that early stage, there was no charge of homosexuality (or rather of sodomy, as it would have been termed at that time) against Whitman, despite the fact that homosexual love is so openly suggested in “Calamus.” The subject of homosexuality was totally sealed to the American mind. In Zweig’s words: “It was as if the ‘Calamus’ poems were not read, as if they slipped through blanks in the minds of the readers.” This (relative) cultural blindness of the mid-nineteenth century American public to the homosexual theme may help explain Whitman’s boldness in using homosexual imagery in his poems. Such blindness played in favor of Whitman’s proposal of a new morality of male friendship.

Whitman’s writings were to be the expression of an oracle—a sacred figure leading his people, as in the Old Testament. He believed he had a religious mission, but rather than demanding adherence to dogmas, what he sought was a revolution in moral values and a subsequent change in people’s (more specifically, males’) behavior. Indeed, more than a systematic creed, what he proposes is a new ethical system grounded on unsystematic, and somewhat vague, theological notions. This book attempts to recuperate for today’s reader the original meaning and purpose of Whitman’s writings. Also, by including a review of the most relevant interpretive missionary writings by Whitman’s early followers, as well as of the largely neglected early- and mid-twentieth century scholarly criticism, it is my hope that this book will be useful as a source book to students and scholars in a diversity of fields.

Of current criticism, Kuebrich’s work merits extended discussion in Chapters 2, 4 and 5 because of its exclusive focus on Whitman as a religious seer,
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an interpretation which is specially significant for the present study. Chapter 1 is devoted to an exploration of Whitman’s religious enterprise. Whitman thought of himself as having a prophetic mission, and was indeed revered as a true prophet and a messiah by an initial band of devotees. Religion was all-important to him, and he considered *Leaves of Grass* to be first and foremost a religious work, all of which, as pointed out earlier, appears to have been for the most part neglected or de-emphasized by generations of scholars.

The first chapter also looks both at the poet’s radical opposition to conventional religiosity, and at the nature of his messianic project. In his anti-ecclesiasticism, in the allegedly mystical character of his new religion, and in his unorthodox views of traditional religious dogmas we find elements of late Romanticism as well as a clear echo of Emersonian ideas. His Romantic aura in conjunction with his often expressed enthusiasm for science and progress, as well as his typically modernist attempt to develop a grand theory, a new Bible, are all elements that make of Whitman a unique synthesis of mid-to-late nineteenth century Western cultural trends.

During his lifetime, Whitman attracted a fellowship of devoted disciples and missionaries in the United States and in Europe. His followers recognized in him a powerful personality, and found in him some unique spiritual quality. They produced extensive missionary writings that resulted in original social and literary creations. This Whitmanite school of thought continued to exist for several decades after the poet’s death, and deserves more attention than has been paid to it in recent scholarship, since it preserved for a time the original meaning of Whitman’s poetic impulse.

Chapter 2 attempts to answer the fundamental question concerning the nature of Whitman’s mysticism—his source of inspiration. What was it like? Was it mere poetic inspiration of mystical overtones, or did it originate in a deeper religious experience, comparable to that of the traditional mystics? Or was, perhaps, the source of his mystical style not even religious, but part of a well calculated scheme, as renegade disciple Eduard Bertz claimed soon after the poet’s death? This is an important question if we are to take Whitman’s religious project seriously, or if one is to comprehend the seriousness with which it was understood by his converts and contemporaries generally. The problem of Whitman’s source of inspiration is embodied in what scholars have called “the mystic hypothesis,” in reference to the belief held by some that such inspiration was rooted in a concrete mystical experience (or possibly more than one) the poet allegedly had in 1855. A weaker version of the mystic hypothesis is the idea that Whitman’s writings resemble the writings of the traditional mystics, while no claim is made as to the existence of an ecstasy properly. A careful review of the mystic hypothesis shows that Whitman may be called “mystic” only in a weak, adjectival, sense, but hardly in a substantive manner, as the strong version of the hypothesis maintains.

From a sociological perspective mystical revelation constitutes a radical source of power and authority. Because of this, exploring the roots of
Whitman's mystical reputation among his initial followers and early Whitman scholars becomes imperative if we are to understand the original meaning of his work, that is, the meaning and purpose the poet himself sanctioned. From a contemporary scholarly perspective, the question whether parts of Whitman's poetry are the expression of a genuine experience akin to those of the traditional mystics or whether he simply adopted a mystical style is still, needless to say, a relevant one.

If Whitman truly experienced a genuine and transformative mystical experience, then the case could be made that the eroticism found in parts of his poetry is only a metaphor for the ineffable, as in some traditional mystics (e.g., St. John of the Cross). Kuebrich is one who maintains that the intense homoerotic imagery of “Calamus” is to be understood on a strictly spiritual level, that is, as the mere expression of an exalted otherworldly experience, thus implicitly denying a primarily social and practical purpose to Whitman's poetry. If, however, the case is that Whitman simply adopted a mystical style in his poetry in order to authoritatively convey a message of social and moral reform, then the interpretation of certain passages in his poetry need not be understood on the same level of figurativeness as those of the traditional mystics. In any case, the existence or not of some sort of mystical experience that triggered Whitman's poetic genius is at the very least a biographical question that deserves attention.

The establishment of new moral precepts and behaviors can be brought about by two different processes: slow cultural evolution, and authority. Cultural evolution, or change through rational persuasion, can take place only with the concurrence of a variety of social, economic and even political factors, and requires an extended period of time to take shape. Authority, on the other hand, offers more immediate possibilities for change, on condition that such authority be recognized as genuine. It is in this context that mystical revelation, or the claim to mystical revelation at any rate, constitutes a radical source of authority. Such an unquestionable source of authority is necessary when the new morality that is being proposed departs from conventional mores as radically as did Whitman’s in his time.

The third chapter is devoted to an analysis of the aesthetic dimension in Whitman's new morality of comradeship. Very much in line with turn-of-the-century aestheticism, Whitman tends to identify the good with the beautiful, thus following in the classic Platonic tradition. As we will see in Chapter 4, this Greek nexus in Whitman's thought plays an important role in the development of his concept of comradeship. In some respects, Whitman's ethical propositions seem to run parallel to those of his contemporaries Oscar Wilde and Friedrich Nietzsche. Consequently, a number of important similarities between Whitman and these authors are also explored in this chapter.

The focus of Chapter 4 is Whitman's mystical concept of comradeship. The implications of his new morality of comradeship are contrasted with those of traditional male friendship. My conclusion is that Whitman’s goal
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was to mainstream certain marginal aspects of traditional male behavior that involve intense emotion as well as physical contact between males. These are aspects of male friendship and comradeship that normally take place only in “marginal” circumstances. This goal served a twofold purpose for Whitman: it legitimated behaviors that otherwise would have been rejected, and it expanded the pool of male partners (in an erotic, though not necessarily sexual/genital, sense). As part of Whitman’s messianic project, these marginal behaviors, taken out of their proper (marginal) settings, were to be regarded as dignified behavior, even as part of a superior moral code, i.e., the morality of comradeship. While actually rooted in his homosexuality, this new morality of male comradeship was presented by the poet as containing independent value and meaning in itself.

The last chapter of the book is devoted to a more detailed discussion of the evidence we have that Whitman’s ultimate purpose was moral reform. His religious project was, to use Peter Berger’s terminology, the “sacred canopy” that afforded legitimacy and made his own particular conception of comradeship socially viable. The latter, as already noted, consisted basically of a reassessment of the marginality of friendship. Whitman was not, in any meaningful sense, a precursor of the modern gay liberation movement, as he has been understood to be by many in our own day. If anything, the opposite is true. He absolutely rejected the possibility of a distinct homosexual minority. This is the ultimate meaning of his concept of comradeship and of the religious and mystical language in which it is embodied.
CHAPTER ONE

Literature As Religion

Whitman’s Messianic Enterprise

“The priest departs, the divine literatus comes”

—Democratic Vistas

“All hail to Thee! Walt Whitman! Poet, Prophet, Priest”

—Henry L. Bonsal

After reading, at the request of a dying soldier, the biblical passage describing the crucifixion of Christ and his resurrection, Walt Whitman—a volunteer nurse during the Civil War—was asked by the young man if he “enjoyed religion.” His reply was “probably not my dear in the way you mean.” Whether Catholic or Protestant, there is little doubt that the soldier, named Oscar, was religious in a conventional manner. Walt Whitman’s religiosity, on the other hand, was of a different kind. In this chapter, we look at the peculiarities of Whitman’s religion, as well as at the missionary activity carried out by his early followers, which ended in the development of a cult, sometimes referred to as the Church of Whitman.

THE BUILDING OF A REPUTATION

Through annotations in his personal diaries, we know that Whitman referred to the continuous writing and re-writing of *Leaves of Grass* as “The Great construction of a New Bible.” He also referred to his project as “the construction of a Cathedral.” Some scholars are of the opinion that Whitman was at all times conscious that he was writing a text that would appear to be mystically inspired, and that the messianic mission, made clear in the 1855 Preface, just became stronger over time. Indeed, Whitman, who despised the established...
churches and clergy, was intensely attracted to religion. Religion was for him the crown of democracy. It was not conventional religion that he had in mind, though, but a new type of religion.

Profoundly influenced by evolutionary theory and scientific ideas of progress, he believed the time had come to replace the old religions with a new one appropriate to the times. Of this new religion, he would be recognized as the prophet and high priest. In light of this, it is not too surprising that an apostolic college should develop around him (“the hot little prophets” as they were called by Bliss Perry, an early and controversial biographer of Whitman), whose members devoted themselves to disseminating the new gospel and glorifying their messiah. Their works generated the myth of Whitman the prophet, the redeemer, the new messiah, a myth that has not endured, but that at the time afforded the poet a controversial role in public life that he skillfully utilized to his advantage. In Asselineau’s words, “[t]o some fanatics he [Whitman] appeared as a saint or a prophet, as the equal of Christ or Buddha. In the space of a few years his renown had become international.” Whitman’s disciples praised him as if he were a new kind of messiah, and Whitman himself encouraged the spreading of the movement to all parts of the world.

To Emory Holloway, one of the more enthusiastic of his early twentieth century biographers, Whitman was an intellectual and emotional planet big enough to attract lesser minds out of their true orbits. If not major literary figures, these little prophets were, nonetheless, individuals of some intellectual standing. For example, Richard Maurice Bucke, a medical doctor and psychiatrist, as well as Whitman’s most inspired apostle, was superintendent of an insane asylum in Canada. He had studied in Europe and had received a number of important academic awards, while John Burroughs, another of the poet’s inner circle disciples, was a leading nineteenth-century American naturalist.

The authors who took upon themselves the task of spreading Whitman’s new gospel were successful in establishing the poet as a (controversial) public figure and, to a large extent, they were also successful in their avowed missionary purpose. Among the works that were responsible for building Whitman’s messianic reputation during his lifetime and for years after his death are William Douglas O’Connor’s The Good Gray Poet (1866) and The Carpenter (1868), John Burroughs’s Notes on Walt Whitman as Poet and Person (1867) as well as Walt Whitman: A Study (1896), Richard Maurice Bucke’s Man’s Moral Nature (1879) and Cosmic Consciousness (1901), John Addington Symonds’s Walt Whitman, A Study (1893), William Sloan Kennedy’s Reminiscences of Walt Whitman (1896) and The Fight of a Book for the World (1926), Henry Bryan Binns’s Life of Walt Whitman (1905) Edward Carpenter’s Days with Walt Whitman (1906), Horace Traubel’s With Walt Whitman in Camden, an oftentimes trivial, but still truly monumental, nine-volume record of his conversations with the poet during the latter’s last four years of life, and In Re Walt Whitman (1893) by Horace Traubel and Whitman’s literary executors.
Of the above authors, Symonds, Kennedy, Carpenter and Binns were British, and by no means the only British disciples.

From early on, the missionary impulse crystallized in the form of an international federation, The Walt Whitman Fellowship International, founded in Philadelphia in 1894, two years after the death of the poet, with the stated goal of extending the influence of Whitman's writings. It developed chapters and associated clubs in New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Knoxville, Canada (Toronto and Bon Echo), Bolton (England), Germany, France and other places. The Fellowship emanated out of the Walt Whitman Reunion (or “Re-Union”—we find both spellings in the documentation), a more informal group that had been meeting regularly since 1887 to celebrate Whitman's birthday. That same year, an attempt was made by Sadakichi Hartmann, a young multifaceted critic of Japanese-German origin, to found a Whitman society in Boston, but he could not find enough support for his project. In 1919, after the death of Traubel—a Boswellian biographer to the poet, the John of the apostolic college, and the indefatigable heart and mind of the Whitman movement—the Walt Whitman Fellowship properly ceased to exist, although it reconstituted itself in 1920 as The Walt Whitman Foundation, and as such became incorporated in 1945. As late as 1958, there was still at least one active chapter of the Fellowship in Chicago. As with the Reunion, the Fellowship held yearly meetings on May 31, to celebrate Whitman's birth. These meetings attracted “[s]ocialists, anarchists, communists, painters, poets, mechanics, laborers, business men [ . . . ] drawn together by the magnetism of a common love.” Traubel was not only one of the founding members of the Fellowship but also its secretary and treasurer during the approximately twenty-five years that the organization was in existence. There were fifty-four people present at its foundational meeting in 1894. By 1903, records show it had two hundred and forty members. By this time, the Fellowship held its meetings at the Hotel Brevoort, on Eighth Street and Fifth Avenue, in New York, and its attendees included famous anarchist Emma Goldman and writer Walter Lippmann. It wasn't always a smooth ride for Traubel, who had problems collecting the dues (initially $2 per year). After 1896, it was decided the Fellowship would depend upon voluntary contributions. However, a large majority ignored Traubel’s requests for contributions, a minority simply refused to contribute, and only a small number of them did pay. This prevented the organization from advancing its publications program, which, after the first few years, was left to its bare minimum.

In March 1890, Traubel began publishing The Conservator, a quality monthly review that reached a circulation of about one thousand. Devoted ultimately to disseminate Whitman's poetry and his message of comradeship, The Conservator regularly featured articles by Whitman's most fervent disciples, together with progressive, even radical, articles on a variety of social and political issues. On its pages we often find articles in support of Socialism, against war, for women's rights and vegetarianism, and against vivisection, racism, anti-Semitism, and the death penalty (which Whitman
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had consistently opposed\textsuperscript{14}, all of it side by side with articles on spirituality, religion, ethics and, of course, central to every issue, Whitman and his work. The paper also kept track of all new reviews and criticisms of the poet. It also promoted the sale of his poetry through large display advertising. Although labeled “an American Communist” by the German press,\textsuperscript{15} Traubel, who leaned towards anarchism rather than communism,\textsuperscript{16} did not shy away from publishing opposing viewpoints, and negative, or even openly hostile, criticisms of Whitman or of himself.

An indefatigable Traubel ran and edited \textit{The Conservator} all by himself for thirty years—a truly colossal task. Occasionally, in the later years of the paper, he was the sole writer in some issues. He managed to keep the monthly publication running until 1919, the centennial of Walt Whitman’s birth. Shortly after the publication of the last issue Traubel died. Gary Schmidgall, in his excellent compilation of articles from \textit{The Conservator}, brings our attention to the final line of the last article in the last issue of the paper: “Leaves of Grass—biography of a man—is the biography of God.”\textsuperscript{17}

The missionary writings published during Whitman’s lifetime by O’Connor, Carpenter, Burroughs, Bucke, Kennedy, and Traubel, the poet himself approved of, as well as of the kind of messianic aura they invested him with. In fact, quite often Whitman edited the texts or, as in the case of Burroughs’s Notes, shamelessly did part of the writing himself (perhaps as much as half the book).\textsuperscript{18} When, years later, Burroughs published his \textit{Walt Whitman, A Study}, a more ambitious work intended as a critical study, even there his criticism is in essence Whitman’s conception of himself, not the expression of an independent judgement.\textsuperscript{19}

As a matter of fact, in these extensive missionary writings Whitman was presented in precisely the way he wanted to appear to the world—although that was not always the case. A number of European maverick disciples—among them, British scholars Edward Carpenter and John Addington Symonds, and, in Germany, Eduard Bertz, the most belligerent of all,\textsuperscript{20}—insisted on seeing Whitman as a homosexual prophet, a role that the poet emphatically denied.\textsuperscript{21}

Born in Long Island, N.Y., in 1819, Whitman lived most of his life in the city of New York and its vicinity. Life in New York allowed him to be in contact with and absorb the artistic and intellectual currents of his time, as well as the popular pseudosciences. A source of inspiration for his worldview, as well as an important support for his messianic claims, came from phrenology. Its novel terminology provided the basic paradigm for Whitman’s ideal man (or “superman,” as it is referred to by some authors), and a solid justification for his own messianic aspirations. Whitman’s steadfast belief in this pseudoscience had a profound influence on his work, not only as the source of some of his most suggestive terminology, but also in shaping the ideal human he represents himself to be in \textit{Leaves of Grass}.\textsuperscript{22}

As early as 1849, Whitman visited Fowler and Wells’s phrenological cabinet in Nassau Street, with the intention of having his phrenological chart
Believers in this pseudoscience had their intellectual and emotional capacities, and even their moral tendencies, evaluated on a scale of 1 (minimum) to 10 (maximum). The number of points for each capacity or tendency measured depended literally on the size and shape of cranial bulges, forehead and overall volume of the head (on the assumption that these reflect the shape and size of the brain). Although Whitman’s “chart of bumps” was unsurprisingly flattering, he probably felt that, after all, he knew himself better than the phrenological experts, and decided to improve his scores by small amounts.²³ This he did in an obvious attempt to strengthen his extraordinary claims about himself. Whitman published the improved chart on at least three different occasions as a credential for *Leaves of Grass.*²⁴ As an extended explanation to the chart, in several editions of *Leaves of Grass* he even reprinted some of the most flattering comments that Lorenzo Fowler added:

This man has a grand physical construction, and power to live to a good old age. He is undoubtedly descended from the soundest and hardiest stock. Size of head large. Leading traits of character appear to be Friendship, Sympathy, Sublimity and Self-esteem, and markedly among his combinations the dangerous fault of Indolence, a tendency to the pleasure of Voluptuousness and Alimentiveness, and a certain reckless swing of animal will, too unmindful, probably, of the conviction of others.

This was precisely the light in which Whitman wanted to be seen by the world. Even negative traits such as voluptuousness, indolence, animal will and unmindfulness had in Whitman’s mind the most seductive connotations, which made them an essential part of his idealized self-portrait:

Walt Whitman, a Kosmos, of Manhattan the son, Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding, No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart from them. (“Song of Myself,” 24)

Sometimes he would publish his reviews anonymously (under the guise of an independent observer);²⁵ at other times, he would ask someone else to sign what he had written, as he did, for example, with the Introduction that appeared in the first British edition of *Leaves of Grass.*²⁶ In other cases, he would encourage such descriptions by others to the point of editing their texts, as pointed out earlier. In O’Connor’s *The Good Gray Poet* (1865), the attempt is clearly visible to link the poet’s idealized physical appearance with his messianic mission—the physical appearance being the expression of the inner illumination:

[A] man of striking masculine beauty—a poet—powerful and venerable in appearance; large, calm, superbly formed; oftenest clad in the careless,
rough, and always picturesque costume of the common people [. . . ] I marked the countenance, serene, proud, cheerful, florid, grave, the brow seamed with noble wrinkles; the features massive and handsome; the eye-brows and eyelids especially showing that fullness of arch we seldom see save in the antique busts [. . . ] the simplicity and purity of his dress, cheap and plain but spotless [. . . ] the whole form surrounded with manliness [. . . ] the august charm of the strong [. . . ]

He has been a visitor of prisons, a protector of fugitive slaves, a constant voluntary nurse; night and day, at the hospitals, from the beginning of the war to the present time; a brother and friend through life to the neglected and the forgotten, the poor, the degraded, the outcast, the criminal; turning away no man for his guilt, nor woman for her villeness.27

In O’Connor’s words Whitman is made to appear as a modern Christ. Some have suggested that Whitman collaborated personally in the writing of The Good Gray Poet.28 In Holloway’s opinion, the best service done to Whitman’s fame by this book was its fixing upon him an enduring sobriquet (“the Good Gray Poet”). Holloway also points out that the title of the book was supplied by Whitman himself.29 There is no record of Whitman visiting prisons in any regular fashion; he never gave refuge to fugitive slaves, and, although he was a nurse during the Civil War, he was not so from beginning to end (and, in any case, most modern critics tend to see reasons other than sheer altruism for his activities as a nurse for the young soldiers). As for O’Connor’s story “The Carpenter,” it is meant to present Whitman as the new savior and messiah. By elaborating on a period of Whitman’s life when he helped building timber houses, O’Connor develops a well-calculated analogy between the poet’s life and the life of Jesus (O’Connor claimed Jesus had not only the same moral but even the same physical traits as Whitman). In his pamphlet, O’Connor depicts Whitman as a miracle worker and Christ, “a gray redeemer” and “lover of soldiers” who walks the hospitals and tells the young sufferers: “Better than all is love. Love is better than all.”30 It was excesses of this kind that, later on, disgusts Whitman’s German disciple Eduard Bertz.31 As part of the same messianic projection of himself, Whitman entitled one of his poems “The Wound Dresser”—an image skillfully exploited by Bucke after Whitman’s death, in his attempt to consolidate the poet’s messianic reputation.

Of all the original disciples, O’Connor and Bucke were most crucial in making known and consolidating Whitman’s messianic ambitions. Bucke was a fervent believer in Whitman’s religion. His devotion to Whitman was such that in a letter to Harry Buxton Forman he even wondered whether Whitman “is human or divine, whether he is a God.”32 Indeed, he was to write: “We have many great poets, but only one divine.”33 Justin Kaplan points out that his devotion was so intense and of such long standing that over the years he came to look like Whitman.34 In a letter to Horace Traubel dated November 9, 1888, Bucke stated: “It is my dream to devote the rest of my life [ . . . ] to the
study and promulgation of the new religion,” which he did. O’Connor, for his part, broke up with the poet in 1872, after a heated dispute over the Fifteenth Amendment, which granted blacks the right to vote (O’Connor broke up with his own wife too for siding with Whitman). It was a estrangement that lasted for ten years. To Whitman, who was against universal suffrage, giving blacks the right to vote was appalling. Still, O’Connor never ceased to revere the “Good Gray Poet,” and came to his help when he was in need.

Bucke met Whitman for the first time on October 1877, but by the time he met the poet he confessed that his poems, which Bucke had read some time before, had already awakened in him a profound interest. In 1883, he published a biography of Whitman which was partly written by Whitman himself—in fact, Whitman admitted to Carpenter that he had written the first twenty-four pages of the book! In Kaplan’s words, Whitman had exercised “such total editorial control over Bucke’s biography that they were practically collaborators.” It comes as no surprise that Whitman should say about such a disciple that he was “about the only one that thoroughly radiates and depicts and describes in a way I think thoroughly delineates me.” In *Man’s Moral Nature* and *Cosmic Consciousness*—Bucke’s two other major works—Whitman is the underlying motive and inspiration, if not actually the central figure. In both of these works Whitman is presented as an individual of superior moral character, and, particularly as far as *Cosmic Consciousness* is concerned, had Whitman lived long enough to read the work, he would have seen his most ambitious messianic aspirations fulfilled. In it, Bucke develops what amounts to a typology of messianic charisma. Whitman is presented side by side with Christ, Buddha, and other such messianic figures, all of whom have been gifted with a “universal” spiritual quality; they belong in an elite of individuals who have reached the highest degree of human development, they are the leaders of mankind. Not surprisingly, this spiritual element was, according to Bucke, more completely realized in Whitman than in any of the other figures with whom he is compared in the book.

O’Connor and Bucke were two of Whitman’s most exalted disciples in the US, and among the most instrumental in launching his messianic project. Whether through their missionary efforts or just because of the merits of *Leaves of Grass*, it didn’t take long for the apostolic spirit to germinate in Britain too. Edward Carpenter, William Sloan Kennedy, John Addington Symonds and Henry Bryan Binns contributed decisively with their writings to satisfy Whitman’s messianic dreams.

Symonds, the author of *The Renaissance in Italy*, a classic work of cultural history, was Whitman’s most persistently troublesome reader, a beloved but awkward disciple. His scholarly background and style made Whitman occasionally refer to him, though in a friendly manner, as “horribly literary and suspicious.” Symonds wanted to obtain confirmation that Whitman was a homosexual prophet and that his writings contributed to justify and dignify the homosexual tendency in men. To that effect he wrote to Whitman a
number of letters in which, at times in a straightforward manner and other times in a more indirect fashion, he kept asking the poet to clarify the meaning of comradeship in his poetry, particularly in “Calamus,” the cluster of poems that celebrates the love of comrades.\textsuperscript{42} In a letter dated August 3, 1890, Symonds explicitly suggested the possible intrusion of those semi-sexual emotions and actions which no doubt do occur between men. Upset by Symonds’s insistence, in a calculatingly casual reply containing what was to become one of the most famous lies in literary history, Whitman claimed to have had six children, though unmarried. Circumstances connected with their benefit and fortune had kept them separated from him. Edward Carpenter (who believed Whitman was bisexual\textsuperscript{43}) made this correspondence public for the first time in \textit{Days with Walt Whitman}.\textsuperscript{44} Symonds, who by that time was ill with tuberculosis, entertained the fantasy of meeting Whitman in the next world—they never met in this one. Although more critical than the other disciples, and above all concerned with the homosexual implications of parts of \textit{Leaves of Grass}, in his \textit{Study} Symonds also elaborates extensively on the newness and uniqueness of Whitman’s religion.

Edward Carpenter, for his part, a young Englishman with a history of involvement in progressive causes, had come to America to pay tribute to Whitman for permitting men “not to be ashamed of the noblest instinct in their nature,” adding that “[w]omen are beautiful, but to some there is that which passes the love of women.”\textsuperscript{45} By the time he met Whitman, Carpenter lived openly with his male lover on a farm in Derbyshire. In his \textit{Days with Walt Whitman}, following Bucke’s lead (whom he cites), Carpenter places Whitman among the \textit{universal prophets}—to be precise, he too places Whitman above them, as Bucke had done. Also similarly to what Bucke had done, in an appendix to a chapter entitled “Whitman as Prophet,” Carpenter attempts to show the parallelisms between \textit{Leaves of Grass} and the sacred scriptures of different religions.

Henry B. Binns’s \textit{A Life of Walt Whitman} (1905), though still a valuable, detailed biography, falls as well within the missionary category. In his introduction, this British author (who never had personal contact with Whitman) warns us that he is not going to deal with Whitman’s writings, except when necessary, and if so in a passing manner. He writes about the man, whom he considers of a “special and exceptional character, a new type of mystic or seer.” A man, he goes on to say, who “belongs to the order of initiates.”\textsuperscript{46} In his book, he devotes specific chapters to Whitman’s \textit{illumination} and to his mysticism. Also, as with O’Connor, the largely irrelevant period of Whitman’s activities as a timber-house builder is deliberately turned into a chapter (“The Carpenter”), although the attempt to establish a parallelism between Whitman and Jesus is in this case more subtle and inconspicuous.

A Whitman cult was probably forming as early as 1860, before the third edition of \textit{Leaves of Grass}.\textsuperscript{47} To David Reynolds, the author of a major cultural biography of Whitman, the formation of this cult, which would take shape
over a number of decades and into the twentieth century, was the result of the religious element in Whitman’s poetry in combination with Bucke’s “religious appropriation” of Whitman. The missionary work, that had quickly spread to Europe (especially, but not only, to the British Isles) fairly soon led to the formation of a prominent chapter of the Whitman cult in Bolton, England. Its members cherished, among other “sacred” objects, a lock of the poet’s hair and the stuffed body of a canary that had once trilled in the parlor of the poet’s home. The group was made up mainly of professional and business people, some of whom came in pilgrimage to visit the poet in Camden. Whitman, for his part, encouraged their devotion by means of epistolary contact: “God bless the Church & branch of the Church (with candelabras blazing more fervidly than any) that is planted & grown in Bolton.” In 1891, the Whitman church of Bolton was visited by Bucke, who was Whitman’s “Luke as well as his Paul, missionary to the gentiles and to the far-flung congregations of true believers.”

Whitman cults soon came into existence in France and Germany. J. V. Widmann, one of the main representative figures of the latter, stated that Whitman was to be understood as a Jacob Boehme, an Angelus Silesius, and praised what he called his “overwhelmingly strong feeling of the sacredness and innate nobility of all existence.” To Gay W. Allen, one of the leading experts on Whitman in the second half of the twentieth century, this complete acceptance of Whitman as a prophet of a new natural religion was the central faith of that particular Whitman cult. Johannes Schlaf was the most fanatical apostle of the Whitman cult in Germany. He carried out some very poor translations of Whitman’s writings into German, which made him the object of a fierce attack by Bertz, the renegade disciple, who attempted to expose Schlaf’s ignorance (see Chapter 4).

In his classic work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James reports that at the beginning of the twentieth century societies were actually being formed for the Whitman cult, and that even a periodical (*The Conservator*) had been created for its propagation, in which the lines of orthodoxy and heterodoxy were beginning to be drawn.

William James mentions that hymns were being written at the time and that Whitman was explicitly compared to the founder of the Christian religion, “not altogether to the advantage of the latter.” This air of religious solemnity and veneration, almost of pure worship, is manifest in an episode recorded by Traubel in his detailed account of Whitman’s final years in Camden. By March 1889, O’Connor, who shortly before had reconciled with Whitman and with his own wife, had only a few months to live, when Bucke and Traubel visited him. This is how Kaplan, a modern biographer, narrates the episode (based on Traubel’s account):

“Horace is the wonder child of our pilgrimage,” O’Connor said, kissing Horace’s lips, eyes, and forehead, “the pride of the flock.” O’Connor
was prepared to depart in peace, having seen salvation in the Whitman church. “It has all been beautiful,” his wife said at the end of this sacramental parting.58

Kaplan’s somewhat ironic use of religious terminology testifies, nonetheless, to the fact that Whitman regarded himself, and was regarded by others, primarily as a (non-conventional) religious figure. Hesser, the author of a systematic study on the religion of Walt Whitman, is also convinced that the poet’s closest friends and disciples thought that he had actually established a new religion.59 He quotes Bucke, who expressed his belief that *Leaves of Grass* offers the foundation for a religion greater than the world had ever seen, and Burroughs, who wrote that Whitman’s ends were religious rather than literary and that he himself (Whitman) was a great religious teacher and a prophet. Thomas Harned, a member of Whitman’s inner circle, begins his essay for a commemorative volume put together by the apostolic college after the poet’s death with the following words: “Walt Whitman was of a profoundly religious nature and “Leaves of Grass” is a religious book,” with the rest of the essay devoted to a discussion of the nature of Whitman’s religion.60 In the June 1895 issue of *The Conservator*, he would write that “[t]hose who have realized that the old theologies do not satisfy, and who also fail to receive comfort in the prevalent agnosticism, can find in *Leaves of Grass* a religion to live by and to die by.”61

If Bucke was an exalted apostle of Whitman’s cause, there was still one whose fervor “out-Bucked” Bucke, to use Whitman’s own expression. This was his British disciple William S. Kennedy, who considered Whitman “one of the prophets and saviors of the world,”62 “a God”63, and who, in an 1890 Christmas letter, posed the question to Whitman whether he thought in a thousand years from then people would be celebrating the birth of Whitman as they are now the birth of Christ.64 Kennedy’s *Reminiscences* consist basically of two parts: transcriptions of Whitman’s diaries, and Kennedy’s own estimate of Whitman. Needless to say that as Kennedy himself ranked high in the apostolic college, his book ranks high among the missionary writings. In it, as in the writings by the other disciples, Whitman is described as a man of a superior moral character and is compared to Jesus—to Whitman’s advantage:

[T]he style is often like that of the New Testament [. . .]. Jesus and Whitman are both of them poets, both prophets, both carpenters’ sons, and both great democrats. But Jesus has the more spirituelle, violet nature, is pensively sad, introspective, austerely self-renunciatory; while Whitman is cheerful and objective, lusty, universal.65

Although the Whitman cult was never large, the missionary effort endured for a considerable period; indeed, it lasted into the 1920s.66 In 1921, almost thirty years after Whitman’s death, two works were being published in the most genuine missionary style, one in France and one in Britain: *Le
Poème évangile de Walt Whitman, by Léon Bazalgette (a regular contributor to The Conservator), and Walt Whitman, the Prophet of the New Era, by Will Hayes. The titles of these books are in line with their contents. In his highly romanticized study, Bazalgette takes religion to be the center and raison d'être of Whitman’s life and work: In his thought, “essential poetry expresses essential religion and walks with it.” In Bazalgette’s view, from the beginning the religious purpose of Whitman’s work dominates all his poetical intentions.67

As for Hayes’s work, its table of contents is self-explanatory:

Chapter
I. The Christ of our Age
II. The Carpenter of Brooklyn
III. A Sermon on the Mount—Of Vision
IV. A Prophet in His Own Country
V. The City of Friends: Whitman’s “Kingdom of God”
VI. Signs from Heaven
VII. The Disciples and the Dinner Basket, etc.

As late as 1924, Whitman scholars were referring to the “evangelical spirit” as the central impulse behind Whitman’s poetry.68 Regardless of the passionate allegations and exaggerations found in the missionary works, Whitman scholars have noticed the numerous parallelisms between the language and the cadence of certain passages of Leaves of Grass and parts of the Old Testament, a fact that has been attributed by everyone, including Whitman himself, to intensive reading of the Bible in his youth.69 Whitman tried to publicize such parallelisms with the subtle purpose of suggesting that the same kind of divine inspiration might have been at work in both the prophetic books of the O.T. and Leaves of Grass.70 Whitman’s burial on March 30, 1892, in Harleigh Cemetery, in Camden, was, of course, a major occasion for public display of veneration on the part of his disciples. While the relatives of Whitman had planned on a Methodist funeral service, the disciples managed to prevent this, and, instead, they arranged, in Asselineau’s words, “a new kind of ceremony suitable for the founder of a new religion which transcended all others.”71 In the ceremony, which took place under a large canopy close to the tomb, several orators read passages from the sacred books of the main religions, and from Leaves of Grass, as it was considered one of them. Colonel Ingersoll, an agnostic admirer of Whitman, spoke in an almost apocalyptic tone, as appropriate to the entombment of a messiah:

[Death is less terrible than it was before. Thousands and millions will walk down into the “dark valley of the shadow” holding Walt Whitman by the hand. Long after we are dead the brave words he has spoken will sound like trumpets to the dying.72]
Kennedy, who was present at the ceremony, felt as if he had been at the entombment of Christ, and he was scarcely surprised that some days after the burial the hill was found “almost denuded of plants, vines and branches of laurel by his passionate lovers.” Others, while the poet was still alive, had already predicted that his grave would become a Mecca that would attract pilgrims from far and near.

Whitman was buried in a monumental tomb, fitting to the great prophet of a new religion. It was Whitman himself who designed his own tomb, which consisted in a plain massive stone temple of unpolished Quincy granite. He personally oversaw the progress in the construction of the tomb, which was to have his name, and only his name, carved in large characters on the frontispiece. The matter of how the money was raised, or who paid for the construction of the tomb, and what was its real cost, became in later times a matter of biographical controversy due to Bliss Perry’s inaccurate, almost fanciful, account of the matter in his biography of Whitman. Perry’s uninformed, even slanderous, account was uncritically accepted as authoritative by later biographers of Whitman. In fact, the matter was convincingly clarified by Traubel and others in the pages of The Conservator.

Swedish scientist and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) exerted an important influence on Whitman’s thought, perhaps even a crucial one. Swedenborg had visions of the afterlife, received revelations, and communicated with angels and the souls of the dead. His esoteric doctrine contained the idea that every material thing has a spiritual counterpart, or “ultimate.” These “ultimates” match Whitman’s “eidólon.” Among the possible Swedenborgian influences on Whitman, Reynolds mentions Swedenborg’s body-specific, erotic mysticism (Whitman agreed with Swedenborg that there is “a very close connection between the state we call religious ecstasy and the desire to copulate,” adding: “I find it confirmed in my own experience”). Swedenborg’s influence on Whitman is no doubt a subject that merits special attention. But also in the Whitman movement, as it developed after the poet’s death, we find esoteric elements, maybe just a reflection of the cultural and intellectual trends of the time, but surely deserving a more detailed analysis than it is possible for me to do here. It called my attention, for example, the fact that, together with unconventional, unorthodox (as one would expect), articles on Western spirituality and religion, starting with the early years of Traubel’s The Conservator, the unofficial bulletin of the Whitman movement, and throughout its thirty years of existence (1890–1919), we also find an unusual number of articles promoting Theosophy, a doctrine associated with Madame Blavatsky’s doctrine of the Occult.

A Theosophical society had been created in New York as early as 1875, with an “Aryan” Theosophical society being created a few years later. The Occult is an
Orientalist doctrine, a version of which may have had some influence on Hitler’s thought. By the second decade of the twentieth century we find a curious connection, not sufficiently studied by Whitman biographers, between Theosophy and the Occult, Spiritualism, and the Whitman movement. This development took place mainly, as far as I have been able to ascertain, within the Whitman Canadian fellowship (made up of the “Club of Bon Echo” and the Canadian “Whitman Fellowship,” two separate organizations). In *Walt Whitman’s Canada* (1992), John Robert Colombo, one of the editors and co-authors of the book, attempts an explanation for this unusual association. In his opinion, the followers of Whitman in Canada “found in Theosophy much that had earlier appealed to them in *Leaves of Grass*, like a sense of universal brotherhood,” adding that “[a]s an occult doctrine, Theosophy had other things to offer.” Greenland and Colombo conclude that Theosophy could be seen “as Whitman plus something more, something occult, something hidden. Whitman was for the masses, Theosophy for the few” (Greenland and Colombo, 1992:26).

Still, it was more than just a fascination with the esoteric. By what can be considered the end of the Whitman movement (with the death of Horace Traubel in 1919, the end of *The Conservator*, and the dissolution of the original Whitman Fellowship), we find a curious turn towards Spiritualism. It happened in Canada, and it might not be considered significant were it not for the fact that it involved some of the original followers of the poet, who experienced apparitions and received messages from him from the beyond.

In 1919, almost thirty years after his death, Whitman appeared to some of his disciples, or so they claimed. Traubel was one of them. Whitman appeared to Traubel at Bon Echo, where he was visiting the Canadian Whitmanites, and talked to him, but the beloved disciple, who died within a few days of the vision, was unable to understand what the poet said. On another instance, Bucke, who in life had been so concerned with the possibility of the afterlife, appeared together with Whitman. On still another instance, Flora MacDonald, the leader of the Canadian Whitmanites, received long approving messages from the poet and Bucke through a medium.

To some extent, we find in the Canadian Fellowship the same combination of spirituality (or, rather, in this case, Spiritualism) and a radical approach to social and political issues that characterized *The Conservator*. The Whitman Fellowship of Canada was in existence for at least nine years. By 1925, a disappointed Arthur Deacon, president of the group, addressed the Fellowship as follows: “The cult is slowly and quietly being captured by persons with the instincts of priests and schoolmasters [. . .] the cult of Whitman is being made respectable and harmless from within.”

**THE CHARACTER OF WHITMAN’S RELIGION**

Whitman despised the established churches and the clergy. “A lot of churches, sects &ct., the most dismal phantoms I know, usurp the name of religion,” he
Walt Whitman’s Mystical Ethics of Comradeship

was to write in *Democratic Vistas*. With other prominent grand-theory nineteenth century prophet-savants, he shared the belief that the existing churches and dogmas were destined to die a natural death brought about by science and progress. His harsh words against the churches and the clergy in his 1856 letter to Emerson express the same kind of contempt and suspiciousness that we find in Freud’s, Marx’s, and Nietzsche’s writings:

> The churches are one vast lie; the people do not believe them, and they do not believe themselves; the priests are continually telling what they know well enough is not so, and keeping back what they know is so. The spectacle is a pitiful one.

Still, while the nineteenth century grand theorists prophesied the end of religion altogether and the establishment, in its place, of new moral codes devoid of religious connotations, Whitman’s craving was rather for a religious revival. His harsh criticisms are addressed to what he considers a dead religion manipulated by the ecclesiastical establishment, where true fervor is lacking, a situation that prevents the true religion from arising:

> [T]he mummery of the churches in which none believes but all agree to countenance, with secret sarcasm and denial in their hearts, is what stands most in the way of a real athletic and fit religion for these States.

This and other annotations that Whitman made on scraps of paper in preparation for lectures or future writings point to the idea that he considered the time had come for a new and more evolved type of religion to take the place of the old ones:

> [W]ho does not see that the outward and technical religious belief of the sects of this age is a mere crust, crumbling everywhere under our feet?—Who does not know that with all these churches, ministers, and all the surface deference paid to the sects, the soul of the people needing something deeper & higher have irrevocably gone from those churches?

Whitman does not mention any particular church in these fragments, which were written in the 1860s (probably early in the decade). Still, we know that during his youth he was possessed of a raving anti-Catholic feeling. While working as a freelance journalist for the *New York Aurora*, he encouraged the 1842 anti-Catholic riots of New York. In his articles, he attacked bishop John Hughes, “a hypocritical scoundrel,” who, along with “bands of filthy wretches, Catholics and ignorant Irish” had insulted and trampled upon “American citizenship.” Whitman urged an open battle against Catholics, which, indeed, took place. A No-Popery mob attacked St. Patrick’s Cathedral and stoned the bishop’s residence. Whitman was to
remark: “Had it been the reverend hypocrite’s head, instead of his windows, we could hardly find it in our soul to be sorrowful.”87 Although his radical anti-Catholicism was to recede when, during the war years, he found himself nursing soldiers side by side with caring and devoted nuns and priests (in old age he confessed to Traubel his perplexity at the many Catholic priests he befriended during those years88), this identification of religion with Catholicism, a church controlled by an outside monarch, seems to be at the basis of his perceptions of established religion:

Really what has America to do with all this mummery of prayer and rituals and the rant of exhorters and priests? We are not at all deceived by this great show that confronts us of churches, priests and rituals—for piercing beneath, we find there is no life, no faith, no reality of belief, but that all is essentially a pretence, a sham. I say that there is today little perhaps no religion—it is a matter of dress only.89

Still, whether or not it was Catholicism that represented in Whitman’s mind the prototypical religion he despised, the question remains as to why he developed such an aversion to organized religion and in particular to the ecclesiastical establishment. According to Hesser, the answer is to be found in his having been exposed since childhood to the ideas of the Free-Thinking movement, through tracts and lectures. Hesser singles out one work in particular:

The Ruins, or a Survey of the Revolutions of the Empires, written in 1791 in France by the Count Constantine de Volney, a work of which by 1795 there was a second English edition. Whitman declared a number of times to have read this book, which his father kept as a precious treasure. In the pages of Volney’s book one finds the rabid anti-clericalism which sprouts only in traditionally Catholic societies. Hesser sees in Volney’s work a Deist concept of God, a God that has created man and then has deserted him. Man, on the other hand, is worthy of honor in Volney’s system:

True, mortal creator! I pay thee homage! Thou hast measured the extent of the heavens, and counted the stars, thou hast drawn the lightning from the clouds, conquered the fury of the sea and tempest, and subjected the elements to thy will.90

Whitman never articulated a systematic definition of religion. Jean Catel attempts such a definition by resorting to the psychoanalytical method. To Catel, it was Elias Hicks, a radical Quaker preacher Whitman admired, who exerted a major influence in shaping Whitman’s idea of religion. Catel sees a profound influence that goes beyond the mere figure of Elias Hicks and his speeches, and encompasses the community. That is what shaped not only a liberal attitude regarding religious matters in Whitman’s mind, but his very concept of religion, according to Catel. To be sure, Hicks’s controversial
interpretations of the Scriptures also played an important role in giving content to Whitman's new religion.

Elias Hicks had been partly responsible for the schism in the Quaker church in 1826, after declaring publicly that the blood of Christ in itself was no more effectual than the blood of bulls and goats. He became the leader of the more liberal branch that came to be known as the Hicksites. Whitman's father, who knew Hicks personally, sympathized with his views and went to hear him preach whenever he was in the vicinity. Even in his old age, Whitman remembered the excitement that surrounded those speeches.91

The poet was ten years old when he accompanied his parents to the ballroom of Morrison's Hotel in Brooklyn Heights. The setting was opulent, with sparkling chandeliers, and the audience was varied: working-class people like the Whitmans, dignitaries, merchants, judges, social leaders, etc. Hicks was the center of attention, and there was excitement and fervor in the audience as he spoke. He was the leader. These early impressions, concludes Catel, account for Whitman's concept of religion:

Religion for Whitman means, therefore, a meeting of people, sharing in one and the same emotion, living according to common principles, listening to a man chosen and venerated by them [. . .]. Whitman will come to believe that in order to promote a new religion it is enough to chant to a collectivity of people that partakes of one and the same emotion.92

Catel's psychoanalytical interpretation of what religion means to Whitman is useful in that it points to an important aspect of the poet's childhood experiences that may be at the basis of his adult belief in a new, unorthodox religion capable of attracting the masses. However, he may be mistaken in claiming that Whitman's idea of religion can be reduced to the image of a community that shares in one emotion and listens to a speaker of their choice and reverence. Such an idea presupposes, firstly, that the central role is played by the ceremony itself, without much regard to the content of what the speaker has to say, and second that, in fact, the content of what the speaker says does not matter at all—as long as the community shares in the same emotion and the speaker is of their choice. But the fact is that it was the content of Hicks's preaching that seems to have had a lasting influence on Whitman. In an essay he devotes to Hicks in November Boughs, Whitman states his belief that

the true Christian religion, (such was the teaching of Elias Hicks,) consists neither in rites or Bibles or sermons or Sundays—but in noiseless secret ecstasy and unremitted aspiration, in a good practical life, in charity to the poor and toleration to all.93

In Democratic Vistas, in order to express what he sees as the essence of true religion, Whitman uses virtually the same words he used to describe Hicks's
beliefs: “Bibles may convey, and priests expound, but it is exclusively for the noiseless operation of one’s isolated Self to enter the pure ether of veneration, reach the divine levels, and commute with the unutterable.” This mystical, highly individualistic, concept of religion is only consistent with the Romantic framework against which Whitman’s religion must be viewed. The emphasis on the individualistic versus the communitarian expressed in the above lines becomes extreme in Whitman’s religious conception, to the point of total incompatibility between religion and church:

The ripeness of Religion is doubtless to be looked for in this field of individuality, and is a result that no organization or church can ever achieve [. . .]

Religion, although casually arrested, and, after a fashion, preserv’d in the churches and creeds, does not depend at all upon them, but is a part of the identified soul [. . .] which can really confront Religion when it extricates itself entirely from the churches and not before.

Whitman expresses again the idea in his introduction to his essay on Hicks that the fountain of all naked theology, all religion, all worship, all the truth is the single self and its inherent relations. While Catel seems to have completely overlooked this aspect of Whitman’s religious ideology, Kaplan, on the contrary, considers this to be the essential creed of Whitman’s religion. Indeed, the Quaker concept of the “inner light,” central to Hicks, and, one should add, equally central to Emerson (one thinks of “Self-Reliance,” for example), seems to have been crucial in shaping Whitman’s religious beliefs. For him, while others “talk of Bibles, saints, churches, exhortations, vicarious atonement,” Elias Hicks appeals to the religion “inside of man’s very own nature,” to which he adds that Hicks “is the most democratic of the religionists—the prophets.”

Kaplan’s interpretation of how the content of the sermons by Hicks may have influenced Whitman is, therefore, more illuminating than Catel’s psychoanalytical assumptions. Also, among Whitman’s personal annotations we find definitions of religion that are imbued with mystical, almost devotional, overtones, resembling those of traditional Christian spirituality. Passages like the following one help us understand the true essence of Whitman’s religion:

If you have in you that which makes you realize the deliciousness of visiting the sick in hospitals and the poor—if you have those sublime moments released from all cares and soaring to the idea of God, rapt sublime—if elate with immortality, realizing the divine of man, then you have the curious something, the crown of life and being, the lumine of the soul, [. . .] religion.

Though more of a definition by approximation than a systematic one, the above lines also tend to discard Catel’s analysis. In fact, Whitman’s definition of religion vividly resembles his own account of Elias Hicks’s. But the
heavy emphasis on individuality that we observe in Whitman’s Romantic religion shows only one side of his ideology. Individualism, which isolates, is to be compensated with adhesiveness (a term he borrowed from the language of phrenology for the love of comrades), which “fuses, ties and aggregates, making the races comrades, and fraternizing all.” In Whitman’s view, both, individualism and adhesiveness, are to be vitalized by religion, as religion is the core and essence of democracy. Such is the non-individualistic side of Whitman’s religion, a non-individualistic aspect that one could hardly call “communitarian”—Whitman himself calls it “adhesive.” To him, the great poet possesses a divine quality and almost a divine nature. He is a medium, and he is above existential attachments and judgments. His is a religion with no preachers or temples. Its only high priest is the poet himself:

Of all mankind the great poet is the equable man. [ . . . ] He is no arguer . . . he is judgment. [ . . . ] The greatest poet [ . . . ] is a seer [ . . . ] he does not stop for any regulation . . . he is the president of regulation.

Even more than a high priest, the great poet is a true messiah, virtually a god:

Divine am I inside and out, and make holy whatever I touch or am touch’d from.

(“Song of Myself,” 24)

Taking myself the exact dimensions of Jehova, Lithographing Kronos, Zeus his son, and Hercules his grandson, Buying drafts of Osiris, Isis, Belus, Brahma, Buddha.

(“Song of Myself,” 41)

While the divine poet’s power does not reside in his ability to perform miracles, as one would expect of a messiah or a saint, he, nevertheless, has the ability to perform the greatest of miracles, that of resurrecting the dead. If that is the case, however, why would not a messiah then be able to perform lesser miracles as well? This is part of what Asselineau has described as “the chaos of Whitman’s thought.” He is not alone in his perception. Others too have found some of Whitman’s statements, hints, and intuitions valuable, but at the same time difficult to follow as philosophical guides, as they point in all directions. Whitman’s celebrated reply to those who would feel confused about his apparent inconsistencies was:

Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)
Unquestionably, there is an element of irrationality in Whitman’s religious thought, which can be better understood in the context of the intellectual and aesthetic currents that were dominant during the first and middle part of the nineteenth century, which he fully absorbed. It was the era of Romanticism, a current of thought characterized by the predominance of passion over reason. The subjugation of rationality to passion gave rise to a wave of irrationalism and excess. Suicide for the sake of love, for example, became a common feature of Romantic literature. Rational contradictions did not matter much to the Romantic mind. The Romantics needed to express a deep emotion, and words were mere instruments to be used for that purpose. The kind of persuasion they sought did not require congruency. An element present in all major Romantic works, as well as in those of the American Transcendentalists, is the sacrilegious, that is, a religious feeling with a displaced object of adoration. The Christian God is replaced with some other object of worship: woman, nature, freedom, etc. At the same time, the conventionally sacred becomes oftentimes the object of attack or ridicule: Faust makes a pact with Satan, while Don Juan breaks into the sacredness of a convent and abducts a young nun, whom he tries to seduce. The Romantic individual needs to worship something more tangible than the traditional God, against whom he rebels anyway. And, in the process, the poet becomes the high priest, the new intermediary, the oracle of the new object of adoration.106 Early in his career, Emerson had warned about the danger of a poetical religion from the tendencies of the age, while expressing his concern that religion would soon “consist in nothing else than the progressive introduction of apposite metaphors”—only to end up expressing his final view of the poet as priest.107

In Transcendentalism, a more speculative American version of European Romanticism, we also find the religious element with its displaced object of adoration. Emerson would publicly renounce Christianity, while Thoreau (in Walden), and Melville (in Moby-Dick) also set out to write a modern, secular gospel.108 Whitman—who has come to be considered by some as the supreme inheritor of Romanticism109—finds his new object of adoration in the individual man (and, with less emphasis, in the individual woman), while becoming himself the object of adoration for the faithful of his “church.”

Besides a god, any religion needs to have sacred scriptures in which the beliefs are spelled out. The Romantic extends that role to the literary work, usually poetry, a poetry capable of stirring powerful emotions: that is what a sacred scripture is meant to infuse in order to gain adepts; that is the Romantic gospel. Binns emphatically testifies to the presence of this underlying emotion in Leaves of Grass:

There is a simple test of the whole matter which one may oneself apply: Does Whitman’s method of writing arouse [. . .] an emotion distinct in character from that aroused by the methods of all other poets?[. . .] What then is this emotion which Whitman alone, or in a special measure, evokes? [. . .] One may call it the religious emotion.110
Whitman consciously attempted to infuse that peculiarly religious emotion in his poems, and was concerned that it should be found in them.\textsuperscript{111} It is this principle that brings about the identification of literature with religion, an essential feature in Whitman’s religious conception. In the first preface to \textit{Leaves of Grass} we find Whitman’s conviction clearly spelled out that literature is, indeed, to be one with religion. Furthermore, the new and true Religion:

\begin{quotation}
\begin{center}
The time has certainly come to begin to discharge the idea of Religion, in the United States, from mere ecclesiasticism, and from Sundays and churches and church-going [ . . . ]. It must be consigned henceforth to Democracy \textit{en masse}, and to Literature. It must enter into the poems of the nation.\textsuperscript{112}
\end{center}
\end{quotation}

This identification of religion and literature is made even more explicit in a later annotation:

\begin{quotation}
\begin{center}
In view of that progress and of evolution, the religious element, the most important of any, seems to me more indebted to poetry than to all other means and influences combined. In a very profound sense religion \textit{is} the poetry of humanity.\textsuperscript{113}
\end{center}
\end{quotation}

As for the role of the poet in Whitman’s religion, James E. Miller, Jr. finds a gradation throughout \textit{Leaves of Grass} from priest to messiah, culminating in “Passage to India” with the poet—the “true Son of God”—taking up the role of Christ:\textsuperscript{114}

\begin{quotation}
\begin{center}
After the noble inventors, after the scientists, the chemist, the geologist, ethnologist, 
Finally shall come the poet worthy that name, 
The true son of God shall come singing his songs [ . . . ] 
Trinitas divine shall be gloriously accomplish’d and compacted by the true son of God, the poet.\]
\end{center}
\end{quotation}

(“Passage to India,” 5)

Next to poetry, science also plays a fundamental role in Whitman’s religious thought. Whitman sees no conflict between religion and science. This is an important characteristic of his religion, which sets him apart from every other grand theorist of his time as well as from traditional religious suspiciousness of scientific progress. To be precise, Whitman shared with many intellectuals of his time the conviction that science would supplant religion in the near future—but only the old religions, not the true Religion. Indeed, Whitman appears to combine the Romantic taste for religion—unorthodox religion and Spiritualism—with a modernist fascination with science, making him thus an ideal reflection of his time. Whitman was a transitional figure,
both chronologically and ideologically. He lived, indeed, at a time of transi-
tion—transition from Romantic love and fascination with the mysterious and
otherworldly to fascination with, and faith in, scientific progress, his genius
giving rise to an original synthesis of both:

With Science the Old Theology of the East, long in its dotage, begins
evidently to die and disappear [. . .] Science—and maybe such will
prove its principal service—[. . .] prepares the way for One indescrib-
ably grander [. . .]—the New Theology—For America [. . .] the supreme
and final Science is the Science of God—what we call science being only
its minister.115

It was also an idea found in European thought and in New England Trans-
cendentalism that science (or “knowing” in a more general sense), was only
a minister to the supreme Science of God. It is in this sense that Whitman’s
underlying purpose was religious and insofar as religious authority conflicted
with scientific progress he distrusted ecclesiastical creeds.116

Not only did Whitman not see an intrinsic contradiction between reli-
gion and science but he saw, in fact, complementarity between the two of
them. To Whitman, the religion America needs will come about through Sci-
cence, which “like a new sunrise, ascending, begins to illuminate all.”117 In Bur-
roughs’s words, Whitman exhibits the religious and poetic faculties perfectly
adjusted to a scientific, industrial, democratic age.118

Tanner distinguishes three possible attitudes of the religiously minded
towards science: one that sees no genuine benefit to the human soul in mate-
rial progress; one that sees accelerating advancements in science and tech-
nology as echoes of God’s inspiration, intelligence and power manifested
through human action; and, finally, the attitude of those who are confused.
He places Whitman in the second category.119 Tanner believes that science
was important to Whitman because it provided him with a certain amount
of positiveness, something of universal comprehensiveness in which to
believe. In his opinion, science was for Whitman what Catholicism was for
Dante, or Anglo-Catholicism was for Eliot: a framework for a philosophy,
and a means of identifying and belonging. However, Tanner’s attempt to cate-
gerize Whitman’s religious thought is problematic. His classification could
conceivably apply to two practitioners of a conventional religion, one feeling
threatened by science, the other celebrating science as yet another expres-
sion of divine wisdom. But if such is the case, Whitman is being placed
by Tanner side by side with the latter inappropriately, since Whitman was
convinced that science would eventually disprove all conventional religions.
He was persuaded that religion would soon be freed by science from “fables,
spangles, trickeries.”120

Although he never used the word “evolution” before 1871,121 Whitman,
absorbing the spirit of the times, held a strong belief in evolution at the physical
Based on his own intuitions, Whitman assumed the evolutionary principle—of a Lamarckian inspiration (or even what might be conceptualized today as Teilhardian)—to be true. As is well known, Lamarck’s evolutionary theory was very influential in the decades preceding Darwin’s. Whether Whitman got his ideas of evolution (Lamarckian and then Darwinian) from biological tracts or from lectures he attended and from astronomy and geology books, one thing is certain, Whitman believed in teleological evolution and, like many of his contemporaries, did not see a conflict between evolutionary theory and religion. In his evolutionary conception, Whitman equates change with progress, and was convinced that once science’s subsidiary role to religion is carried out, it too will disappear. Only religion will remain.

In Whitman’s view, evolution applies to religion especially, for it is inclusive of everything else. The religions that have existed in the past, as well as those in existence now, not excluding Christianity, are “the road for their times,” not to be despised, “[mean] as they are.” They represent necessary stages towards true Religion:

I say to you that all forms of religion, without excepting one, any age, any land, are but mediums, temporary yet necessary, fitted to the lower mass-ranges of perception of the race—part of its infant school—and that the developed soul passes through one or all of them, to the clear homogeneous atmosphere above them.

In his evolutionary view of religion, Whitman emphasized the temporary superiority of Christianity, while asserting that there is an element of truth in all religions:

There is no false Religion—Each one is divine. Each one means exactly the state of the people—they have arrived at that,—by-and-by they will pass on farther—The Christian Religion though the highest and most beautiful and advanced means the same and stands in the same position.

Hesser proposes a list of nine aspects that he identifies as common to both the “Romantic Religionist” and to Whitman’s religion which, to some extent, summarize our present discussion:

1. Both had a pantheistic rather than a Deistic belief.
2. Both lacked faith in institutions, creeds and books as sources of religious knowledge.
3. Both had faith in intuition as a source of knowledge of God.
4. The complete reliance of both of them upon the soul within resulted in a kind of prophet’s pride.
5. Both believe that man is in some sense divine.
(6) For both of them Idealism was the philosophic basis for their religion and especially for their belief in the spiritual nature of man and in immortality.

(7) Both considered objects of nature symbols of the Divine.

(8) Both felt that religion should harmonize with science, yet both were reluctant to accept the materialistic implications of science and especially of Darwinian evolution.

(9) For both Evil was transient and therefore subordinate to good, but Evil was necessary.\textsuperscript{132}

\textsc{The Creed}

As part of a lecture note on religion, Whitman wrote: “Do you suppose religion consists in one particular form or creed—the Christian or any other? No [,] it is the whole universal heart of man.”\textsuperscript{133} Authors who have dealt with the content of Whitman’s religion agree that there is no systematic creed to his religion.\textsuperscript{134} Still, attempts have been made to determine the theological tenets behind his poetic mode of expression. These attempts are partial by nature, since, as pointed out earlier, logical consistency did not matter much to Whitman. For example, when Thomas Harned, his future literary executor, asked him about his pantheistic views, Whitman did not appear to mind the conflict between those views and his belief in the immortality of the individual soul.\textsuperscript{135}

Still, despite the fact that Whitman labeled himself \textit{pantheistic}, it is doubtful that he would qualify as such.\textsuperscript{136} The following lines of “Song of Myself” (48), for instance, express, according to Kuebrich, the immanence of God in nature, but not the identification of God with nature:

I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least [. . . ]

Why should I wish to see God better than this day?
I see something of God every hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then,
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass,
I find letters from God dropt in the street, and every one is sign’d by God’s name

While differentiating the material from the spiritual, Whitman, in what may seem a paradox, identifies the one with the other, and affirms the immortality of these material/spiritual entities:

Was somebody asking to see the soul?
See, your own shape and countenance, persons, substances,
beasts, the trees, the running rivers, the rocks and sands.
All hold spiritual joys and afterwards loosen them;
How can the real body ever die and be buried?
(“Starting from Paumanok,” 13)

Hesser, who does consider Whitman a pantheist, believes (in agreement with H. Fairchild, whom he quotes) that the imaginative fusion of the familiar and the strange, the known and the unknown, the real and the ideal, the natural and the supernatural, is a definite characteristic of the Romantic mind. Adopting Fairchild’s terminology, he calls the first element in each of these pairs the “descendental” element versus the “transcendental” element represented by the second concept in the pair. Whitman’s emphasis on the descendental element is what sets him apart from the Transcendentalists.137

Whitman declares himself divine (“Song of Myself,” 24) but also he declares everyone else to be divine138; he identifies himself with Christ on the cross (“Salut au Monde,” 38) and recognizes the divinity of Christ (“Salut au Monde,” #43) but, considering his other statements, that may not make Christ any more divine than anyone else. At the same time, he believes in “return,” an aspect of his thought that is given to at least two different interpretations, i.e., that of a belief in reincarnation within the Eastern religious framework that some have applied to Whitman’s writings, or the idea that, with time, every possible combination of particles will occur again and again, that is to say, the Nietzschean concept of eternal return:

Believing I shall come again upon the earth after five thousand years
(“Song of Myself,” 43)

(No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before.)
(“Song of Myself,” 49)

Two more concepts seem to define Whitman’s theology: the Trinitas (Democracy, Science and, crowning them all, Religion), and the Square Deific. Suffice it to say here that the latter has often been taken to be the most systematic expression of Whitman’s theological tenets.139 A poem entitled “The Square Deific” was first sketched by Whitman prior to the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass, but first published in 1866 as “Sequel to Drum-Taps” and finally included in the cluster entitled “Whispers of Heavenly Death.” The Square Deific is made up of four divine persons: The Father, whom the poet identifies as Jehovah, Saturnus, Kronos and Brahman; the Son, typified by Christ, Hermes, and Hercules; Satan; and Santa Spirita. The most straightforward interpretation of the Square Deific is that of Father, Son, Holy Ghost—and Satan. There is discussion on whether Santa Spirita stands for the Holy Ghost, or whether the poet meant something different by creating an expression that, although it resembles Italian or Latin, in fact does not belong to any
language. Naturally, the originality of his theological thought consists in his including Satan as one of the divine persons. Such inclusion is consistent with Whitman’s conception of evil as ultimately contributing to perfection (a point to which we shall return).

When dealing with Whitman’s religious enterprise, his theology is only of secondary importance. Whitman never formulated a systematic doctrine; neither, consequently, did his disciples try to indoctrinate others with systematic theological beliefs. More than beliefs, what Whitman seems to be proposing is a new behavior, a new ethical code, and as such he was interpreted, particularly by early generations of Whitmanites. From the new ethics he proposes—not from the messianic aura—stems his appeal to many a reader even today. But this will be the topic of a later chapter.
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CHAPTER TWO

The Mystic Hypothesis

In a handwritten note, Whitman calls himself a mystic and compares himself, to his own advantage, to William Blake. He states that although “William Blake and Walt Whitman Both are mystics,” the difference between the two of them is that while in Blake the subjective “seat on an absolute throne, wilful & uncontrolled,” in Whitman “[t]o the perfect sense, it is evident that he goes off because he permits himself to do so [. . . ] able to stop the wild teetotum & reduce it to order, at any moment.” The idea that Whitman’s poetry was rooted in a genuine mystical experience, similar to those of the traditional mystics East and West, was indeed a serious hypothesis that remained central to Whitman studies well into the twentieth century. In this chapter, I will look at the kind of claims that have been made about Whitman’s mysticism, the types of mystical experience he has been said to represent, and the relationship between his mysticism and his ethical doctrine.

Prior to the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass, Whitman had been a rather unsuccessful journalist who wrote editorials, articles, and book reviews for newspapers in New York, Brooklyn, and in New Orleans, none of which writings show great originality. He had also written grisly sensational temperance stories, a notable example being his novel Franklin Evans; or The Inebriate, A Tale of the Times, that later in life he felt ashamed of having written. None of these writings seem to predict Whitman’s genius as revealed in Leaves of Grass. In his famous letter to Whitman after the first edition of Leaves of Grass, Emerson was the first one to express the belief that Whitman’s poetic genius “must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start.” Apparently, though, such foreground is nowhere to be found. This missing link between Whitman’s obscure career as a journalist, together with his lack of poetic creativity prior to 1855, and the sudden outburst of poetic genius on that year gave rise to two hypotheses: the love hypothesis and the mystic hypothesis. The love hypothesis, largely discredited nowadays, originated in Binns, who, in his Life of Walt Whitman (1905), claims that it was a love affair Whitman supposedly had with a woman while working as a journalist in New Orleans.
that produced “some quickening of emotional self-consciousness.” Binns claims that the process of Whitman’s love affair may have well culminated in what Bucke described as “cosmic consciousness,” adding that, before that culmination, “Whitman’s experience must have contained elements that do not seem to be present in the Whitman of Franklin Evans.” The love hypothesis was taken up by Bazalgette, De Selincourt, and Holloway, with the latter going as far as producing a photograph of Walt Whitman’s son.

Although the case could be made that Emerson was the first proponent of Whitman’s mysticism when he described Leaves of Grass as a curious mixture of the Bhagavad Gita and the New York Herald, the mystic hypothesis evolved after a questionable interpretation of Bucke’s “cosmic consciousness” theory. According to Bucke, Whitman possessed “cosmic consciousness,” a superior faculty of the intellect, the result of an advanced stage of evolution reached only by a few individuals. In Cosmic Consciousness (1901), Bucke compares the American poet to Jesus, Buddha, Jacob Boehme, and Dante. Together with these, however, he also includes in the list some personal friends and fellow disciples of Whitman, such as William O’Connor and Edward Carpenter—quite a heterogeneous mixture. Not surprisingly for the reader familiar with the missionary spirit of Whitman’s disciples, the quality of Whitman’s cosmic consciousness is claimed to be definitely superior to that of all the others: “Walt Whitman is the best, most perfect, example the world so far has had of the Cosmic Sense, first because he is the man in whom the new faculty has been, probably, most perfectly developed.”

Bucke claims that in a specific passage of “Song of Myself” (# 5), Whitman describes his experience of a true ecstasy:

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 reached till you felt my beard, and reached till you held my
feet.

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 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,
And that a kelson of the creation is love[..]

Bucke speculates that this alleged experience of ecstasy, that he considers to be the source of Walt Whitman’s poetical and religious inspiration, took place probably in June of 1853, when the poet had just turned thirty-five. At
any rate, such is the textual basis for the mystic hypothesis, to which a number of authors outside Whitman’s circle have adhered, although each of them with his peculiar understanding of it.

The debate over Whitman’s mysticism has given rise over the years to two different versions of the mystic hypothesis. The original formulation of it is that the poet derived his religious and ethical worldview from an ineffable spiritual revelation. Authors who support this view generally quote Bucke and his selections from “Song of Myself” as the expression of such an ecstasy or ecstasies. In the second half of the twentieth century, nevertheless, another formulation of the hypothesis gained acceptance, i.e., that *Leaves of Grass*, or parts of it, can be construed as a mystical work, but that whether Whitman found his inspiration in an actual mystical experience is ultimately irrelevant. For the sake of clarity, we will call the original version of the hypothesis (i.e., that Whitman is a mystic), the “strong hypothesis,” or simply the mystic hypothesis, and the latter, of manifest formalistic inspiration (i.e., that Whitman’s style resembles that of the mystics), the “weak hypothesis.”

An interesting question that the mystic hypothesis poses, that is, in its strong formulation (but also, to a certain extent, in the weak version), is whether, in his poetry, Whitman expresses a mystical doctrine of universal brotherhood, for which the sexual imagery he uses is only a metaphor (analogous to, for example, St. John of the Cross and other traditional Western and Eastern mystics who resort to erotic imagery), or whether, on the contrary, his notion of love, particularly the love of comrades, constitutes actually a new code of friendship and possibly of sexual ethics to be understood in a somewhat literal manner.

**THE STRONG HYPOTHESIS**

The textual basis for the mystic hypothesis, as presented by Bucke, gained immediate acceptance among the most religiously inclined scholars. Even nowadays, Whitman’s biographers unfailingly make reference to the mystic hypothesis (in its strong version) as it represents somehow the “official” version (i.e., that favored by those Whitmanites who follow what the poet’s first disciples considered to be the orthodox interpretation of his writings). This is how Kaplan (who does not believe in the hypothesis) formulates it: “In a moment of supreme illumination, comparable to the conversion of Saint Paul […] a mere ‘Man’ had been turned into a “Titan.””¹² To which he ironically adds that “for public consumption […] this was a view Whitman endorsed.”¹³

Asselineau finds the mystic hypothesis (or, rather, his particular brand of it) definitely convincing. Still, he raises a series of questions that, in his opinion, remain unanswered by the hypothesis:

*[The] new faculty which Bucke calls “cosmic consciousness” […] is more commonly designated as mysticism.*
According to Bucke, this initial ecstasy was a consecration and all of Whitman’s works flowed from it. [...] No doubt there is a relation between Whitman’s mystical sense and his poetic activity, but this parallelism or coincidence in itself explains nothing. It replaces one mystery by another. To say that Whitman’s genius was born of his mysticism does not solve the problem of its sudden appearance.¹⁴

Asselineu believes it “impossible” to penetrate the mystery of the first ecstasy. He asks: “Why did it happen in 1853 and not some other year? What spark suddenly set off the explosive mixture that had gradually accumulated in him?” And he concludes that where mysticism is concerned we can only describe “the how of things,” the why will always evade us. This consideration does not prevent Asselineau, though, from articulating a crucial question for the hypothesis: the transmutation of the revelation into poetry. He wonders why Whitman felt the need of translating his revelations poetically instead of merely experiencing them.¹⁵ The acquisition of a new view of reality through mystical revelation does not in any way need to involve the gift of poetic genius.¹⁶ As a matter of fact, in the Western tradition, recognized mystical poets are relatively rare.

William James was probably the most authoritative figure to lend credibility to the mystic hypothesis in its original form. It is not an exaggeration to say that, together with Bucke, James was responsible for Whitman’s unofficial canonization.¹⁷ Quoting the same lines that Bucke does as the expression of Whitman’s ecstasy, in The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902), James classifies the poet’s mystical experience as “sporadic” and triggered by the contemplation of nature. At the same time, he claims that some passages of Whitman’s work reveal what he calls a “chronic mystical perception.”¹⁸ James’s “mystical” characterization of Whitman soon became an obligatory reference for those authors who believed in Whitman’s mysticism, as it added credibility to their claim.

Only a few years after the publication of The Varieties of Religious Experience, British Whitmanite George Carpenter referred to James as an authoritative source when dealing with the mystical aspects of his poetry. “That Whitman must be considered a mystic becomes immediately apparent when one examines the writings of mystics—Oriental and Occidental, medieval and modern. All show the characteristics which professor William James has formulated so precisely.”¹⁹ Following what would become a regular pattern in Whitman biographies and critical studies when dealing with the mystical aspects of his poetry, George Carpenter cites Bucke’s cosmic consciousness theory and quotes the passage from “Song of Myself” selected by Bucke as the expression of Whitman’s ecstasy. He claims that Bucke was the first one to see that Whitman “scientifically speaking, belongs to this class [mystics].”²⁰

A particularly interesting aspect of G. Carpenter’s discussion is his attempt to assimilate Whitman’s mysticism to that of the Orientals, thus taking up a
lead which would be followed by a number of authors in the second half of
the twentieth century (although on purely formalistic grounds). G. Carpen-
ter believes that the mysticism of Walt Whitman came about as a result of a
process parallel to that followed by the Eastern mystics.\textsuperscript{21} To be sure, G. Car-
penter was not the first one to notice the similarity with the Oriental mystics.
Th oreau had noticed that resemblance and even pointed it out to Whitman
himself. That similarity with the Orientals was also noticed by many of the
early critics and admirers, as shown in the pages of \textit{The Conservator}.\textsuperscript{22}

G. Carpenter suggests that the long catalogues, or inventories as they have
been called, found in \textit{Leaves of Grass}, that have puzzled critics so much, are
in reality a reflection of Whitman’s own Oriental-style ecstasy-inducing tech-
niques, and that their purpose is to induce those mystical states in the reader.
G. Carpenter’s opinion about the question of Whitman’s mysticism admits of
no ambiguity:

\begin{quote}
We may feel sure, then, that Whitman was a mystic, and that he discov-
ered, in those months and years of meditation that preceded the appear-
ance of the \textit{Leaves of Grass}, his own means of freeing himself from the
outward and understandable world and of precipitating himself into the
mood of ecstasy.\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

G. Carpenter finds two specific characteristics in Walt Whitman’s
mysticism:

\begin{quote}
First, the universe appeared one: all things revealed themselves to him
simultaneously, as it were, and on the same plane, as if space and time had
been annihilated. Second, the law of this world was love. Rank and order
vanished; the lowest and the highest were equal; all were to be compre-
hended by affection.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

Among the authors who also adhered to the mystic hypothesis in the early
part of the twentieth century was Gerard Bullet. In his \textit{Whitman} (1924), Bul-
let seems to lead the reader into a critical treatment of Whitman’s mysticism,
which he eventually renounces. He initially declares that \textit{Leaves of Grass} is the
fruit “either of illuminating mystical experience or of delusion,” after which
promising introductory statement he proposes to “provisionally” accept the
first alternative. In the end, Bullet all but forgets about the second possibility.
His contribution to the debate consists mainly of his assertion that Whitman
is not a religious mystic because he accepted “passionately, voluptuously, the
gross as well as the spiritual aspects of that universal life.” In support of his
assertion he quotes some lines from \textit{Leaves of Grass} where Whitman declares
that copulation is no more to him than death, and that he believes in the flesh
and the appetites. In a disappointingly poor end to his discussion, Bullet con-
cludes that no cloistered saint but would shrink from declaring such things.\textsuperscript{25}
A more extended treatment of Whitman’s mysticism is found in Hesser’s 1957 unpublished PhD dissertation, “The Religion of Walt Whitman.” Hesser’s dissertation is particularly interesting in that it constitutes a serious attempt, though relatively uncritical, to determine the peculiarities of Whitman’s mysticism. He draws heavily (and almost exclusively) on Bucke and James and on the 1946 version of Allen’s *Walt Whitman Handbook*, where Bucke’s hypothesis is presented by Allen as authoritatively confirmed by James.

At no point does Hesser question the truth of the mystic hypothesis. He carries out an incipient textual analysis that appears to support his contention that Whitman was a genuine mystic. Besides quoting the traditional paragraph from “Song of Myself” that allegedly describes Whitman’s ecstasy, Hesser resorts to Whitman’s old age references, in his conversations with his disciples (later published by Traubel), to the “mystic foundation of man,” to man’s “mystical intimations” and to “the mystic in man, that which knows without proof, and is beyond materialism.” But the bulk of Hesser’s evidence for Whitman’s mysticism consists of his assertion that six elements of mysticism are found in the above-mentioned paragraph of “Song of Myself.” These are:

1. Communication with the Soul
2. Sensation of being penetrated by the supernatural
3. Belief that the experience has brought with it knowledge and spiritual wisdom
4. Convictions of equality with God
5. Convictions of brotherhood with all people
6. Confidence that love is the foundation of the universe.

Hesser does not explain why he chooses these elements of mysticism and not others, or whether they are necessary or sufficient for anyone to qualify as a mystic. He simply states that “the majority” of Whitman’s critics are agreed that the above elements are to be found in the often-quoted passage from “Song of Myself.” Nevertheless, he cites only Bucke, James and Allen. He also believes that several other similar mystical experiences are described in other poems.

Hesser believes that mysticism is never separated in Whitman’s mind from religion. He asserts that Whitman makes religion “absolutely dependent on mystic experience” in support of which he quotes from *Democratic Vistas*, where the poet states that only in the perfect uncontamination and solitariness of individuality may the spirituality of religion positively come forth to all. He concludes that Whitman “must always be classified as a mystic,” adding that the poet was completely free from “pathological mysticism,” by which he means hallucinations, voices, trances.

In *The New Walt Whitman Handbook* (1975), Gay Wilson Allen also devotes a relatively extensive section to the issue of Whitman’s mysticism. After quoting the familiar paragraph from “Song of Myself,” Allen, who believes in the mystic hypothesis, draws heavily on Bucke’s and James’s interpretations,
while also quoting other authoritative scholars who appear to support the hypothesis. He does not, however, do a sufficiently detailed analysis of the opinions of the authors on which he relies.\textsuperscript{30}

Malcolm Cowley, for his part, believes that one reason why “Song of Myself” has been misinterpreted by scholars is that they have paid a disproportionate attention to its sources in contemporary culture. In his opinion, a different approach is required for a better understanding of it. According to him, the real nature of the poem becomes clearer when it is considered in relation to quite a different list of works, even though Whitman had probably not read any of them in 1855. In fact, as Cowley clarifies, most of those works had either not yet been written or published or were not yet translated into English.\textsuperscript{31} That list of works includes the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, Christopher Smart’s \textit{Jubilate Agno}, Blake’s \textit{The Marriage of Heaven and Hell}, Rimbaud’s \textit{Illuminations} and Nietzsche’s \textit{Thus Spake Zarathustra}, as well as \textit{The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna} and \textit{The Philosophies of India} by Heinrich Zimmer. As if to exacerbate the perplexity of those unfamiliar with the field of mysticism, Cowley brings in a commonplace quote from Thoreau, who went to visit Whitman in Brooklyn and told him that \textit{Leaves of Grass} was “wonderfully like the Orientals.” When Thoreau asked the poet if he had read them,\textsuperscript{32} Whitman answered: “No, tell me about them.”

Cowley sides with what I will call the Perennial Philosophy school (after Aldous Huxley’s 1944 typological anthology of mysticism). Scholars within this school maintain that mystical experience is essentially one and the same, regardless of time and socio-historical conditions. The cultural and religious context of each mystic may influence the linguistic expression of the experience but not the experience itself. In his essay, Cowley explicitly articulates this belief:

[Mystical ecstasies] have been reported, sometimes in sharp detail, by men and women of many different nations, at many historical periods, and each report seems to bear a family resemblance to the others. Part of the resemblance is a feeling universally expressed by mystics that they have acquired a special sort of knowledge not learned from others, but directly revealed to the inner eye [. . .] Indeed, they hold so many principles in common that it is possible for Aldous Huxley and others to group them together as “the perennial philosophy.”\textsuperscript{33}

Somewhat ironically for someone who, in his private correspondence, referred to Whitman as “the old cocksucker,” and to his work as a “very strange amalgam between cocksucking and democracy,”\textsuperscript{34} Cowley asserts that Whitman is a genuine mystic. In support of his contention, he quotes the traditional passage from “Song of Myself,” while citing Bucke. After some speculation about the nature of the mystical state, he proceeds to declare that most of Whitman’s doctrines belong in the mainstream of Indian philosophy.\textsuperscript{35}
Cowley devotes the rest of his essay to comparing and contrasting some of the ideas expressed in *Leaves of Grass* with those found in certain Indian and Buddhist mystical texts. He does not provide, however, any possible explanation for why Whitman’s mystical experience should be encapsulated in cultural forms that were decidedly alien to him.

While Cowley does not try to resolve the problem posed by Whitman’s sexual imagery, Asselineau offers his solution to the conflict between mysticism and sexuality in *Leaves of Grass* by declaring that Whitman’s is a case of “sexual mysticism.” In Asselineau’s words, Whitman “does not disguise the fact that the source of his mysticism is not a diffuse sensuality, but emotions and joys of a purely sensual nature.” In this sense, he believes Whitman prefigures Freud. Asselineau believes that the poet transposes the center of sensibility: “[I]t is no longer the heart but the genitals.” In what amounts to a new theory of mysticism, this French scholar expresses his belief that the spirit, in order to be manifest, cannot do without matter, and that all mysticism depends on and is accompanied by emotions of the flesh. He thinks that Whitman always has the sharp consciousness of the purely sensual source of his mystical intuitions, and that he never forgets that his body is “the theatre and the point of origin” for his mystical states. Whitman was well aware even of the sensual nature of religious fervor per se, in Asselineau’s opinion. He observes that in dealing with the mystical side of Whitman’s personality, one seems to be dealing with “a sexuality overshadowed with mysticism, rather than a mysticism overshadowed with sensuality.” “In desiring bodies,” Asselineau writes, “[Whitman] communicates mystically with souls,” and he believes it is this curious pansexualism which makes Whitman consider coitus as a form of knowledge.

Asselineau’s analysis contains some inconsistencies. Given his interpretation of Whitman’s mysticism, an unavoidable conclusion on his part is his double claim that, on the one hand, it is undeniable that for Whitman “sexual climax was the source—and condition—of suprarational communication, of mystical revelations,” and, on the other, that Whitman knew “at least once […] a genuine mystical ecstasy.” In support of the latter claim, Asselineau cites Bucke and James, and quotes the well-known passage from “Song of Myself.” After having elaborated extensively on Whitman’s identification of sex and mysticism, he attempts to prove the genuineness of Whitman’s mysticism by claiming that Whitman’s mystical experience satisfies some conditions James considers to be present in all genuine mysticism. As far as the ineffable quality of mystical experience, for example, Asselineau claims that the contents of the illuminations that accompanied Whitman’s “sexual transports” were inexpressible in rational language. But such claim only adds inconsistency to his theory since, as a consequence of it, he is forced to concede that Whitman’s sexual imagery is metaphorical (as it is in traditional mystics): “in spite of the importance of the spiritual element […] [Whitman] represents [his] mystical state as a form of sexual intercourse.”
Among later Whitman scholars, it is David Kuebrich who is responsible for the most developed formulation of the strong version of the mystic hypothesis, and thus his thesis calls for detailed analysis in the present context. Faithful to the principles of the Perennial Philosophy school, Kuebrich believes mysticism to be an extra-temporal, extra-cultural spiritual phenomenon, and considers Whitman to be akin in many ways to the traditional mystics. His mystical interpretation of Whitman’s writings is by far the most fastidious and well-informed that has been carried out in the field of Whitman scholarship. It deserves special attention.

Much the same as with Asselineau, Kuebrich’s own conception of the mystical phenomenon plays a definite role in shaping his interpretation of Whitman’s mysticism. Thus, he declares that Whitman “was a mystic who gave expression to modes of experience which, in their essential forms, are transhistorical and therefore have parallels in other traditions.” Kuebrich claims a purely mystical level of interpretation for Whitman’s language. In his opinion, Whitman “invests what seems to be ordinary language with a level of mystical meaning.” Words such as “real,” “new,” “athletic,” “touch,” “love,” “secret,” “limitless,” (and other ‘less’ words), “aroma,” “tally,” “whispers,” “pulse,” “power,” “pride,” “urge,” “want,” “yearnings,” etc., are to be understood on a strictly metaphorical level. Much remains unsaid in Leaves of Grass, according to Kuebrich, because, as with the traditional mystics when confronted with the unavoidable dilemma of the ineffability of their spiritual experience, Whitman resorts merely to hints and suggestions rather than fully articulating his ideas.

As for Whitman’s use of heterosexual imagery, Kuebrich, consistent with his framework of analysis, maintains that Whitman uses it as a symbol of the soul’s relationship with the divinity. Still, in his approach to the mystical passage in “Song of Myself,” he acknowledges a dual function to it: that of suggesting the intensity and completeness of the spiritual experience, and that of expressing the poet’s desire to sanctify sexuality as a religious symbol that manifests how the soul unites with God. Kuebrich’s dual interpretation of the heterosexual imagery in “Song of Myself” strongly parallels that of the classic understanding of the erotic imagery in parts of the Old Testament and in St. John of the Cross. Interestingly, in the section of “Song of Myself” that has traditionally been taken to express Whitman’s original ecstasy we find an extraordinary resemblance with the final part of the “Dark Night of the Soul,” by St. John of the Cross.

One of the more important aspects of Kuebrich’s analysis is his attempt to trace the stages of the traditional mystic way (or “Via Mystica”) in Leaves of Grass. In order to do so, he reinterprets some sections of Whitman’s poetry as expressing the poet’s passage through the purgative and the illuminative stages, and finally as reaching union.

In traditional Christian mysticism, “purgation” is the name given to the cleansing phase, a phase which is almost invariably found in Oriental
mysticism as well. The purgative stage involves active or passive mortification of the flesh and of selfish desires. While many of the authors who deny Whitman's mysticism do so on the grounds that there are no traces whatsoever of this stage of the mystic way in his writings, Kuebrich claims that, on occasion, Whitman does enjoin his readers to selflessness, "though admittedly a selflessness of a peculiarly republican character." Kuebrich believes that Whitman advocates self-denial, and that he does it not only because it promotes spiritual development and puts the good of others before self-interest, but also because it is a form of civic behavior that Whitman believed essential to a successful democracy. In support of this assertion, he quotes a passage from the 1855 Preface of *Leaves of Grass* in which Whitman, using a sermon-like style, commands the reader to despise riches and to give alms to everyone who asks. In the 1860 poem "Thought (Of persons . . . )," Kuebrich also finds support for his contention, as Whitman condemns as "sad, hasty, unwaked sonnambules who are full of the rotten excrement of maggots," those who seek the attainment of high positions, ceremonies, wealth, or scholarships.

Eager to give due relevance to the moralistic aspect of Whitman's writings, Kuebrich emphasizes its positive tone. He points out that Whitman spends most of his time not condemning but encouraging his readers to orient their lives in terms of lasting spiritual truths. In the 1855 cluster of poems "To Think of Time," Kuebrich finds a reminder to the reader that this life is but a prologue for eternity, an idea which is very much in line with traditional Christian asceticism:

(I see one building the house that serves him a few years, or seventy or eighty years at most,  
I see one building the house that serves him no longer than that.)  
(“To Think of Time,” 3)

I swear I think there is nothing but immortality!  
That the exquisite scheme is for it and the nebulous float is for it, and the cohering is for it!  
And all the preparation is for it—and the identity is for it—and life and materials are altogether for it!  
(“To Think of Time,” 9)

Furthermore, as was the case with St. Francis of Assisi, St. Teresa of Avila, and other such icons of Christian spirituality, in section 8 of "Starting from Paumanok," Kuebrich finds the notion present in Whitman's poetry that worldly pursuits are not necessarily immoral, but relatively unimportant activities that should be subordinated to one's spiritual development:

What are you doing young man?  
Are you so earnest, so given up to literature, science, art,
amours?
These ostensible realities, politics, points?
Your ambition or business whatever it may be?

It is well—against such I say not a word, I am their poet also,
But behold! such swiftly subside, burnt up for religion’s sake,
For not all matter is fuel to heat, impalpable flame, the
essential life of the earth,
Any more than such are to religion.

In Kuebrich’s understanding, mortification and the reorientation of
the personality are only one side of purgation, as purgation also involves a
transformation of the senses, “not a denial, but a cleansing or purification.”
Citing Evelyn Underhill, an early twentieth-century authority in the field of
mysticism, he states that “‘pure sensation’ provides ‘one of the most accessible
avenues’ to union with God [. . .]. The beginner on the mystic way must ‘see
more intensely, hear more intensely, touch and taste more intensely than ever
before.’” In order to achieve this state, the mystic needs to adjust his intel-
lect by freeing it from customary expectations and preconceptions, and by
freeing his will from the desire to possess. Based on Underhill’s opinion, Kue-
brich believes that, when this is accomplished, the mystic perceives things in
a simpler and more truthful way, which (following Underhill’s terminology)
he calls “simple seeing” or “perception without thought.” Kuebrich sees an
expression of this side of the purgative stage in “Song of Myself”:

Creeds and schools in abeyance,
Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never
forgotten,
I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,
Nature without check with original energy.

The result of pure perception of the world is a “sanctification” of that
world itself which, in its turn, results in a deeper, more intimate form of spiri-
tual knowing. When the mystic encounters the world in this manner he or she
has reached the second stage of the mystic way, “illumination.” Kuebrich notes
that Underhill sometimes refers to this state as the “discovery of God in his
creatures,” and he expresses the conviction that Whitman wanted to lead his
readers to a sacramental vision of the world.

Despite his effort to reveal a genuine mystical plane of meaning in Leaves
of Grass comparable to that of the traditional Christian mystics, Kuebrich
cannot overlook the all too obvious intensity of the sexual imagery. To this
problem, he responds by stating that while some critics have maintained that
Whitman’s sensuous mysticism distinguishes him from Christian mystics
who are alleged to deny the senses, “[t]he real difference between the Christian
mystic and Whitman is the latter’s unrestrained blessing of human sexuality as a means to spiritual development and union with the divinity.” At this point Kuebrich’s argument becomes unsound, as he seems to be claiming for Whitman’s (heterosexual) sexual imagery both a metaphorical meaning and also a literal meaning (since sexuality, not metaphorically interpreted, is presented as a means to spiritual development).

Of union, the final and most characteristic stage of the mystic way, in which the mystic fuses with the divinity, Kuebrich does not say much, except that it is also present in Whitman’s thought, in the form of the fusion of the laws of human and divine natures (presumably a reference to Underhill’s notion of God in his creatures). Whitman adapts mystical union to his political concerns, making it an important source of social order and political unity, says Kuebrich. However, he does not seem to be aware that this curious adaptation of mystical union to political concerns, if correct, sets Whitman totally apart from the traditional mystics’ disregard for mundane concerns, politics being the most mundane of them all. Nevertheless, this association of Whitman’s mysticism with his political concerns is revealing in that it captures a fundamental idea in Whitman’s thought: the mystical justification of his ethics of comradeship, with its political dimension.

Even more intriguing than his treatment of heterosexual imagery in Leaves of Grass is Kuebrich’s interpretation of “Calamus,” the cluster of poems where intense homoerotic imagery is used to celebrate the love of comrades. Of this cluster of poems, he affirms that when it is placed within the context of Whitman’s larger religious vision, it becomes clear that its fundamental level of meaning is “not a gospel of homosexuality but of mystical love.” This statement is only consistent with a desire to reveal a mystical level of meaning in every section of Whitman’s work. However, the task of finding such level of meaning in a cluster of poems which is characterized by straightforward homoerotic imagery is daunting. Kuebrich asserts that “Calamus” is a “gospel of mystical love,” and not of homosexuality. But one must not forget that, when dealing with sexual imagery of a heterosexual kind, Kuebrich was eventually forced to recognize that Whitman blessed sexuality as a means to spiritual development. In his analysis of “Calamus,” however, he seems to totally dissociate the metaphorical from the literal (the latter being, in fact, denied).

Kuebrich’s determination to discern the pattern of traditional mystical experience in the poems that conform “Calamus” leads him to interpret “In Paths Untrodden,” the first poem of the cluster, in which the poet projects an intense sense of intimacy and secrecy, as an expression of the poet’s withdrawal from the (public) world. Comradely love is important to Whitman, Kuebrich suggests, because of its power to soothe man’s spirit and fortify his faith. He adds that it is the love of comrades which convinces the poet that he is cared for in this world and that his belief is indeed well founded. In support of this statement, and as part of his attempt to find recognizable traces of an
ascetic phase, he quotes from "Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances" an 1860 poem of the “Calamus” group, where the poet states:

That may-be identity beyond the grave is a beautiful fable only,  
May-be the things I perceive, the animals, plants, men, hills,  
shining and flowing waters,  
The skies of day and night, colors, densities, forms may-be  
these are (as doubtless they are) only apparitions [. . .]  
But I walk or sit indifferent, I am satisfied,  
He ahold of my hand has completely satisfied me.

In his reading of this poem, Kuebrich disregards the fact that, while in it the poet expresses suspicion about the reality of the physical world, he also expresses a lack of mystical knowledge about identity and immortality, as he says that knowledge is only possible for him in the absolute immediacy of the here and now that sensual contact provides.

Of the illuminative stage in “Calamus,” Kuebrich makes no mention. Instead, he claims that in the third poem of the cluster (“Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand,” 1860) Walt Whitman seeks the conversion of the reader to his mystical concept of comradeship. “Union,” the final stage of the mystical way, comes next. Nevertheless, Kuebrich’s redefinition and interpretation of the mystical union is again (as with his concept of the political-mystical union) too metaphorical to be identified with this most dramatic ecstatic stage in classic mysticism:

Just as a sense of mystical union with Christ sustains dedicated Christians, especially when their religious values lead them into conflict with the values of the surrounding culture, so Whitman intended for the members of his new religious faith to find in him their chief inspiration and dearest comrade.59

What is interesting about Kuebrich’s observations is the acknowledgement that there is something in the mystical religion Whitman proposes that conflicts with the dominant social values of his time. Implicit in this affirmation is the recognition that Whitman proposes the reader to convert to something more than pure ideas. But if, in practical terms, Whitman was only proposing something as irrefutably positive as the political union of the Republic, one wonders where the source of conflict is with the values of the surrounding society. The fact of the matter is that Whitman was proposing a change in behavior, a new ethical code that did conflict with the social values of the time.

While acknowledging that many of the poems that make up the “Calamus” cluster have no explicit religious dimension, Kuebrich believes they have an unstated religious purpose, because readers are urged to imitate these
Walt Whitman’s Mystical Ethics of Comradeship

types of love. As a consequence of their initiation, the readers “would come to understand the emotions induced by their acts of friendship and love as revelations of a higher world.”

For the benefit of his English editor, W. M. Rossetti, Walt Whitman defined the calamus symbol as “a very large & aromatic grass, or rush . . . spears about three feet high . . . often called ‘sweet flag’ . . . the actual “Calamus” presenting the biggest & hardiest kind of spear of grass—and their fresh aquatic, pungent bouquet.” Bradley and Blodgett point out that the sexual connotations of the calamus, or sweet flag, for Whitman, are obvious from his use of it in “Song of Myself,” 24:

Root of wash’d sweet-flag! timorous pond-snipe! nest of guarded duplicate eggs! It shall be you!

When confronting the phallic meaning of the calamus symbol, Kuebrich claims that even if at one level the calamus is to function as a phallic symbol, it does not necessarily follow that Whitman intends it as an encouragement of homosexual love, since the phallus is a unique bond shared by all males and thus it is an appropriate symbol of male comradeship. In other words, the centrality of phallic symbolism, so obvious to the post-Freudian mind, is of secondary importance to Kuebrich. Moreover, he believes that Whitman institutes the calamus grass as the symbol of the highest form of spiritual love. But the very language Kuebrich uses betrays his firm determination to ignore the more than obvious ethical implications of the type of mystical attachment Whitman preaches. This is clear, for example, when he insists that Whitman depicts the mystical nature of his manly love as he establishes the calamus plant as one of the key symbols of his new religion. One is tempted to think that such an assertion would be more accurate if the term “mystical” were dropped from it. Undeterred, Kuebrich concludes that the calamus is reserved for a spiritual elite, its symbolic meaning open only to those developed souls who, like Whitman, have learned to experience human love as an experience that unites the soul with God.

Whether or not one finds his interpretation of Leaves of Grass convincing, Kuebrich’s analysis is consistent with his own framework of reference, more so than is the case with other Whitman interpretations.

The Weak Hypothesis

So far, we have looked at those interpretations whose common denominator is the belief that the mysticism of Walt Whitman is to be understood in the most literal sense, and that his poetry ought to be read on the same level of meaning as that of the traditional mystics. Other authors have taken a less demanding position. In their view, there is only a formal resemblance between certain parts of Leaves of Grass and the writings of traditional
Eastern and Western mystics. Their analysis being strictly formalistic, the claim is dropped that those passages reflect an actual mystical experience. Among these interpretations, that by James E. Miller, Jr. (1957, 1959, 1964), goes first by order of relevance.

Miller claims that “Song of Myself” can be read as the “dramatic representation of a mystical experience.” In his 1955 essay “Song of Myself As Inverted Mystical Experience,” he makes an important clarification:

The term “dramatic representation” indicates an important distinction: it is not my contention that the poem is a transcript of an actual mystical experience; rather it is a work of art in which such an experience, conceived in the imagination, is represented dramatically.

Miller suggests that the central portion of the poem (sections 6–49) may be particularly related, step by step, to the Mystic Way as described by Evelyn Underhill. This is how he construes “Song of Myself” as an “inverted” mystical experience:

I. Sections 1–5: Entry into Mystical State.
II. Sections 6–16: Awakening of Self.
III. Sections 17–32: Purification of Self.
IV. Sections 33–37: Illumination and the Dark Night of the Soul.
V. Sections 38–43: Union (Faith and Love).
VI. Sections 44–49: Union (Perception).
VII. Sections 50–52: Emergence from Mystical State.

In Miller’s view, “Song of Myself” is primarily a poem, not a historical, philosophical or religious document. Having stated unequivocally what the character of “Song of Myself” is, by following the above plan he engages in a meticulous matching up of the stages of the mystic way with the different sections of the poem. He warns the reader that this mystical dramatization is primarily emotional rather than logical or philosophical and, consequently, contains some unconventional aspects. For example, he points out how Whitman departs widely in sections 17–32 of the poem from the conventional mystic methods of purifying the self. “Indeed,” Miller remarks, “Whitman celebrates those very same senses that the traditional mystic would mortify if not annihilate.” He thinks that whereas normally the mystical state is achieved only through mortification or escape from the senses, the poet of “Song of Myself” asserts that it is “through the transfigured senses” that he reaches mystical consciousness. In this sense, Miller points out that Whitman’s aim is as surely purification as is the mystic’s.

Because it has been through acceptance of the body, not through mortification of it as something evil, that the mystical experience has been launched,
Miller considers that the traditional values of the mystic have been “inverted.” To him, the sexual connotations of certain passages of the poem are unmistakable, although, as a critical exercise, they could be read as the consummation of the marriage between body and soul.

Frederik Schyberg, a Danish scholar and author of a reputed 1951 critical study on Walt Whitman, repeatedly states that the American poet is a mystic. Despite this, Schyberg is to be classified as a proponent of the weak version of the mystic hypothesis. This is so because of the formalistic analysis that leads him to such a conclusion. In fact, to be precise, there is no process of analysis properly, except for his observation that there are certain formal similarities between the language of Whitman and that of universally recognized mystics of the past. Schyberg renounces any attempt to prove that such coincidental tropes stem from the same type of experience in both Whitman and in the traditional mystics. Rather, the point he makes is that Whitman had a “mystical temperament.” This temperamental similarity, we are to assume, accounts for those parallel forms of expression. Schyberg insists that those similarities are particularly striking with the Oriental mystics, a point which was to be more fully developed, years later, in the writings of Malcolm Cowley, a proponent of the strong hypothesis, and V. K. Chari (1964) within the framework of the weak hypothesis.

While Chari was not the first one to carry out a systematic and extensive comparative study of Whitman’s relationship to Indian thought, given his qualifications as a scholar from Benares Hindu University, there seems to be general agreement that Chari’s work is the best informed and most representative of these type of comparative studies. In his *Whitman in the Light of Vedantic Mysticism*, Chari is only concerned with formal parallelisms between *Leaves of Grass* and the Hindu mystical writings (although he does not discard the possibility that these formal similarities might also have their origin in parallel experiences). In his foreword to Chari’s volume, Allen is explicit about the stated purpose of the Hindu scholar:

> Dr. Chari wisely does not concern himself at all with sources, which are only of theoretical importance. In this study he is concerned with parallels which have a very practical importance: the Vedantic examples clarify and illuminate Whitman’s meaning. This is the only valid excuse for comparative studies.

Despite such a clear-cut statement by Allen, Chari shows a calculated ambiguity when explaining his purpose. On the one hand, he accepts that given the lack of evidence, as well as the negative evidence available, that Whitman ever read the Hindu mystics seems a remote possibility. Still, he plays with the idea that the poet may have come in contact indirectly with them through the Transcendentalists or the German idealists that Whitman himself claimed to have been influenced by. At the same time, he praises Cowley, a proponent of
the strong version of the hypothesis, for his categorization of Whitman’s mysticism. However, Chari cannot embrace Cowley’s theory because he (Chari) is determined to show such a degree of (formal) parallelism between Whitman and the Hindu mystics that no perennial philosophy theory could ever possibly account for it. Chari appears to try to take advantage of all possible sources of Whitman’s mysticism, while at the same time claiming not to concern himself at all with sources. It seems to me that if Chari’s analysis of *Leaves of Grass* needed to be substantiated by evidence of any kind, other than mere formal similarities, it could not be sustained.

Following the same pattern as Miller and Chari, other comparative studies have been carried out that attempt to show similarities between *Leaves of Grass* and the writings of Eastern and Western traditional mystics. Because of their methodology and claims, such studies belong in the present category as well.80

**The Denial of the Hypothesis**

In the second half of the twentieth century, a number of authors rejected the strong version of the mystic hypothesis while not taking into consideration, or discarding as irrelevant, the studies carried out within the framework of the weak hypothesis. Interestingly, the first drastic attack on the mystic hypothesis occurred not long after Whitman’s death, and it came from his renegade German disciple Eduard Bertz.

In *Der Yankee-Heiland* (1906), a work that has not been translated into English, Bertz launched an attack on Whitman’s claim as a mystic, prophet, and thinker, and expressed his conviction that the true motor of Whitman’s literary and religious activity was a sexual disorder (homosexuality). Homosexuality, he declared, was the key to understanding Whitman’s “work, his personality and his gospel.”81 When Leon Bazalgette, the passionate French Whitman disciple, in a characteristic Biblical style, claimed that Whitman was best understood not by scholars but by “idlers and children,” Bertz retorted that “‘idlers and children’ know the ‘good gray poet’ [. . . ] not by mystical intuition, but through physical contact.”82

Catherine Ackerman, in her 1959 article “The Mysticism of Walt Whitman,” states her belief that, although as a result of competent, realistic scholarship, Walt Whitman the myth has receded into the background, there is still with us a remnant of the myth-making fostered by Bucke, i.e., the alleged mysticism of Walt Whitman. Ackerman believes that the root of the problem is the confusing use of the term “mystic,” a confusion that extends, according to her, even to specialists in mysticism. She criticizes William James, for instance, for considering dreamy states and intoxication as forms of mysticism, and concludes that the failure to restrict the application of the term has led to the practice of categorizing as mysticism virtually any type of supersensual experience or practice.83
In her attempt to find a suitable definition for the concept of mysticism, Ackerman resorts to Underhill, who lists four conditions as the marks of genuine mysticism. The fourth of these conditions refers to the “Mystic Way,” that leads to union, the mystical state *par excellence*. Based on Underhill, Ackerman explains that “[u]nion is a definite state [. . .] arrived at by a definite and arduous psychological process—the so-called ‘Mystic Way’. ”84 Once established a meaningful concept of mysticism (versus what she considers a meaningless one), Ackerman points out that a study of Whitman’s life does not reveal that his energies were devoted exclusively to a quest for union with the Absolute. She observes that even Allen (in the 1946 original version of his *Walt Whitman Handbook*) admits that it is difficult to prove that Whitman was what he calls a “primary mystic,”85 and that “mysticism” may appear in a writer’s work as a result not of actual experience but of contact with someone who has had such an experience or through reading about such an experience. With regard to the “Mystic Way,” Ackerman is persuaded that no convincing traces of it can be found in either Whitman’s writings or in his life.

In her opinion, it is not uncommon for poets to experience some form of Illumination. She points out that even the ordinary individual, under the spell of emotion or beauty, may have momentary insights of this sort.86 She believes that the poet’s tenderness toward the wounded soldiers, and his love for mankind in general, can probably be best described as resulting from his complex sexual make-up, rather than from a religious, Christ-like nature, and exhorts the Whitman scholar not to employ the term “mystic” as an all-embracing word which explains all the mysteries of this poet. She concludes that Whitman cannot be regarded as a genuine mystic. To Ackerman, Whitman was only “mystical” in that, like a number of other great poets, he was privileged to enjoy a kind of consciousness which corresponds to the Illumination of the true mystic.87

Similarly to Ackerman, Richard Chase (1955) thinks it is “more gratuitous or honorific than accurate” to refer to Whitman as a mystic. In stating this, Chase explicitly rejects what he mistakenly takes to be James’s contention that Whitman qualifies as a mystic. While reluctantly acknowledging that there may sometimes be “a kind of mysticism” at work in Whitman’s poetry, he believes it is hardly ever distinguishable from merely vague thought and diffuse metaphor.88 In any case, he writes that, from a literary point of view, this “mysticism” is surely not “characteristic.” To which he adds:

> [T]he more one reviews the evidence and the more one reads the poems, the less likely does the “mystical experience” seem and the less relevant to an understanding of such poems as “Song of Myself” does it become, even if it occurred.89

Chase does not find any evidence that Whitman was capable of any stern, overwhelming, or intense spiritual experience. Moreover, he remarks that
poetic experience cannot be equated with or produced by mystic experience properly, a question that Asselineau, as well, was to raise years later: “Mysticism leads to the ecstatic contemplation of the naught; it does not of itself produce poetry, which is a metaphorical construction of the aught.”

Stephen Black is one more who questions the mystic hypothesis. After an extremely detailed psychoanalysis of the self’s indeterminacy in “Song of Myself,” Black comes to the conclusion that the poet’s self, confronted with the dilemma of choosing a mystical, transcendental understanding of the world or a personal, psychological point of view is unable to make the choice. In the end, the poem “works itself out to neither conclusion nor resolution, but instead to an increasingly more clear and precise statement of the dilemma.” As a consequence, to Black, Whitman’s attempt to reach the mystical plane of experience ends in failure.

Finally, Kaplan also takes sides in the debate over the mystical question by plainly rejecting the possibility of Whitman’s mysticism. Similarly to Ackerman, he concedes that Whitman experienced some kind of poetical illumination or ecstasy, an experience shared by many people. But he does not consider that enough for Whitman to qualify as a mystic in a technical sense. He states this idea unequivocally:

Whitman was not a “mystic.” Conversion, discipline, renunciation of the self, the body, and the world are alien to Leaves of Grass [. . .] He had shared the experience of countless people, irreligious by common standards, who had flashes of illumination or ecstasy.

Kaplan believes such non-mystical ecstatic experiences may be triggered by certain images, like the sea, the grass, the green world of summer, or by music.

CONCLUSION

Whether the source of Whitman’s poetic and religious genius is rooted in a mystical experience in the classic sense, or whether it is simple poetic inspiration, perhaps originating in his sexual makeup, is something that will remain a matter of scholarly debate. One gets the impression, in any case, that the concept of mysticism, as applied by those who favor the strong hypothesis, is too vague, and that when specific conditions are listed their application to Whitman’s case is too lax. One could not be more in agreement with Ackerman on this point. Her observation is to be taken seriously that if the term “mystic” is to be meaningful at all, it needs to be restricted and applied with strict criteria. What she does, for her part, is to resort to Underhill’s authoritative criteria. She believes that the conditions Underhill stipulates for true mysticism cannot be fulfilled by Whitman, therefore proving the mystical hypothesis wrong. In reality, all Ackerman proves is that Whitman is far from being universally recognized as a genuine mystic.
Underhill is apparently (but only apparently) ambiguous in her treatment of Whitman. While she states that the American poet belongs in the category of those who “cannot justly be reckoned as pure mystics,”94 she refers to him, however, as a “mystical poet.”95 Her cautious interpretation of Bucke’s “cosmic consciousness” concept is that such a state of consciousness consists, in reality, in a variant of the illuminative stage of the mystic way.96 Thus, for Underhill, rather than a “pure mystic,” Whitman was, technically speaking, an “illuminate.” From this perspective, Whitman can be called a “mystical” poet insofar as he partially shares in the mystical process.

I am not concerned here with finding a solution to the many discrepancies that divide scholars within the field of mysticism, such as whether it is legitimate to talk about mysticism as a distinct and unitary phenomenon that can be found across unrelated cultures, historical times and religious creeds, or whether, on the contrary, every instance of “mysticism” can be explained in terms of its socio-cultural and theological context. Neither am I concerned with formulating a definition of mysticism that is satisfactory to everyone. That is beyond the scope of this chapter. My purpose here has been to show the extent to which there is agreement as well as disagreement concerning the question of Whitman’s mysticism, and the consequences that this may have for our understanding of his project of moral reform. In this respect, only one conclusion appears reasonable: scholars who have dealt with the question of Whitman’s mysticism strongly disagree as to whether he should be classified as a genuine mystic. While it would be futile and arbitrary to opt for one definition of mysticism over another, or to attempt our own, the observation must be made that while there is consensus regarding the status of traditional mystics, the consensus is missing in the case of Whitman.

Despite the fact that Bucke is considered to be the original proponent of the mystic hypothesis, and as such he is always quoted, in reality he never claimed that Whitman was a mystic. Cosmic consciousness, as conceived by Bucke, represents an advanced stage in the teleological process of human evolution. This is how he describes “cosmic consciousness”:

a consciousness of the cosmos, that is, of the life and order of the universe [. . .] Along with [this] there occurs an intellectual enlightenment or illumination which alone would place the individual on a new plane of existence—would make him almost a member of a new species. To this is added a state of moral exaltation, an indescribable feeling of elevation, elation and joyousness, and a quickening of the moral sense [. . .] With these come what may be called a sense of immortality, a consciousness of eternal life, not a conviction that he shall have this, but the consciousness that he has it already.97

This is the definition of a state of illumination, but it is not meant to be a definition of mysticism. While mystics are presumably in possession of cosmic
consciousness, it would be erroneous to conclude that all those who experience cosmic consciousness are mystics. Bucke indeed makes no such claim.

Bucke was convinced that, as a result of the evolutionary process, humankind was on the brink of three revolutions that would permanently alter man’s life on earth. These revolutions would be brought about by aerial navigation, socialism and cosmic consciousness. The fact that he considers the acquisition of cosmic consciousness a comparable step in human evolution to the development of aerial navigation is itself revealing of the nature of the concept. Cosmic consciousness is presented as one more step in the evolution of human consciousness, an evolution which, in Bucke’s words, accounts for the transformation “from brute to man, from man to demigod.” In this evolution, Bucke distinguishes four stages:

1. The perceptual mind—the mind made up of precepts or sense impressions;
2. The mind made up of these and recepts—the so-called receptual mind, or in other words the mind of simple consciousness;
3. The mind made up of percepts, recepts and concepts, called sometimes the conceptual mind or otherwise the self conscious mind—the mind of self consciousness;
4. The intuitional mind—the mind whose highest element is not a recept or a concept but an intuition. This is the mind in which sensation, simple consciousness and self consciousness are supplemented and crowned with cosmic consciousness.

In his work, Bucke states plainly that he is concerned with “the evolution of the intellect.” In other words, “cosmic consciousness” is not about the ineffable revelation of hidden truths, or about communication or union with the divine, but only about evolution of the human intellect. Bucke never calls Whitman a “mystic,” and indeed he repeatedly refers to the ecstatic experience he finds in “Song of Myself” as one of illumination.

While such a state of illumination could be termed “mystical” in that it partakes in, or at least resembles partially, the mystical process, Bucke never even uses that adjective in reference to Whitman. William James does, though. And it is due to a misinterpretation of James’s language on the part of critics that the mystic hypothesis has found undue support.

In his review of Bucke’s theory, James identifies cosmic consciousness as a mystical state of consciousness, and, after extensively quoting from Bucke’s work, he declares: “We have now seen enough of this cosmic or mystic consciousness.” James also writes about Whitman’s sporadic type of mystical experience, and about the poet’s chronic mystical perception. At no point in his work does James refer to Whitman as “a mystic” in a substantive sense. His adjectival use of “mystic” and “mystical” is to be interpreted in the same way as Underhill’s use of it. As a matter of fact, James’s approach totally coincides with Underhill’s. And, while Underhill states that Whitman is not
a “pure mystic,” James does not even bother to test his four marks of genuine mysticism in evaluating Whitman. In other words, for Underhill and James, Whitman appears to fail many a test of genuine mysticism, by every definition. One of the main obstacles is the lack of a purgative stage in his writings or in his life, as he introduces himself to the reader as “Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,/Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding” (“Song of Myself,” 24).

It is virtually impossible to find traces of the first stage of the mystic way in Leaves of Grass, unless the concept of purification is reinterpreted in such a way as to render it meaningless. Kuebrich’s effort is, in this respect, as strenuous as it is futile, if only because, as we saw, it leads to inconsistencies, such as giving both a literal and a metaphorical interpretation to the heterosexual imagery in Whitman’s poetry but only a metaphorical interpretation to homoerotic imagery.

There are other equally serious objections to the mystic hypothesis. For example, the unawareness of one’s own self that, according to Robert Ellwood, a contemporary expert in the field of mysticism, is essential to “perfect” mysticism is totally alien to Leaves of Grass, the allegedly more mystical of its poems being precisely “Song of Myself.”

Asselineau, for his part, mistakenly claims that William James and Bucke are in agreement that Whitman is a mystic, and states that he himself finds “[t]he mystic hypothesis formulated by Maurice Bucke” attractive. Strangely, though, he finds his very literal interpretation of sexual imagery consistent with the mystic hypothesis. The fact is Asselineau’s theory does not lead, as he claims it does, to a definition of a “sexual mysticism” (which could presumably be assimilated to a notion of Tantric mysticism), but rather to a “mystical sexuality” (“a sexuality overshadowed with mysticism,” is how he defines it). As if unaware of the inconsistency with his claim of a “sexual mysticism,” Asselineau also claims that Whitman satisfies James’s conditions for genuine mysticism.

In summary, it is possible to say that while there is a lack of consensus over whether Whitman is a mystic, there is, however, positive consensus that Whitman is “mystical.” That is, his style resembles that of the traditional mystics. In other words, he is to a mystic what a fatherly man is to a father, or a motherly woman to an actual mother. The style in which a fatherly man or a motherly woman behave resembles that of a father or a mother respectively, but it would be mistaken to say that they are necessarily actual fathers or mothers. As pointed out, it is in this adjectival sense that both major authorities in the field of mysticism, Underhill and James, understand Whitman’s “mysticism.”

On a more technical level, with regard to the mystical categories, Whitman qualifies as an “illuminate” (in the same way that someone who engages strictly in the process of purgation is called an ascetic). Indeed, even among those who disagree with the mystic hypothesis, Whitman is regarded as an illuminate.
Still, one question remains: What was the trigger of Whitman’s “illumination”? In the traditional Christian mystics the claim is that illumination comes about by God’s grace, but that claim would hardly be appropriate for Whitman. Rather, in Whitman, it is the ecstatic contemplation of beauty (in nature, and particularly in the human body) that appears to trigger the mystical feeling. According to Ackerman, it is not uncommon for poets to experience some form of Illumination, which may assume “the aspect of a permanent, radiant consciousness of the ‘otherness’ of natural things.” She adds that even the ordinary individual “under the spell of emotion or beauty” may have insights of this sort. Glenn A. Shook classifies this type of mystical experience as “aesthetic mysticism.” His description of such a kind of mysticism fits Whitman’s experience with amazing accuracy:

The distinguishing characteristics of this type [of mysticism] are love and appreciation of the best the world can offer, and unrestrained enthusiasm for the beauty of nature [. . .] For the aesthetic mystic there is no difficult path, no harsh asceticism, no self-criticism. He is concerned primarily with the joy of living and not with the problem of evil [. . .] This is the mysticism of artists and poets who have faith in mankind [. . .] It is often a reaction against intolerant Puritanism which is more concerned with the depravity of man than with his good qualities [. . .] [the aesthetic mystic] turn[s] from a narrow evangelical piety to the God of the “beautiful.”

In brief, the strong hypothesis of Whitman’s mysticism is based, in part, on a faulty identification of Bucke’s cosmic consciousness theory with a theory of mysticism, and on incorrect assumptions on the part of scholars, stemming from James’s use of the adjective “mystical” with reference to Whitman. References to Bucke and James by supporters of the strong hypothesis are complemented in a few cases with rather loose, all-inclusive definitions of mysticism which, for instance, can indifferently accommodate self-denial and self-affirmation. When the attempt is made to read Whitman exclusively on a mystical level of meaning, as Kuebrich does, the attempt fails as the arbitrary stretching of concepts and the inconsistencies in the interpretation become all too obvious. As for the weak hypothesis, its proponents only confirm the fact that Whitman has a mystical style. It seems, indeed, that Whitman must be classified as a mystical poet (not a mystic properly), who shares in the illuminative stage with the traditional mystic, his mystical inspiration being triggered by aesthetic emotions. And it is these powerful aesthetic emotions, imbued with the strength of mystical illumination, that will largely determine his ethical views.
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CHAPTER THREE

A Gospel of Beauty

“To the artist, I say, has been given the command to go forth unto all the world and preach the gospel of beauty.”
—Walt Whitman

On May 16, 1888, a young labor agitator came to see Whitman at his home in Camden. He was a handsome young man, and the impact he made on the ailing poet was such that he confided to Horace Traubel that the impression would never go away. Political, literary, or other considerations were of secondary importance for Whitman before the beauty of his young visitor. Moreover, one gets the impression that no matter what the young man’s political ideas might have been, his impressive beauty would have been enough of a justification for them. This is how Traubel relates the episode:

[Whitman said:] “There was a kind of labor agitator here today—a socialist or something like that: young, a rather beautiful boy [. . .] I was sorry to see him come: I am somehow afraid of agitators, though I believe in agitation: but I was more sorry to see him go than come. Some people are so much sunlight to the square inch. I am still bathing in the cheer he radiated. O he was a beautiful, beautiful boy!” “What was his name? Where did he come from?” “I could not catch the name—he was from the west. he said he just came to say ‘how d’ye do’ and go again: that he was sure Leaves of Grass could do more for the new dispensation than anything else he knew. I don’t see how anything could do more for the dispensation than such a boy himself. Horace—he had your blue eyes: there was a flavor of German in him: he said he was the son of an emigrant. Well—you might crowd this room with emperors and they would only be in the way—O he was a beautiful boy—a wonderful daybeam: I shall probably never see his face again—yet he left something here with me that I can never quite lose.”
This episode, narrated by one of Whitman’s closest disciples, is significant in that, in a candid and spontaneous way, it points to a characteristic of Whitman’s thought: the preeminence of the aesthetic judgment over the ethical judgment. He is an aestheticist, although of a different sort than his contemporaries in Britain, who became the best known representatives of aesthetic morality as a value system. Aestheticism was not a monolithic movement, as some have attempted to characterize it. The aesthetic worldview gained prominence in Western thought during the later part of the nineteenth century. John Ruskin, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde are among the best known figures in this post-Romantic movement, which could be rather characterized as late Romanticism.

The influence of aestheticism in the nineteenth century was wider than generally thought. It made an impact not only on the realm of literature and the visual arts, but also on the field of philosophy and religion. Walt Whitman, too, absorbed the aesthetic ideas of his generation, and they played a crucial role in shaping his own religious and ethical ideals.

In this chapter, I will focus on the aestheticist assumptions in Whitman’s worldview and how they inform his ethics. As part of this analysis, we will trace the roots of these assumptions in Western culture. In the second part of the chapter, I will discuss the ideologies of two aesthetes who were contemporaries of Whitman, Friedrich Nietzsche and Oscar Wilde. Both of these figures had intensely personal views on religion and ethics. Little known aspects of their personality and writings offer extraordinary similarities with the work and the personality of Walt Whitman. Viewed in this light, Whitman’s figure appears clearly connected to, if not purely representative of, the aestheticist tradition of ethical discourse during the later part of the nineteenth century. It is against the background of nineteenth century aestheticism that Whitman’s religious enterprise and the new ethics he proposes are to be understood.

**THE CLASSICAL ROOTS OF AESTHETICISM**

Since the early times of the Christian era, two opposite lines of thought have coexisted in Western culture, as far as the relationship between ethics and aesthetics is concerned: the Christian Neoplatonic and the Classical Greek (Platonic). In Neoplatonism, whose influence has dominated Christian thought throughout the centuries in some traditions (particularly Catholicism), physical beauty (i.e., the attractiveness of the human body) is suspect. This mistrust of physical beauty is epitomized in the myth of Lucifer, the Angel of Light, the most beautiful angel, whose sin established the precondition for the fall of Creation into chaos. The asceticism that Christian Neoplatonism brought about emphasized the contradiction between the beautiful and the good. Within this tradition, the Christian ascetic, the saint, is not expected to be physically beautiful—if anything, the opposite. Selflessness and self-
renunciation, as exemplified by Christ carrying his cross to Mount Calvary, constitute the Christian ethical ideal.

In Platonic thought, on the other hand, the beauty we see in this world is a reflection of true Beauty; the more beauty we find in an object, the closer that object is to transcendent Beauty, to true (ideal) beauty, to God. In Plato’s thought no opposition is perceived between goodness and physical beauty. The quest for the Beautiful was indeed part of the quest for the Good (this is not to say that there was a complete identification of the two and that the distinction between the good and the beautiful was never made). The Platonic view has surfaced occasionally in Christian Europe, the Renaissance being a notable example. Interestingly, the Renaissance coincided with a general relaxation of sexual mores in the Christian world.

The traditional Christian and Neoplatonic idea is not only, as in Platonism, that the beauty we observe in this world is only a reflection, a shadow, of true beauty, but that it is a shadow that hinders our contemplation of, distracts our attention from, true, transcendent Beauty. In traditional Christian thought of Neoplatonic inspiration, the opposition between physical and spiritual beauty in this world will eventually resolve itself in the next world into actual beauty, the moral or spiritual beauty that remains hidden under the physical appearances of this world manifesting itself in sensible form (thus, the beauty of heavenly beings, such as the Virgin Mary, as described by visionaries). In brief, while from the Christian Neoplatonic perspective physical beauty is deceitful because it distracts our attention from the True Beauty that dwells only in Heaven, for the Platonic mind beauty is good because it partakes in the divine. The more beautiful an individual is, the closer she or he is to God.

Nineteenth-century aesthetics attempted unorthodox syntheses of the Platonic and Christian-Neoplatonic lines of thought. In *Beauty and Belief* (1986), Hilary Fraser points out how Oscar Wilde delighted in every example of the meeting of Greek and Christian, and how Walter Pater attempted to unite Hellenism and Christianity through the mediation of Plato by emphasizing Plato’s belief in moral education through aesthetic experience. Fraser, however, questions the aesthetes’ religiosity:

> The difficulty of determining their sincerity may also be explained by the fact that their wish to unite the claims of Christianity and Hellenism derived from their own tendency to oscillate between a desire for religious faith and a love of art and beauty. Wilde’s adult life was a prolonged flirtation with the Roman Catholic Church, and it is amusing to read of the way in which he was, on successive occasions, lured away by the Hellenic spirit just as he was on the point of committing himself to the Christian.

In *Aestheticism, the Religion of Art in Post-Romantic Literature* (1990), Leon Chai claims that, in a sense, all of aestheticism might be said to emerge
out of the twilight of a waning religious faith in the later nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{5} Aestheticism, however, can also be said to be a religiously inspired movement. In authors like Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, it becomes, as a matter of fact, an attempt to make Christianity viable on grounds other than doctrinal orthodoxy. Fraser considers one of the most prominent and characteristic features of the nineteenth century the proliferation of “religio-aesthetic theories designed to reconcile the claims of Christianity and Beauty, morality and art.”\textsuperscript{6} She points out that while this was not a new disposition in the history of Western thought, it became, indeed, unusually pronounced in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{7}

A man of his time, Whitman fully absorbed, and engaged in, this religio-aesthetic trend. Clearly demonstrating his affinity to these postulates, in a speech at the first awards ceremony of the Brooklyn Art Union in 1851 (four years before the publication of \textit{Leaves of Grass}), he solemnly declared: “To the artist has been given the command to go forth into all the world and preach the gospel of beauty. The perfect man is the perfect artist.”\textsuperscript{8}

As a moral thinker, Whitman does not belong in the Christian tradition. Rather, his particular brand of aestheticism comes closer to classical Greek proto-aestheticism. His perception of the relationship between the good and the beautiful is akin to the Platonic worldview and alien to Christian ethics. Whitman’s aestheticism did not lead him to attempt to rescue Christianity for his time on aesthetic grounds, as was the case with Wilde. Instead, he placed himself on the side of those who, like his contemporary Friedrich Nietzsche, despised the priests and were resolved to replace Christian morality (indeed the Christian religion) with a new one of their own—a typically nineteenth-century enterprise. The aesthetic character of Whitman’s new religion and, by extension, of the ethics embodied in it, is expressed in one of his personal annotations:

\begin{quote}
And perhaps one of the works ?mission of both priest & poet for the modern, from the American point of view, for broadest Humanity is to break down the old conventions, the barriers, so narrowly restricting the ideas of Beauty, and—so we must abolish the ?religious ?ecclesiastical demarcations.\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
It is one of the most encouraging & democratic tendencies of modern times/Evangelical Alliance.\textsuperscript{9}
\end{quote}

Overcoming the opposition between beauty and goodness was, indeed, one of Whitman’s religion’s major goals. William Sloane Kennedy was one who saw this as a crucial feature of the new gospel: “Christianity and Whitmanism are mighty and irreconcilable opposites, as touches the body. The one ascetic, anti-naturalistic; the other a joyous accepter of nature; the one spurning what is the other’s chief glory.” Kennedy considered historical Christianity superstition, while Whitmanism he thought to be science. To which,
however, he added that “in spiritual insight Christ and Whitman are grandly alike, both seeing the real life to be behind the veil of sense.”

WHITMAN AND THE PLATONIC TRADITION

In his dialogues, particularly in the Symposium, Plato identifies the good with the beautiful. Through Socrates, he states that “the love of the beautiful set in order the empire of the gods, for that of deformed things there is no love,” and that “Love is the love of beauty and not of deformity.” Moreover, when discussing the role of love in generation, Socrates is taught by an oracle that the object that progenitors have in view is birth in beauty and not in deformity. Through the words of the oracle we learn that the deformed is always inharmonious with the divine, and the beautiful harmonious. According to the oracle, this is the reason why, “when the hour of conception arrives, and the teeming nature is full, there is such a flutter and ecstasy about beauty whose approach is the alleviation of the pain of travail.” The oracle concludes that love is not the love of the beautiful only, but “the love of generation and of birth in beauty.”

Contrary to the Neoplatonic view that was to develop centuries later, Plato did not find sensuous beauty despicable. Rather than a deceitful “copy” or a “shadow” of the “ideal” Beauty, he thought of sensuous beauty as a materialization of the ideal one, which it approximates in different degrees. In an immortal passage from the Phaedrus, Plato states:

> Of Beauty, I repeat again that we saw her there shining in company with the celestial forms; and coming to earth we find her here too, shining in clearness through the clearest aperture of sense. For sight is the most piercing of our bodily senses [. . .] this is the privilege of Beauty, that being the loveliest [idea] she is also the most palpable to sight.

To Plato, the contemplation of sensuous beauty allows those who have been initiated in the mysteries and who have not been corrupted to rise out of this world to the sight of the true Beauty in the other:

> [The observer] is amazed when he sees anyone having a godlike face or form, which is the expression of divine beauty; and at first a shudder runs through him, and again the old awe steals over him; then looking upon the face of his beloved as of a god, he reverences him, and if he were not afraid of being thought a downright madman, he would sacrifice to his beloved as to the image of a god.

Marking an important difference with the Classical period, in Neoplatonic thought the emphasis is heavily placed on the spiritual, rather than on the physical, beauty—a line of thought that was to match perfectly Christian
ideology. In the *Enneads*, Plotinus, like Plato, unmistakably identifies Beauty with Good and Ugliness with Evil. He states that the beauty in things of a lower order comes by operation of the shaping Soul which is also the author of the Beauty found in the world of sense. For Plotinus, however, physical beauty is not only without importance, it is a dangerous distraction:

He that has strength, let him arise and withdraw into himself, foregoing all that is known by the eyes, turning away for ever from the material beauty that once made his joy. When he perceives those shapes of grace that show in body, let him not pursue, he must know them for copies, vestiges, shadows, and hasten away towards That they tell of. For if anyone follow what is like a beautiful shape playing over water—is there not a myth telling in symbol of such a dupe, how he sunk into the depths of the current and was swept away to nothingness?

Plotinus believes that a soul becomes ugly “by something fostered upon it, by sinking itself into the alien, by a fall, a descent into body, into matter.” As gold is degraded when mixed with earth particles, so is the soul with earthly desires, he says. In order to cleanse the soul, Plotinus proposes the way of purgation:

let it [the Soul] be but cleared of the desires that come by its too intimate converse with the body, emancipated from all the passions, purged of all that embodiment has thrust upon it, withdrawn, a solitary to itself again—in that moment the ugliness that came only from the alien is stripped away.

There is little doubt that Whitman’s view, and particularly his conception of physical beauty, echoes Classical Platonic thought rather than Neoplatonism. The aura of mysticism that we find in Plato’s conception of the beautiful (and particularly in relation to his idea of friendship) is captured by Asselineau when he states that Whitman “conceives beauty not as aesthetic value but as a mystic property,” to which he adds that Whitman’s aesthetics is “the logical outcome of his mystic intuitions.”

That human beings and all things in nature have a real form (i.e. “ideal” in the platonic sense) beyond their material shapes (a notion common to both Platonism and Neoplatonism) is an idea which Whitman appears to address in “Eidólons”.

Densities, growth, façades,
Strata of mountains, soils, rocks, giant tress,
Far-born, far-dying, living long, to leave,
Eidólons everlasting.
Beyond thy lectures learn’d professor,
Beyond thy telescope or spectroscope observer keen, beyond all mathematics,
Beyond the doctor’s surgery, anatomy, beyond the chemist with his chemistry,
The entities of entities, eidólons.

(“Eidólons,” 40–45 and 60–65)

This 1876 poem was shifted to the introductory cluster “Inscriptions” in 1881, thus indicating that Whitman regarded it as one of the keys to *Leaves of Grass*. The notion of every natural object having its ultimate reality in a sphere of being beyond the physical is one that echoes both Greek and Christian metaphysics. It is unclear, however, whether Whitman considers eidólons to be more perfect than their physical manifestations.

Purgation and contempt of the body, and of bodily pleasures, are alien to Whitman, as we saw in the preceding chapter. The bodies of men and women are not just deceitful shadows. Rather, as in Christianity, they are sacred. Differently from Christianity, though, the human body is not only sacred but also divine, the object of worship:

Whoever you are, how superb and how divine is your body or any part of it!

(“Starting from Paumanok,” 13)

If I worship one thing more than other, it shall be the spread of my own body, or any part of it

(“Song of Myself,” 24)

The love of the body of man or woman balks account, the body itself balks account

(“I Sing the Body Electric,” 2)

The man’s body is sacred and the woman’s body is sacred

(“I Sing the Body Electric,” 6)

If any thing is sacred, the human body is sacred

(“I Sing the Body Electric,” 8)

Whitman’s Platonism resembles that of his aestheticist contemporaries. For example, Pater’s aesthetic morality derives from his belief in a natural
correlation between the beautiful and the good. Indeed, Pater cites Plato as his historical model and as the philosophical authority for his own synthesis of ethics and aesthetics. In any case, as far as Whitman is concerned, it is very likely that he came into contact with the Platonic conception of beauty through Emerson's essays (particularly “Love,” where he declares that beauty is “the flowering of virtue,” and “Nature,” where he writes that beauty is “the mark God sets upon virtue”). In “Love” and “Nature,” Emerson prefigures what would be some of the central ideas in Euro-American late Romanticism and mystical aestheticism.

We find also a certain parallelism between Whitman’s conception of the relationship between the spiritual and the material and that of Hegel, whose philosophy had already gained universal acclaim in the first part of the nineteenth century. In his Philosophy of Religion, Hegel states that beauty is “the spiritual making itself known sensuously.” This belief, which Hegel shared with the Classical Greeks, is reiterated in his discussion of the Greek world: “In Greek beauty, the sensuous is only a sign, an envelope, in which spirit manifests itself.” While in Plato, despite his appreciation of physical beauty, there is a sense of dissatisfaction that it needs to be embodied in the sensory material (although not a sense of incompatibility as in Plotinus), for Hegel, nevertheless, it is a unique glory that ultimate reality presents to our immediate perception in sensuous shape.

Although Whitman claimed to have read Hegel, and while he liked to emphasize Hegel's influence on him, it is not completely clear that he actually read him. It seems more likely that he only had access to secondhand accounts and journalistic versions of his philosophy. In any case, Hegel is often cited as both source and parallel for Whitman’s ideas. Whitman’s conception of the relationship between body and soul does, indeed, very strongly echo Hegelian idealism. It comes as no surprise that Hegel also believed in phrenology, a pseudoscience that claimed the existence of a direct relationship between shapes of the human body and moral qualities.

FROM PHRENOLOGY TO AESTHETIC MORALITY

In his 1855 preface to Leaves of Grass, Whitman writes: “All beauty comes from beautiful blood and a beautiful brain.” This statement, that so closely echoes the phrenological principles, contains a clear formulation of the assumption that underlies aesthetic morality: “moral beauty” proceeds from physical beauty (physical superiority). This is not to deny that there is room in Whitman’s thought for spiritual beauty hidden under an ugly physique, e.g., “The ugly face of some beautiful soul” (“Faces,” 1), but that represents the exception, the enigma. Beauty, for Whitman is not just erotic, youthful beauty, but rather harmony and lack of deformity (all of which, of course, reaches its peak in youth), so that there can be beauty in old age too.
In his 1876 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, he declares that *Leaves of Grass* contains the chants of the Body and Existence and expresses his hope that the unseen reality, the Soul, will find a bard that will write its poems. As for himself, given his attachment to the sensual, the task is beyond his powers: “the construction of such a work (even if I lay the foundation or give impetus to it) is beyond my powers, and must remain for some bard in the future.” The physical and the sensuous retain holds upon him, he says, which “I have not only not denied, but hardly wished to weaken.”

In order to attain physical beauty (the source of moral worth), which Whitman equates with a healthy well-proportioned body, the poet offers the readers some precepts to follow, such as looking after the cleanliness of their bodies and bathing frequently, as they will gain a fine complexion by it. Whitman placed much of his hope in hygiene and sport, as health was of supreme importance to him. Asselineau points out that Whitman’s aesthetics is “inseparable from his ethics and his spiritualism being inextricably mixed with his materialism, his prescriptions concern the body as well as the soul.”

Physical beauty is never predicated of Christ. Rather, the opposite is true: Christ is usually pictured as bleeding, suffering and despised by others during his Passion, the most transcendental part of his religious activities. Other than that, no physical description is given of him prior to the Resurrection. The physical attractiveness of the Christian messiah was irrelevant for the new morality being preached. With Whitman, the case is different. While for Christ the messiah his being good was the sign of his divine nature and the source of his moral authority, in the case of Whitman his attribute as messiah was beauty. It has been a usual remark by Whitman’s critics, including many during the poet’s lifetime, that rarely has a writer demonstrated such exquisite care for his appearance and for the effect he had on others as he did. This is how he describes himself in one of his anonymous self-reviews of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*:

Of American breed, of reckless health, his body perfect, free from taint from top to toe [. . .] full blooded, six feet high, a good feeder, never once using medicine, drinking water only—a swimmer in the river or bay or by the seashore—of straight attitude and slow movement of foot—an indescribable style evincing indifference and disdain—ample limbed, weight a hundred and eighty five pounds [. . .] countenance of swarthy transparent red, beard short and well mottled with white—face not refined or intellectual but calm and wholesome—a face of an unaffected animal.

Given the close connections between body and spirit, between spiritual purity and physical beauty, to Whitman the poet is not only a person endowed with superior spirituality, he is also a man of an “impeccable ‘physiology’.” For Whitman, genuine prophecy and poetry can originate only in the man of perfect body. It is for this reason that he chose to mythologize himself as
the superb male who radiates health and spirituality. Bucke described Whitman as possessing “an exceptional physique, an exceptional beauty of build and carriage, exceptionally handsome features.” In *Walt Whitman* and in *Cosmic Consciousness* (which Harold Aspiz calls “an inevitable post-mortem apotheosis of Whitman’s physical self”), Bucke plainly states “No description can give any idea of the extraordinary physical attractiveness of the man.” Indeed, as early as 1865, in O’Connor’s *The Good Gray Poet*, whose writing was supervised by the poet himself, Whitman was described as a man “of striking masculine beauty.”

Eugenics is a natural consequence of aesthetic morality. The attainment of higher degrees of physical perfection and beauty through the pairing of physically superior individuals is a notion that acquired new “scientific” dimensions in the nineteenth century with the popularization of the different versions of evolutionary theory. Eugenics, though, was by no means a new idea in the nineteenth century. As we saw before, Plato affirms that Love is the love of generation and of birth in beauty, and in *The Republic* he favors eugenics among the elite individuals. Inevitably, Whitman shared in that ideology too. According to Aspiz, Whitman enunciated “an evolutionary gospel of racial betterment.” It is within the context of his quest for beauty (admittedly, of a particular type) that Whitman’s ideas, and poetic utterances, on the black person and other races finds its proper framework:

You Hottentot with clicking palate! you wooly-hair’d hordes!
You own’d persons, dropping sweat-drops or blood drops!
You human forms with the fathomless ever-impressive countenances of brutes!
You poor koboo whom the meanest of the rest look down upon, for all your glimmering language and spirituality!
You dwarf’d Kamtschatkan, Greenlander, Lapp!
You Austral Negro, naked, red, sooty, with protrusive lip, groveling, seeking your food
You Caffre, Berber, Soudanese! [. . . ]
I do not prefer others so very much before you either,
I do not say one word against you, away back there, where you stand,
(You will come forward in due time to my side)
(“Salut au Monde,” 12)

However, Whitman did not have a systemic thought on eugenics. Heredity is at the center of what we could call his eugenic ideas. According to Marlene Walther, in every man Whitman sees a potential breeder that may be “the start of populous states and rich republics,” while in a woman he sees “the bearer’ of mothers and of them that shall be ‘mates to the mothers’.” To which she adds that Whitman despises, even condemns, those who spend themselves
“‘with no thought of the stain, pains, dismay, feebleness’ they are bequeathing,” while he gives his bravos “to all impulses sending sane children to the next age.” The topic of eugenics was so important to Whitman, Walther points out, that he wanted it to be established as a science, “the noblest science.” Writing in Germany only a few years after the end of World War II, Walther concludes “Only four or five decades later his prophetic wish became reality”—a sad and horrendous one, one might add. But it would certainly be unfair to charge Whitman with an ideology and a practice with which he had nothing to do in his day. His eugenic ideas are no more than simple—almost simplistic—idealizations of notions that, still untested in his time, were being presented by some as novel and socially progressive.

Whitman believed in the temporary supremacy of the white race. Traubel, however, did not believe in the supremacy of any race, and very emphatically so. Traubel, the guardian or Whitman’s orthodoxy, the one who shaped the Whitman movement and possibly too the poet’s opinions (or who at least moderated them on certain issues) was a true social visionary and a leader. Whitman was not. Outside the realm of his poetic dream of comradeship, Whitman was an intellectual who avidly absorbed the ideological currents of his time, and used them in creative ways as raw material for his own original poetic dream but, again, he was not a social visionary. His opinions on issues such as war, or his view of other social or religious groups (Catholics, for instance) changed over time, and only after experience proved his prior ideas wrong. Traubel’s opinions on those and other issues never changed. They remained clear, radical, and unchanged until his death.

While opposed to extending slavery to new territories, Whitman also opposed total abolitionism as “mad fanaticism” and as a “dangerous fanatical insanity.” Radical abolitionists acted, in his opinion, “as if slavery was the only evil in the universe.” He was afraid that the competition of cheap slave labor might negatively affect the interests of the white working class, and he believed that “the institution of slavery is not at all without its redeeming points.” In fact, he approved of the constitution of the State of Oregon, which prohibited blacks (slave or free) from entering the state, and was convinced that had he lived in the South he would have sided with the Southern whites on the question of slavery.

Whitman felt a kind of aversion to blacks, according to Asselineau, who adds that the poet, who could “scarcely hide his disgust for Negroes,” went as far as to reproach them with the color of their skins. Whitman believed blacks “quite incapable” of governing themselves, and shared the opinion with Carlyle that “God had created the blacks to act as servants to the whites.” He thought that the black race lacked the drive to self rule, and that somehow its natural place is a subservient one. Whitman did not believe in amalgamation of whites and blacks. Neither did he wish it to happen. Indeed, as Kuebrich remarks, he hoped that blacks would be one day sent back to Africa or at least somewhere outside the United States.
While working as a nurse in the hospitals in Washington during the war, Whitman said that, in comparison with the ongoing slaughter, he “did not care for the niggers,”60 and in a letter to his mother, he mocked them and compared to “wild brutes let loose” a group of them who paraded in a disorderly manner to celebrate the election of Mr. Bowen.61 Somehow unsurprisingly, when describing some positive quality in the black soldiers who were fighting the war, Whitman made an aesthetic observation: “[W]e cannot find fault with the appearance of this crowd—negroes though they may be. They are manly enough [. . . ]. Many of them real handsome young fellows.”62 In contrast with his negative perception of the black person, later in life Whitman expressed his belief that the future of the world is one of open communication and solidarity of all races.63 And the fact is, during his years in the Washington hospitals he also nursed black soldiers.64

WHITMAN’S TREATMENT OF THE UGLY: THE “KOSMIC” VISION

Whitman was personally acquainted with a number of artists in the early 1850s, and wrote articles about their work. He often came to the studio where Henry Kirke Brown, national Academician and sculptor of the equestrian statue of Washington in Union Square, worked with his young assistant, John Quincy Adams Ward. It seems that with the young artists who had just returned from their studies in Paris, Rome, and Florence Whitman felt more at home than with the literati.65 Whitman shared these artists’ commitment to the “gospel of John Ruskin,” whom he had praised in The Eagle. Young as Whitman was at the time,66 the younger artists admired him as a prematurely graying savant of progressivism in art, literature and politics, and as trusted promoter of their work.67 Whitman’s devotion to Ruskin is meaningful in that it helps us understand the poet’s concept of the ugly, which closely resembles that of the British aesthete.

Whitman accepts the ugly as a positive aspect of reality. In the 1860 poem entitled “Thoughts—1: Visages,” he writes:

Of ugliness—To me there is just as much in it as there is in beauty—And now the ugliness of human beings is acceptable to me.

The same idea is also manifest in the following lines from “A Song of the Rolling Earth” (1856), in which the poet again sees defects as contributing to cosmic perfection:

Amelioration is one of the earth’s words,
The earth neither lags nor hastens,
It has all attributes, growths, effects, latent in itself from the jump,
It is not half beautiful only, defects and excrescences show just as much as perfections show.

(“Song of the Rolling Earth,” 17–20)

These examples are revealing in that they show that the belief in evolution is at the root of Whitman’s justification of the ugly. The same idea is central to Ruskin’s perspective on the ugly:

[I]mperfection is in some sort essential to all we know of life. It is the sign of life in a mortal body, that is to say, of a state of progress and change. Nothing that lives is, or can be, rigidly perfect; part of it is decaying, part nascent [ . . . ]. And in all things that live there are certain irregularities and deficiencies which are not only signs of life, but sources of beauty. No human face can be exactly the same in its lines on each side, no leaf perfect in its lobes, no branch in its symmetry. All admit irregularity as they admit change; and to banish imperfection is to destroy expression, to check exertion, to paralyze vitality.68

In the above lines, Ruskin formulates what appears to be a fundamental aspect of the Greek aesthete’s mind. Nietzsche attributed to the Greeks the knowledge that life can be best understood as an aesthetic phenomenon. In Nietzsche’s view, the Greeks could enjoy the worst kind of abominations as mere spectacle.69 At the very beginning of “Nature,” Emerson, for his part, reminds the reader that beauty (“cosmos”) is the Greek word for Nature.

In his exploration of Nietzsche’s fascination with Greek thought, C. N. Stavrou makes some observations that also contribute to illuminate our understanding of Whitman. “According to Nietzsche,” writes Stavrou, “art served the Greeks as morality (ethics) served Socrates and Christianity [ . . . ]. Whereas Christianity led its followers to flee and hate life, art enabled the Greek to view life as an enjoyable game.”70 Such observations about Nietzsche find their perfect application in the case of Whitman. In a world conceived as a work of art, the ugly (even “the most forbidding abominations,” to use Stavrou’s expression) could be enjoyed as a spectacle of beauty. It is this special aesthetic receptivity, a natural side of aesthetic morality, that permits Whitman to introduce the “kosmic”71 vision in his work. The capacity to appreciate the value of the ugly as part of a developing tragedy (in the case of the Greeks), or of the evolving drama of the earth in the case of Whitman (with the evolutionary perspective always in mind), allowed the poet to express his fascination with science without renouncing his existential judgments on everyday reality. At times, Whitman expresses an impartial judgment of the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly. I have called “kosmic” those statements where the poet expresses such a point of view. In order to better understand this category, it will be useful first to clarify the distinction between the kosmic and the existential.72
The kosmic point of view is non-temporal and not restricted in its judgments by the individual’s existential limitations, i.e. those biological, historical, and cultural circumstances that determine one’s beliefs and aesthetic sensitivity, among other things. The kosmic perspective is a detached one; it is the perspective of an indifferent judge. The existential point of view, on the other hand, is that of the person as biologically, historically and culturally determined. It is the perspective of the person who fears his own death, even if his death represents a positive and necessary step in the ongoing evolution of the universe. It is also the perspective of the individual who judges something or someone to be good or bad, beautiful or ugly, from the limited perspective of a biologically, historically and culturally determined individual. Examples of existential judgments are those in which the poet expresses his preference for one person or group of people over others, or those in which he makes reference to the beauty of an individual, or group of individuals, contrasting their beauty, explicitly or by implication, with the less beautiful or the ugly.

On the kosmic visionary plane, the poet refuses to take sides with the good or the bad, as all that happens in the universe, even what affects us negatively as individuals, plays a necessary role in the wider scheme of teleological evolution. From a kosmic point of view, Evil is not an absolute concept, but only relative to the interests of the individual person. Moreover, in Whitman’s teleological conception of evolution there is a constant progression towards the best, so that what one person considers evil or ugly from his existential perspective may represent a positive contribution to the whole. For Whitman, thus, the distinction between good and evil, beautiful and ugly, is only existential.

In the 1855 Preface, we find the expression of the kosmic point of view, when Whitman states that the poet “is no arguer . . . he is judgment. He judges not as the judge judges, but as the sun falling around a helpless thing.” And the following lines from “Thoughts 1—Visages” are again an expression of the kosmic vision, as they can only make sense from the perspective of a superior mind, unaffected by human opinions, judgments and conventions:

Of criminals—To me, any judge, or any juror, is equally criminal—and any reputable person is also—and the President is also.

And in “Song of Myself,” 22:

What blurt is this about virtue and vice?
Evil propels me and reform of evil propels me, I stand indifferent.

Whitman’s kosmic statements constitute, in a sense, poetically formulated scientific manifests. Indeed, while his existential judgments are
valuative, his kosmic statements are merely descriptive, as if they were scientific statements. In the Preface to the 1872 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, he exclaims: “But what is life but an experiment? and mortality but an exercise? with reference to results beyond.” Whitman shared with many of his contemporaries a fascination with science, which he repeatedly expressed in his poetry and prose writings (“Hurrah for positive science! long live exact demonstration!” he exclaims in “Song of Myself,” 23). In the above-mentioned preface, he writes that science, now “like a new sunrise, ascending, begins to illuminate all.”73 And in a very revealing passage in his Preface to the 1876 edition he says:

> Without being a Scientist, I have thoroughly adopted the conclusion of the great Savants and Experimentalists of our time [. . .] and they have interi-orly tinged the chyle of my verse, for purposes beyond. Following the Modern Spirit, the real Poems of the Present, ever solidifying and expanding into the Future, must vocalize the vastness and splendor and reality with which Scientism has invested Man and the Universe [. . .] Poetry, so largely hitherto and even at present wedded to children’s tales, and to mere amor-uousness upholstery and superficial rhyme, will have to accept [. . .] the Kosmic Spirit which must henceforth, in my opinion, be the background and underlying impetus, more or less visible, of all first-class Songs.74

Science and poetry go hand in hand. Poetry crowns scientific achieve-ments: “In the beauty of poems are the tuft and final applause of science” (1855 Preface).75 This final applause of science takes the form of the kosmic vision when poetically expressed.

## Whitman and Nietzsche

Walt Whitman and Friedrich Nietzsche were contemporaries. While Whitman devoted some of his most enthusiastic lines to democracy, Nietzsche despised democracy as the repository of the sick morality of the herd, that condemned Europe to mediocrity, over the morality of the individual. Still, this and other disparities between the philosophical and social ideals of Nietzsche and Walt Whitman have been deemed by some superficial. One common ground is that both share in that aspect of the Platonic worldview that identifies the aesthetic with the moral. In their moral thinking, these two seemingly disparate figures are fundamentally connected, and are representative of a distinctive phase in Western moral thought. Each of them developed a grand theory of his own. They both attempted to found a new religion. The same as with other nineteenth-century grand theorists, such as Marx, Comte, and Freud, Whitman too offered an eschatological vision and, like Nietzsche, had messianic ambitions. And also like Nietzsche and other grand theorists of his time, he was strongly influenced by evolutionary theories. The enormous,
all-pervasive influence that evolutionary theories (both Darwinian and pre-Darwinian) had on intellectuals and on the popular mind throughout much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, leading even to political theorizations, is only now beginning to be understood.

Suggestive similarities between Whitman’s and Nietzsche’s ideas include their messianic aspirations, their contempt for conventional morality, their attack on the Christian churches, and their respective attempts to found a new religion and a new morality that would inaugurate a new era in the history of humankind. As for Nietzsche, his attack on conventional Christian morality permeates all of his works. Thus Spake Zarathustra, for example, constitutes a genuine anti-gospel, a parabled treatise in counter-morality. But we find his most furious attack against the morality, beliefs, and representative figures of Christianity in The Antichrist. In it, Nietzsche launches a furious diatribe against the priests that evokes Whitman’s own diatribes:

[The priest is] a parasitical type of man, thriving only at the expense of all healthy forms of life, the priest uses the name of God in vain: he calls a state of affairs in which the priest determines the value of things “the kingdom of God” [. . .] One step further: the “will of God” (that is, the conditions for the conservation of priestly power) must be known: to this end a “revelation” is required [. . .] it is made public with full hieratic pomp, with days of repentance and cries of lamentation over the long “sin.”

Nietzsche’s attack was not only directed against the churches and the clergy but against the very notion of the Christian God. The Teutonic races need to abandon such a belief and develop a new type of religion well adapted to their superiority (that of the “overman”):

That the strong races of northern Europe did not reject the Christian God certainly does not credit to their religious genius—not to speak of their taste. There is no excuse whatever for their failure to dispose of such a sickly and senile product of decadence.

Whitman’s belief that his ideal Anglo-Teutonic Americans—the superior race in the world—deserve a better religion than those decadent, inherited ones is certainly parallel to that expressed by Nietzsche. Through Nietzsche’s remarks, we perceive a probable identification of his “overman” with the northern European races, which he calls the “strong” races (while Christianity reveals itself as the religion of the “weak”). In this we find a parallel with Whitman too, whose “superior individuals” belong in the white race. In Aspiz’s words, “Whitman’s hoped-for super-race is Nordic; the Americans whom he idealizes are essentially those he calls ‘ever sturdy, ever instinctively just, by right of Teutonic descent.’” Even Nietzsche’s distinction between “master” and “slave” morality finds its peculiar formulation in Whitman. Aspiz points
out that Whitman’s attitudes toward non-Teutonic peoples were inconsistent or unfavorable, and that the poet believed that “Africans” had an instinct for slavery just as the white Americans had an instinct for freedom.79

Nietzsche also shared with Whitman—as well as with Marx, Freud, Comte, and other grand theorists of the time—the intimate belief that Christianity was about to die—what Kuebrich describes as an “appallingly inaccurate perception of the lasting appeal of Christianity.”80 In the final lines of the Antichrist (in his laws against Christianity), Nietzsche declares the Christian era over. With his worship of the overman a new era begins.

Walter Kaufmann points out that Nietzsche, as well as Hegel, did not believe in the primacy of moral values. In support of his contention, he quotes from The Birth of Tragedy (Nietzsche’s first work) that “only as an aesthetic phenomenon are life and the world justified eternally” and that philosophy dares to place morality in the world of appearances.81 Despite the fact that Nietzsche regards beauty as a supra-historical given, the concept of beauty belongs in an existential value system. Neither Whitman’s kosmic vision nor his optimistic belief in the evolution of mankind are present in Nietzsche’s thought.

To some, Nietzsche represents the peculiar attempt to unite the classical and romantic elements in Western culture. The same could be predicated of Whitman. The rebellious attitude of both Whitman and Nietzsche, their passionate contempt for conventional religion together with their respective attempts to create new religions (admittedly, of a very different nature from each other), as well as their attack on traditional morality are typically Romantic. Their adoption of the Greek worldview (implicit in Whitman, very explicit in Nietzsche) is one fundamental element they also share.

In view of such similarities, it is not surprising that a number of authors have compared Whitman and Nietzsche. Eduard Bertz, Whitman’s renegade disciple, was probably the first one to link the name of the poet to that of the German philosopher. In Der Yankee-Heiland (“The Yankee Messiah”), Bertz’s incisive attack on Whitman’s messianic claims, the poet’s former admirer compared Whitman’s case to that of Nietzsche, and suggested a hereditary taint in both.82

In his Life of Walt Whitman (1905), Binns too carried out an incipient comparison between Whitman and Nietzsche. According to Binns, something that characterizes both authors is a spirit of “rebellion against all bondage, even though it call itself virtue and morality.” This spirit of rebellion was, as Binns sees it, always a part of the real Whitman, “it was the side of the Square Deific which he has aptly named ‘Satan’.”83

In Walt Whitman (1950), Schyberg too carries out a relatively extensive comparison of Whitman and Nietzsche, in which he emphasizes the similarity between the two authors as far as the centrality of the aesthetic. While acknowledging some paradoxical differences between the two, Schyberg believes that their influence on modern thought frequently converges. He
draws a suggestive parallelism between Nietzsche’s “superman” theory and Whitman’s “great individuals”:

Nietzsche’s superman theory, with his scorn of the common people, seems at first glance to differ as widely as possible from Whitman’s democracy, yet there is a certain accord between Nietzsche’s “grosse Individuum” and Whitman’s “great individuals,” and particularly, as Johannes Schlaf noted, is there an undeniable kinship in their lyrical inspiration.84

Schyberg believes that the resemblance between the two, while limited to Thus Spake Zarathustra, is, nevertheless, a striking one. While noting that there is nothing to indicate that Nietzsche knew about Whitman at any time, but especially not before the publication of Zarathustra,85 he contends that Nietzsche’s original poetic impulse, his enthusiasm for music, and his delight in oratorical effects, all common traits to Whitman, resulted in a prose lyric which contains the ideas and images familiar to us in Leaves of Grass.86 This Danish scholar finds a common similarity in the writings of Whitman and in Nietzsche’s Zarathustra to Persian and Indian lyricism. In his opinion, the similarities between the two books are largely accounted for by the way in which they were both conceived, in an open-air inspiration, such as Whitman celebrated.87

Schyberg does not overlook the obvious similarity between Nietzsche and Whitman that they both broke with conventional morality (at least on the level of ideas) and carped at scientists and priests. He sees also a more personal resemblance to Whitman in Nietzsche’s “hectic, enthusiastic, but always disappointing” friendships and “his longings for perfect friends,” which, was, according to Nietzsche’s sister, the personal background for all the philosopher’s work on the book. Schyberg traces this impulse in what he sees as the “Calamus-motivated” poem entitled “The Friend” in Part I of Zarathustra.

As part of the personal parallels between the American poet and the German philosopher, Schyberg mentions the fact that Nietzsche served as a nurse in the Franco-Prussian War, and points out that Nietzsche’s later illness has been attributed to overexertion in that period, “exactly as with Whitman.” He makes the point that in Nietzsche’s illness and insanity we find the same Christ-complex that Whitman had, although in a much less pronounced degree in the case of the American poet (Nietzsche even signed his letters with the name of Christ).88

Despite these striking similarities between the life of the two contemporary poets (Schyberg categorizes Nietzsche as a poet), Schyberg emphatically points out that the truly meaningful similarities between the two are a common form of expression, a common imagery, almost a common language.89 He illustrates his point with numerous examples taken from Zarathustra, which show indeed great similarities with passages in Leaves of Grass. One of these examples is Zarathustra’s treatment of the notions of body and soul, which (as
Whitman did) he celebrates as one, though “with a peculiar Whitmanesque duality when he has ‘the Self’ carry on a conversation with ‘the I’ exactly like Whitman’s dialogue between soul and body.” Also Zarathustra’s praise of his own body, in which the aesthetic is identified with the moral, bears an interesting parallelism with that of Whitman.

Schyberg, however, does not overlook the differences between Whitman and Nietzsche: Nietzsche’s lack of sympathy, his conscious intolerance, his making mouths at the common people, etc. Despite such differences, he thinks that in the German philosopher we find an unmistakable leaning towards Whitman or the Whitmanesque type. He finds their lyrical likeness astonishing:

The wandering and the awakening, the theme of the ship, the complete intoxication with nature and oratory, the frequent long lyrical passages similar in construction and content to Whitman’s, the oriental imagery of the dancers reappearing again and again in Nietzsche’s book, all unite to produce a resemblance that paradoxically makes intelligible what Isadora Duncan meant by the strange observation in her memoirs that since her youth she had chosen “three masters in the art of dance: Rousseau, Walt Whitman and Nietzsche!”

In commenting on the work of Johannes V. Jensen, a Danish author, Schyberg points out that *Hjulet* (“The Wheel”) (1901), one of Jensen’s novels, is permeated with Whitman’s poetry, a point that he illustrates with examples from the said novel. Evanston, a homosexual character in *Hjulet*, takes advantage of Whitman’s “New Bible” to make himself the prophet of a new religion and is worshipped by everyone, first in Chicago and then everywhere else. Evanston finally embraces the doctrine of the union of Evil and Good, so familiar in Whitman. Jensen’s novel illustrates the similarities between Whitman and Nietzsche, according to Schyberg, who concludes:

We cannot deny either Whitman or Nietzsche the rank of eminent poetical preachers; the doctrines of both give negative results socially, just because neither of them belonged to the healthy-minded great, but with astonishing psychological resemblances and in spite of differences in milieu and intellect, both belong to the erratic great of literary history.

Schyberg’s observations are particularly interesting in that it is through seemingly negative features that he links the two authors: their doctrines produce negative results if applied to the social sphere, none of them is a “healthy-minded great,” and they both belong to the “erratic great literati.” These parallels offer a profound insight into the true character of Whitman’s thought. This is so despite the fact that Schyberg’s theory conflicts with important characteristics of the Whitman myth, in particular William James’s characterization of Whitman as a perfect example of a healthy-minded religious
thinker. In any case, Schyberg concludes that both, Whitman and Nietzsche, are "poetical preachers," that is, moral reformers of a non-conventional kind.

Still, it is to C. N. Stavrou that we owe the most extensive comparison to date between Whitman and Nietzsche. In his book *Whitman and Nietzsche* (1964), Stavrou carries out a detailed analysis of the thought of the two authors, which he finds convergent in most relevant aspects. Of particular interest is his comparison of Nietzsche's overman to Whitman's "superman." By quoting from *The Will to Power*, Stavrou informs the reader that Nietzsche's overmen would possess "an overflow of energy for beauty, bravery, culture, and manners even for the most abstract thought; a race [ . . . ] strong enough to be able to dispense with the tyranny of the imperatives of virtue."93

The bible of the new race of overmen would be a critique of all prevailing values and virtues. In Stavrou's interpretation, the ambition of this new race would be to become, through self-knowledge and self-determination, their authentic selves. "Their society," he says, "would be the very antithesis of that in which anonymity is the most prized virtue, numerical strength the decisive factor, and majority opinion the divine oracle."94 At this point, Stavrou makes the transition to Whitman by intercalating the poet's lines from "Starting from Paumanok" as if part of the description of Nietzsche's overmen: "This 'new race dominating previous ones, and grander far, with new contests, / New politics, new literatures and religions, new inventions and arts'." Afraid of oversimplifications, Stavrou also delineates the differences between the two: 95

Nietzsche's hero is his own justification for being; his greatness derives not from his utility to history but from intrinsic worth. [ . . . ] Whitman's hero conforms closely to Emerson's fearless, self-reliant individualist who does not hesitate to place his trust in whim and who laughs to scorn the restraints of prudence. The principal difference is that Whitman's hero is free of all Emersonian prudishness, inhibitions and delicacy. 96

Stavrou believes that Nietzsche's philosophy originates in his violent reaction to Christianity, his self-appointed mission being to indicate man the wherewithal to create Man-God to replace God-Man.97 Here the parallel with Whitman is clear, since one of the poet's capital notions is that of the divinity of men. Stavrou makes the interesting observation that the German philosopher's vitriolic vehemence in his diatribes against Christianity stems "not so much [from] a precocious atheism, as it does [from] the artist's anger at the deprecation of beauty."98

Particularly relevant for our present discussion is Stavrou's assertion that Whitman was "quite Platonic."99 While much attention has been paid to Whitman the Romantic, the rebel, the illuminate, not enough has been paid to the classical roots of his sensitivity, which underlie his illuminate worldview. Whitman (like Nietzsche) represents a synthesis of the classical and the Romantic, his Platonic view usually being mentioned with reference to
his poem “Eidólons,” as Stavrou indeed does. Based on the ideas expressed in this poem, Stavrou concludes that to Whitman all objects were palpable models, visible replicas, tangible manifestations of their corresponding spiritual archetypes (i.e., eidólons). Still, Stavrou pointedly remarks that the sensible, the mortal, is not thereby less estimable for Whitman, “Whitman’s orientation was too sensorial.”

In disagreement with the main conclusions reached by Stavrou in his comparative study, Gay Wilson Allen, in what he terms “Some comments on the basic comparison itself, without regard to the merits of Mr. Stavrou’s book,” goes as far as casting doubts on the convenience of such a work, as he asks whether it is justified. Stylistical similarities between Whitman and Nietzsche can be traced to their being both influenced by Emerson, Allen claims, thus their pride in the ego, their admiration for the human body, defiance of conventions and worship of health and strength. Nevertheless, their doctrines are far apart when it comes to sympathy, love, death and immortality. Allen believes that while to Nietzsche, who considered Christianity a religion of slaves, sympathy was sickness, a kind of disease, Whitman had a Christ-like compassion. In Allen’s remark we find again the Whitman myth at work.

Allen addresses his main criticism to Stavrou’s proposed parallelism between Whitman’s “Great Companions” or “Great Individuals” and Nietzsche’s “Übermensch” (a term that Stavrou translates as “overmen,” but that Allen, adding to the terminological confusion, prefers to translate as “supermen”). He agrees that those who claim that Nietzsche’s “superman” in no way resembles the Nazi hero are probably right. According to his interpretation, Nietzsche’s ideal was a man who would transcend men as they actually existed in his nineteenth-century world, not a ruthless brute, as the Nazis were. And yet, he points out:

one aspect of this superior-man was his ruthlessness with all kinds of weakness, psychological as well as physical. Thus the cult of Darwinism (the weak must be obliterated so that the race may be kept strong) merged with the Nietzsche cult of will-to-power in the late nineteenth century.

Judging from his remarks, Allen seems to be unaware of Whitman’s attitude to what he considered inferior races, which, in his opinion, were destined to be “eliminated.” In James T. F. Tanner, we find the opposite view to that of Allen’s. In his 1965 article entitled “The Superman in Leaves of Grass,” Tanner maintains that the Superman theory found in Whitman’s work is “a fundamental extension of the evolutionary doctrine.” He also thinks that Nietzsche’s Superman was capable of being adapted to the fascism of Nazi Germany and Italy, while Whitman’s was not. (Tanner translates Nietzsche’s “Übermensch” as “Superman,” making it thus indistinguishable from Whitman’s. Tanner always capitalizes the word “superman.”). Tanner’s observations are in obvious contradiction with those of Allen. Whether or not Nietzsche’s
Übermensch made room for the Nazi prototype, one must be in agreement that Whitman’s Superman is an extension of the evolutionary doctrine with the implications it bears.

In Tanner’s view, Whitman himself represents the Superman outlined in *Leaves of Grass*. While he ascribes the descriptions of the Superman to sections 39, 40 and 41 of “Song of Myself,” he also finds that the “superhuman characteristics” depicted in “The Prairie Grass Dividing,” a poem of the “Calamus” cluster, bear a suspicious resemblance to the character of Whitman himself:

> The prairie-grass dividing, its special odor breathing,
> I demand of it the spiritual corresponding,
> Demand the most copious and close companionship of men,
> Demand the blades to rise of words, acts, beings,
> Those of the open atmosphere, coarse, sunlit, fresh, nutritious,
> Those that go their own gait, erect, stepping with freedom and command, leading, not following,
> Those with a never-quell'd audacity, those with sweet and lusty flesh clear of taint,
> Those who look carelessly in the faces of Presidents and governors as to say *Who are you?*
> Those of earth-born passion, simple, never constrain’d, never obedient .

From his own analysis of the relevant passages in *Leaves of Grass*, Tanner concludes that the five defining characteristics of Whitman’s Superman are that he is athletic, arrogant, affectionate, invincible and scholarly. If Whitman’s self-descriptions amount to a portrait of his Superman, as Tanner claims, physical beauty should definitely be among the above characteristics. Admittedly, beauty is implied in the resulting picture from Tanner’s characterization, especially since he complements his characterization of Whitman’s Superman with the assertion that throughout *Leaves of Grass* Whitman praises “masculinity, good health and athletic living.” To see that physical beauty is an essential ingredient of Whitman’s self-portrait, and thus of his Superman (if Tanner’s identification is correct) one only needs to recall O’Connor’s description of Whitman in *The Good Gray Poet*, whose writing was supervised by the poet himself, as well as Whitman’s self-descriptions in his anonymous self-reviews, and most explicitly in Bucke’s statement in his *Walt Whitman* (1882) that *no description can give any idea of the extraordinary attractiveness of the man*, a statement he literally repeats in *Cosmic Consciousness*. The point is reinforced by Tanner’s remark that it is only natural that Whitman would equip his Superman with one of his own personal traits, homosexuality, which Tanner says was “almost a way of life” with Whitman.
A more recent comparison between Whitman and Nietzsche is Adrian Del Caro’s “Kingdom of This World: Whitman and Nietzsche Compared.” In his essay, Del Caro claims to go beyond the simple juxtaposition of superficial points, which he recognizes to be tempting but not productive. He finds that underlying the respective views of Whitman and Nietzsche is a common appreciation for the transforming social life of the latter half of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, he also finds hard-to-reconcile differences between the two of them, the most important one being that while Whitman serves as spokesman for his nation, in the case of Nietzsche, who considered himself the aristocrat par excellence, there is no nation or people which he represents. Del Caro, however, makes the very questionable assertion that at the core of Nietzsche’s philosophy is the individual, while the core of Whitman’s is the en masse. His perception is on this point, as in others, selective, as Whitman often places the individual at the core of his religious and social message, and in fact he was often hailed by his early followers as the prophet of individualism.

Del Caro also makes the point that while Nietzsche not only rejected the idea of equal rights for women, but equal rights for any, Whitman could well champion the cause of equal rights for women. The fact is, however, that even if one grants that Whitman’s peculiar notion of equality between male and female could pass as equivalent to our contemporary notion of women’s rights, it is unlikely that Whitman would have championed that cause. Del Caro goes on to say that while Nietzsche was no spokesman for any country, Whitman was for America, but that the form of Whitman’s patriotism “is not narrowly nationalistic,” for he believed that the true seeds of American democracy would scatter, as indeed the States themselves were expanding. The question of Whitman’s “narrow” patriotism will be dealt with in detail in the next chapter, where we will be looking at his editorials on the Mexican-American War and at his expansionist dreams, which included the annexation of Canada, Mexico and Cuba. I find it questionable to say that Whitman’s nationalism was not narrow because the true seeds of American democracy would scatter as a result of expansionism. Despite these and other differences between Whitman and Nietzsche, which Del Caro emphasizes, he finds that underlying both authors is a common appreciation for the transforming social life of the latter half of the nineteenth century.

The fact is that, despite the many differences that separate the philosophies of Nietzsche and Whitman, there is indeed a common trait that both share. This trait is their elevation of aesthetic values to the moral plane. Their identification of the aesthetic with the moral constitutes a central feature of their respective supermen.

In his comparative analysis of Wilde and Nietzsche, Thomas Mann declares with solemnity that Nietzsche is “the most uncompromisingly perfect aesthete in the history of thought.” Such a strong view lends support to the idea that aestheticism is not only realized within the field of literature and the
visual arts, but also in ethics and religion. Interestingly, it is in Oscar Wilde that we find the most explicit association of religion and aestheticism, together with a clear formulation of his particular brand of aesthetic morality. If only on these grounds, a comparison with Whitman is warranted. But, as we will see, there is even more of a common ground between the two of them.

**WHITMAN AND OSCAR WILDE**

Oscar Wilde represents the late nineteenth century aestheticist sensibility par excellence. The admiration that Oscar Wilde and Walt Whitman felt for each other has not been the object of much attention, perhaps because they have been understood as holding widely disparate worldviews. As a matter of fact, both authors share more in their moral thinking than might appear at first sight.

Commenting on the great importance Whitman gave to his self-appearance, Zweig remarks that the poet’s counterpart is not “the cocky Yankee peddler striding America’s ‘open road,’” [in reference to the title of one of Whitman’s poems] but Baudelaire’s esthete and dandy [fictional character] Samuel Cramer [. . .] or, more vividly, Oscar Wilde.”118 To Zweig, Wilde’s visit to Whitman in Camden (which he calls a “pilgrimage”), in 1882, reveals the fact that the English aesthete guessed Whitman’s deepest nature.119 Indeed, that may well be the case. Schyberg, for his part, makes the point that the Scandinavian writer Georg Brandes considered Walt Whitman and Oscar Wilde “as one.”120 He also believes that only Oscar Wilde among the prominent people had any realization of Whitman’s potentialities, in support of which he quotes from an 1889 article by Wilde in which the British writer calls Whitman “the herald to a new era.”121 As a matter of fact, Whitman made a powerful personal impression on Wilde during his visit, and in a subsequent letter to the American poet, while still in the United States, he wrote: “Before I leave America I must see you again—there is no one in this wide great world of America whom I love and honor so much.”122 At the time of Wilde’s visit to Camden, the mystical quality of Wilde’s aestheticism was still not overtly expressed in his works. The revelation of religious aestheticism in its most articulate form, as found in *De Profundis*, lay still years ahead. While for Wilde it was easy to feel a common nature with Whitman, not so for Whitman, who once remarked to Traubel: “[Wilde] has extraordinary brilliancy of genius with perhaps rather too little root in eternal soils. Wilde gives up too much to the extrinsic decorative values in art.”123

It is far from clear that Whitman’s repudiation of the “extrinsic decorative values” is a genuine one. Rather, Whitman had a very elaborate artistic creation which he tried to mirror in his life, or at least to project in his self-descriptions, in his poetry, and elsewhere. Indeed, very insightfully, Asselineau considers Whitman the most perfect realization of Wilde’s paradox that nature imitates art.124
The aesthetic ideal Whitman lived for was not that of the exquisiteness of the English aristocracy, as was Wilde’s. Whitman’s aesthetic ideal was that of the rough, sensual American of an exuberant masculine beauty. Still, that difference in object does not make the quality of Whitman’s aestheticism essentially different from that of Wilde’s. The aesthetic valuation of life is seen by some as itself a sign of rebellion against the established order. Thomas Mann writes that the reason for his coupling together Nietzsche and Wilde is that aestheticism was the first manifestation of the rebellion against the morality of the bourgeois age. Nietzsche and Wilde belong together as rebels, he concludes, “rebels in the name of beauty.”

As in the cases of Whitman and Nietzsche, we also find a Christ complex in Wilde. In his essay “Christ and Wilde,” G. Wilson Knight delineates the main characteristics of such complex in the British writer:

Christ is a key to Wilde’s life […] Wilde was “drawn to the personality of Jesus Christ […] and his interest increased every year until at length he almost identified himself with Christ and often spoke in parables […] he saw himself in the role of Christ, the shouts of his first-night audiences being his hosannas,” with Calvary to follow […]. He felt that his life needed a tragic completion and wooed disaster “under the influence of a mystical concept […]. Finally, “his own condemnation and sufferings had completed the parallel with Jesus which for many years he had instinctively drawn.”

We may safely conclude that the three contemporaries, Whitman, Nietzsche, and Wilde shared not only in their aestheticism and in their rebellion against established morality (both aspects intimately connected), but also in their messianic aspirations.

Some of Wilde’s statements remind us vividly of Whitman’s kosmic language. To the editor of the Scots Observer he declared “an artist, sir, has no ethical sympathies at all. Virtue and wickedness are to him simply what the colours of his palette are to the painter.” The same as Whitman, Wilde was concerned with religion almost to the point of obsession. Differently from Whitman, though, Wilde craved for conversion to the most conventional of religions, Roman Catholicism, although not for the most conventional reasons. As a student, he had his Oxford room full of pictures of the Pope and Cardinal Manning, and always maintained that parental pressure was responsible for his failure to become a Roman Catholic. He even claimed at one point that had his father allowed him to become a Catholic “the artistic side of the Church would have cured my degeneracies.”

Wilde represents an attempt to synthesize the Greek and the Christian. In De Profundis he suggests that the main value of Christ’s Passion is aesthetic. Thus, for Wilde the Passion becomes the most perfect work of art, the most sublime of tragedies, high above the superior achievements of the Greeks. One
could say that it is only the type of aesthetic ideal that separates Whitman from Wilde. Homosexuality, which, interestingly, enjoyed an open and valued role in Greek society and thought, is a personality trait that they both shared too. While Wilde regretfully acknowledged it as a degeneracy, Whitman, who did not acknowledge it, used it creatively to shape his ethics of comradeship. To this subject we turn next.
CHAPTER FOUR

The Love of Comrades

I will make divine magnetic lands,
With the love of comrades,
With the life-long love of comrades.
—"For You O Democracy"

Whitman said the basis of his poetry was “human fraternity, comradeship,” adding that “the idea of my book is conveyed in that one word ‘comradeship.’” The concept of comradeship is at the heart of Walt Whitman’s religious and moral enterprise. In the words of Mila T. Maynard, “[t]he circle of Whitman’s thought finds its perfect round in the idea of comradeship.” In his work, Whitman elevates the idea of comradeship to quasi-mystical levels. It is, indeed, the love of comrades that reveals the original meaning and purpose of Whitman’s work.

While it is in “Calamus” that Whitman expresses most emphatically his enthusiasm for the love of comrades, references to comrades and “camerados” abound in his poetry and in his prose writings. In this chapter, I will look at this central concept of his ideology, and its ethical, religious and political aspects. In doing so I will review the theories and interpretations of a number of scholars who have dealt with the issue of Whitman’s ideal of comradeship and its relationship to religion and sexuality.

A MESSIANIC MISSION

In a verse of marked prophetic overtones placed in one of the early sections of Leaves of Grass, Whitman announces: “I will write the evangel-poem of comrades and of love” (“Starting from Paumanok,” 6). The messianic aura that we find in this and in other similar verses reveals the emotional intensity he attached to his desire to establish a new morality of comradeship. In Leaves of Grass the religious message is inseparable from the new ethics it serves to
justify. For Whitman to say that he will write the evangel of comrades is only consistent with his early references to his intention to construct a cathedral or a New Bible. The religious connotations with which Whitman invests his ideal of comradeship are also manifest in the following lines from his 1871 poem “Gods”:

Lover divine and perfect Comrade,
Waiting content, invisible yet, but certain,
Be thou my God.

Thou, thou, the Ideal Man,
Fair, able, beautiful, content, and loving,
Complete in body and dilate in spirit,
Be thou my God.

The poet’s sacred ideal constitutes a clear example of the peculiar integration of his ethics and his aesthetics. Whitman’s perfect Comrade, his ideal man is, among other things, “fair,” “beautiful,” “content,” and “complete in body.” At least on two separate occasions, Whitman calls himself in Leaves of Grass “the poet of comrades” (“Starting from Paumanok,” 6, and “These I singing in Spring”), while in “In Paths Untrodden,” the first poem of the “Calamus” cluster, he introduces the reader to the celebration of masculine comradeship:

In paths untrodden,
In the growth by margins of pond-waters,
Escaped from the life that exhibits itself,
From all the standards hitherto publish’d, from the pleasures, profits, conformities,
Which too long I was offering to feed my soul,
Clear to me now standards not yet publish’d, clear to me that my soul,
That the soul of the man I speak for rejoices in comrades,
Here by myself away from the clank of the world,
Tallying and talk’d to here by tongues aromatic,
No longer abash’d, (for in this secluded spot I can respond as I would not dare elsewhere,)
Strong upon me the life that does not exhibit itself, yet contains all the rest,
Resolved to sing no songs to-day but those of manly attachment,
Projecting them along that substantial life,
Bequeathing hence types of athletic love,
Afternoon this delicious Ninth month in my forty-first year,  
I proceed for all who are or have been young men,  
To tell the secret of my night and days,  
To celebrate the need of comrades

The poem as a whole impacts the reader for a number of reasons. First,  
the restrained intensity of the emotion expressed in it. One feels as if in the  
presence of a volcano which is about to erupt. But one is also impacted by the  
sense of secrecy and confession. The very title of the poem adds to the sense of  
mystery: the poet is going to walk with us “in paths untrodden.” He repeatedly  
announces he is going to reveal something which has not yet been “published.”  
Furthermore, we are told by the poet that he is “no longer abashed” about what  
he has to tell us, for he is in a “secluded spot” where he says things he “would  
not dare elsewhere.” Shrouded in this aura of hiddenness and intense secrecy,  
we finally find out what it is that the poet wishes the reader to confront: his cel-  
ebration of “manly attachment,” “athletic love,” and “the need of comrades.”  
We are told this is the secret of his nights and days.

In the 1860 poem of the “Calamus” group entitled “I Hear It Was Charged  
Against Me,” the poet manifests his purpose to establish “the institution of the  
dear love of comrades” all over the world. In the parenthetical verses “These I  
Sing in the Spring,” another poem within the same cluster, the calamus “root”  
is established as the symbol of comradeship which youths are to interchange  
with each other:

(O here I last saw him that tenderly loves me, and returns again never to  
separate from me,  
And this, O this shall henceforth be the token of comrades, this calamus-  
root3 shall,  
Interchange youths with each other! let none render it back!)

Whitman, who is known for his creative use of language, introduces the  
term “camerado,” that he alternates with the more familiar “comrade.” The  
origin of “camerado” and the reasons for its alternation with comrade have  
been the object of an interesting study by Marian Stein. According to Stein,  
the word “camerado” is derived from the Spanish word “camarada.” How-  
ever, the words “comrade” and “camarada,” she points out, are not completely  
equivalent in meaning. Stein cites a dictionary definition of the word “com-  
rade”: “An associate in occupation or friendship, or a close companion.” As for  
“camarada,” Stein says it is derived from the word “cámara” which signifies a  
large and/or main room in a house. By resorting to a 1936 historical-linguistic  
dictionary of Spanish, we are given the following definition of “camarada”: “El  
compañero de cámara, que come y duerme en una misma posada.” While  
Stein does not offer a literal translation of the sentence, she clarifies its mean- 
ing by stating that a “camarada” is “someone who is so close to another man
that he eats and sleeps in the same house with him.” From this, Stein concludes that “camarada” connotes more than “comrade.”

Before analyzing the different contexts in which “comrade” and “camerado” appear in *Leaves of Grass*, Stein deals with the prior question of why Whitman uses “camerado” instead of the proper Spanish word “camarada.” While warning the reader that we can only speculate about this, she advances some reasonable hypotheses for this peculiar modification of the original Spanish word. By resorting again to the *Diccionario Histórico de la Lengua Española*, Stein informs us that “camera” is an antiquated version of “cámara.” She conjectures that Whitman may have known this fact and for some reason changed the spelling as if the word had been derived from “camera” rather than from “cámara.” She also offers an alternative hypothesis: that the different spelling may have appealed to Whitman as it may have seemed to better express that which he wished to express. But why did Whitman’s coinage terminate with “o”, rather than the “a” of the Spanish word? To this question, Stein ventures the hypothesis that the poet perhaps knew that “o” usually denotes masculinity in the gender of Spanish words (“camarada” being an exception) and he wanted to emphasize the masculinity of his camerados.

Stein believes Whitman made a conscious distinction between “comrade” and “camerado” based on the degree of intensity with which he imbued the concept. Thus, side by side with passages in which the poet uses the term “comrade,” Stein quotes the following lines in which the word “camerado” is used:

O camerado close! O you and me at last, and us two only.
O a word to clear one’s path ahead endlessly!

("Starting from Paumanok," 19)

My Rendezvous is appointed, it is certain,
The Lord will be there and wait till I come on perfect terms,
The great Camerado, the lover true for whom I pine will be there.

("Song of Myself," 45)

Camerado, I give you my hand!
I give you my love more precious than money,
I give you myself before preaching or law;
Will you give me yourself?

("Song of the Open Road," 15)

Camerado, this is no book,
Who touches it touches a man.
(Is it night? are we together alone?)
It is I you hold and who holds you,
I spring from the pages into your arms—decease calls me forth.
(“So Long”)

She concludes that the lines in which “comrade” is used “are not nearly as intense as the lines in which ‘camerado’ appears,” adding that it seems that Whitman uses “camerado” “when he wishes to communicate a kind of personal closeness and immediacy, and ‘comrade’ when he is speaking generically or in reference to the idea of male friendship that is distant from the here-and-now and Walt Whitman.”

Of the identification of “Lord” with “Camerado” in “Song of Myself,” Stein speculates that it may be indicative of the inclusiveness and special sense of ultimate unity which permeates Whitman’s vision of life and death. She does not believe that Whitman meant to attain union with a personal God or “Camerado.” Rather, the identification of “Lord” with “Camerado” is a poetic exclamation symbolic of the underlying complex of his thought and feeling. She also hypothesizes that “Camerado” suggests the mystical, perfect union of all camerados.

Whether or not Stein is right in her observations, at least she succeeds in showing that the poet expresses his affection for comrades with a varying degree of intensity, from the intense (as compared to regular feelings of same-sex friendship) to the mystical. But what is the nature of Whitman’s “love of comrades,” which seems to arouse such deep emotions in him?

THE NATURE OF COMRADESHIP

A number of authors have suggested that Whitman’s dreams of male comradeship are a vicarious enjoyment, or even a sublimation, of feelings, either sexual or non-sexual, that he could not satisfy in real life. As early as 1896, Thomas Donaldson, one of Whitman’s personal friends and biographers, stated in his Walt Whitman, the Man that Whitman’s poems celebrating “love of comrades” were written not out of actual experience but as a compensation for his own loneliness. To this, Allen adds that Whitman put into his poems “the ‘passionate love of comrades’ for which he found no human recipient.” Schyberg, for his part, by resorting to Freudian interpretation, concludes that the underlying meaning of Whitman’s idea of comradeship is sexual in nature. He slightly hints also at the possibility of sublimation, purification (through intellectual or aesthetic means) or sacralization of those originally sexual feelings.

The psychoanalytical interpretation of Whitman’s “love of comrades” became commonplace for critics in the second half of the twentieth century. In Walt Whitman Reconsidered (1955), Richard Chase speculates on the subject of Whitman’s sexuality, “an abnormal sexuality,” of which he finds traces in the poet’s physiognomy. He states his belief that Whitman’s feelings of
comradeship are basically the immature expression of his sexual leanings, and believes that the poet found ways of converting his sexual impulses to artistic ends or generalizing them into a vague, diffuse, and psychically infantile feeling of “comradeship.”

Chase’s observations on Whitman’s sexuality and on how it reflected on his physique are rather questionable. While sublimation is hinted at as the intellectual ground for comradeship, he dismisses it with a negative value judgment. Such disqualifications are unusual in other authors who also follow the psychoanalytical lead, such as Asselineau and Zweig.

Asselineau traces Whitman’s exaltation of comradeship in “Calamus” not only to his homosexuality (which he takes for granted), but, more specifically, to an unsuccessful love affair in the life of the poet. In substantiating his hypothesis, he focuses on a personal crisis Whitman underwent around the month of June of 1859. The evidence Asselineau produces consists mainly of some intriguing annotations the poet made in his diaries, and in two poems, one of them expressing exhilaration of a love kind, and the other one expressing excruciating pain and depression.

Toward the end of June, 1859, Whitman was forced to resign as editor of the *Brooklyn Times*. This may have been the direct result of two articles Whitman published on June 20 and 22 respectively. In the first one, he dealt with prostitution from a pragmatic and liberal perspective. In the second one, he discussed celibacy and the dangers of sexual repression. At the time of losing his job, Whitman made the following entry in one of his notebooks (June 29): “It is time to stir things for Money enough, to live and provide for M _____. To Stir ____ first write stories and get out of this Slough.” It is this mysterious “M ____” that gives rise to Asselineau’s speculations. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that it is impossible to arrive at any certainty here, as it is a very obscure period in Whitman’s life. In any case, it seems almost certain that during this time Whitman went through a severe emotional crisis of which the two articles in the *Brooklyn Times* were perhaps symptomatic. But what triggered this crisis?

Asselineau sees in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* unequivocal traces of a painful emotional disappointment. He believes that Whitman experienced sometime in 1858–59 a great passion for a man about whom nothing is known. This passion was “so violent and so exclusive that it superseded everything that concerned [Whitman] previously [ . . . ]. Drunk with love, he experienced moments of extraordinary exaltation in which his usual apathy completely disappeared.”

Asselineau speculates that it was as a result of this state of elation that Whitman wrote the poem entitled “We Two Boys Together Clinging,” of the “Calamus” group. The great love that inspired that poem was probably not returned, Asselineau says. And soon Whitman found himself alone, abandoned by his loved one, and broken-hearted. And, possibly as a reflection of his state of mind, he wrote the following lines:
Hours continuing long, sore and heavy hearted,
Hours of dusk, when I withdraw to a lonesome and unfrequented spot,
seating myself, leaning my face in my hands,
Hours sleepless, deep in the night, when I go forth speeding swiftly the
country roads, or through the city streets, or pacing miles and
miles, stifling plaintive cries;
Hours discouraged, distracted—for the one I cannot content myself
without, soon I saw him content himself without me;
Hours when I am forgotten (O weeks and months are passing, but I believe I
am never to forget!)
Sullen and suffering hours! (I am ashamed—but it is useless—I am
what I am;)
Hours of my torment—I wonder if other men ever have the like, out of
the like feelings?
Is there even one other like me—distracted—his friend, his lover lost
to him?
Is he too as I am now? Does he still rise in the morning, dejected, thinking
who is lost to him? and at night awaking, think who is lost?15

If taken literally, as a personal confession, this poem, which only appeared
in the 1860 edition and was excluded by Whitman from successive editions, is
indeed very revealing and tends to substantiate Asselineau’s hypothesis. The
reason for the exclusion of the poem from later editions was, according to
Asselineau, that the confession was too intimate, the revelation too compromising,
to which he adds that the terrible despair the poet had experienced was
probably rendered “still more painful by an awareness of his singularity—of
his inversion [. . .]. He was to some extent ashamed of it and did not dare to
complain or to confess as much as he would have liked.”16

Asselineau’s hypothesis that this (supposed) episode is at the core of
Whitman’s dreams of comradeship gains some credibility from the fact that
the “Calamus” cluster appeared in 1860 for the first time.

Despite the “benevolent” efforts of Whitman’s early biographers to the
contrary, there is little doubt today that Whitman was homosexual. This
is something that virtually every current biographer of Whitman takes for
granted. The evidence is just too overwhelming for “good-willed” interpreta-
tions. The heterosexual love stories in the life of Whitman, promoted mainly
by Henry B. Binns and Emory Holloway,17 appear to be totally unfounded.18
The poet’s lack of romantic interest in women was manifest. A clear indica-
tion of this is a candid statement by Peter Doyle, Whitman’s companion—and
impossible love—during the Washington years, that “I never knew a case of
Walt’s being bothered up by a woman. In fact, he had nothing special to do
with any woman [. . .] Woman in that sense never came into his head.”19 Also
well known is the episode of Ann Gilchrist, a relatively young, well-educated
and attractive English woman, who fell prey to a fascination with *Leaves of
Grass and its author to the point of moving to the US, where she expected to meet the poet and start a romantic relationship with him. At no point was Whitman responsive to her advances, and their relationship was from beginning to end one of strict friendship. Still, some critics, even today, believe the poet had romantic or sexual affairs with women. David Reynolds, for example, says that Whitman “evidently” had one or two affairs with women. For such an “evident” fact, Reynolds only finds ambiguous suggestions in Whitman’s journals. He also believes Whitman “had an eye for female beauty,” which is, simply put, wishful thinking on the part of Reynolds—one more good-willed attempt, this time on the part of a reputed current scholar, to save the poet’s reputation (at least as a bisexual man).

A revelation came in the 1960s that Whitman had been tarred and feathered in the town of Southold, Long Island, where he worked as a school teacher, for having sex with one or more boys. At that time it was not uncommon for a school teacher to share a bed with his pupils since, grossly underpaid, teachers lodged at their pupils’ homes. According to Reynolds, this event took place in 1841, and it appears to have been common knowledge in that town for quite a long time (in fact, the school where Whitman taught was unofficially renamed “Sodom School” after the incident, and as such it was known well into the twentieth century). According to Reynolds, the story was passed to Southold’s official historian Wayland Jefferson, and in 1966 put in print by Katherine Molinoff. Being a privately printed pamphlet, however, it went virtually unnoticed. Reynolds briefly reports the incident in his cultural biography of Walt Whitman. I’d like to offer here a more detailed description of what happened.

Molinoff collected sufficient evidence from a number of Southold residents who had clear recollections of the story, as it had been passed on to them from generation to generation. The name of the school, in Molinoff’s words, was derived from the sermon by the thirty-one-year-old Reverend Ralph Smith, a Presbyterian minister. On a Sunday morning, Smith preached a sermon in which he referred to the school as “a Sodom,” and in that sermon Whitman was denounced from the pulpit (Molinoff is not explicit as to what the substance of the denunciation was). Some members were outraged “because of his behavior to the children and his goings on.” A mob gathered and went to a place where hot tar was always available for mending fishermen’s seines, and then went to the home of one of Whitman’s pupils, later declared by a judge to be one of Whitman’s “victims,” where the twenty-two-year-old teacher was lodging at the time. When Whitman became aware of the mob, he fled to the homestead of Dr. Ira Corwin and burst in upon the housekeeper, who hid him in the attic, but the men found him. They plastered his hair and clothing with the tar, and rode him on a rail. He was rescued by “aunt Lina,” who labored to remove the tar and feathers, and helped him recover. Apparently, the recovery period lasted for a month, enough to give an idea of the injuries and the trauma he suffered. Nothing is said in Molinoff’s pamphlet about the age of Whitman’s pupils, but my assumption is that they were not children properly
but adolescents. Ed Folsom, a major authority on Whitman studies, calls this “one persistent but unsubstantiated rumor,” which is surprising, given the solid character of the evidence presented by Molinoff—another good-willed attempt to save Whitman’s reputation? Shortly before this incident, Whitman had been fired from the Republican Watchman, at the nearby town of Greenport, for publishing an anti-slavery editorial.

The incident at Southold was, no doubt, enough to make Whitman aware that the intensity of his attraction to other men went far beyond the socially accepted sense of comradeship, and so he was forced to hide the full dimension of those feelings, a common experience of all gay men and lesbians to our own time. Perhaps he was referring to that when he said: “There is something in my nature furtive, like an old hen [. . .] I think there are truths which it is necessary to envelop or wrap up.” In fact, as Asselineau points out, he was periodically obsessed with his homosexual inclinations, which he may have tried to suppress. He camouflaged his private annotations. One way in which he did this was by assigning numerical values to the alphabet, so that the initials of the names of the men he wrote about would appear only as a two or three digit number. In other cases, the masculine pronouns of the text were erased and replaced with the feminine equivalent, although under the superscription they can still be clearly seen. Asselineau makes the reasonable assumption that Whitman feared the scandal that would have broken out if anyone had known the true nature of his passion. He also makes the more arguable suggestion that “Children of Adam,” the cluster of poems devoted to heterosexual love and procreation, was placed in Leaves of Grass in such a manner so as to counterbalance “Calamus,” and thus “to camouflage the abnormal character of [Whitman’s] instincts.”

Tanner is also of the opinion that homosexuality is what underlies Whitman’s elevated conception of comradeship. Quoting from Whitman, he conjectures that “the most copious and close companionship of men” must mean “something more than the traditional Christian concept of brotherly love.” In fact, as mentioned earlier, he believes that homosexuality was “almost a way of life” with Whitman, and concludes that it is indeed “esoteric homosexuality” which Whitman calls “the love of comrades.”

To Zweig also, homosexuality constitutes the true nature of Whitman’s feelings of comradeship. In his opinion, overwhelming sexual passion of a socially unacceptable kind antecedes the notion of comradeship. Zweig finds the best example of Whitman’s passion in the poem entitled “When I Heard at the Close of the Day.” In that poem the poet identifies “friend” with “lover” and there is, indeed, heavy erotic imagery. Here, Zweig sees the key to a “secret” which Whitman intended to disclose to Horace Traubel, though he never did. He believes the poet’s secret was his homosexuality:

[H]ere is the secret fully spoken: Whitman loves a man; he takes him to his bed, redefines himself as the poet of this love. He renounces his
promiscuous love affair with the “present age” and becomes absorbed in a private love.\textsuperscript{31}

Whitman struggled against his homosexual inclination. His fear of expressing his romantic and sexual interests too openly, his feelings of guilt, and social pressures, Zweig believes, may have moved him to make the transition from expressions of undisguised homosexual passion to intellectualized expression of the concept of comradeship. In Zweig’s words, “the drama of sexual love becomes the more innocuous love of comrades.”\textsuperscript{32} He finds a tendency towards abstraction in Whitman’s writings, which culminates in his use of the phrenological term “adhesiveness,” which Zweig calls “strangely bloodless and philosophical” when compared to the poet’s fulsome expression of passion. A similar reasoning to that of Zweig’s has led other critics to also conclude that the whole notion of comradeship in Whitman is a compromise version of his homosexuality. Zweig describes the calamus grass, Whitman’s symbol for manly comradeship, as a “stiff phallic plant,” being “just the sort of veiled symbol that Whitman loved.”\textsuperscript{33} As if more evidence were needed, some annotations in Whitman’s diaries strongly point to homosexual eroticism:

Why [. . . ] there be men I meet, and [. . . ] others I know, that [. . . ] while they are with me, the sunlight of Paradise [. . . ] expands my blood—that [. . . ] when I walk an arm of theirs around my neck, my soul leaps and laughs like a new waked child\textsuperscript{34} scoots and courses like an unleashed dog.\textsuperscript{35}

\textbf{EDUARD BERTZ: COMRADESHIP AS VEILED HOMOSEXUALITY}

The controversy over Whitman’s homosexuality and over the underlying homosexual meaning of his poetry, particularly “Calamus,” interestingly did not start in the United States but in Europe. Although the controversy, properly speaking, began after the poet’s death, homosexual readings of a friendly character had already taken place during Whitman’s lifetime. Two English authors, Edward Carpenter and John Addington Symonds, especially the latter, had mused aloud about the question. Symonds, in his letters, had been insistent in trying to obtain a confirmation from the poet himself that his homosexual reading was correct, thus putting Whitman on the defensive. The controversy over Whitman’s homosexuality and the homosexual meaning of his poetry was, however, to explode in Europe towards the beginning of the twentieth century. The accusation of homosexuality against Whitman took place in England and in Germany almost simultaneously, putting the Whitman cult on an aggressive defense.

It was a frustrated German Whitmanite, Eduard Bertz, none of whose writings have been translated into English, who ignited the controversy. In a publication by the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee (\textit{Wissenschaftlich-
humanitäre Komitee), an early homosexual rights organization founded by Magnus Hirschfeld. Bertz, originally in a positive key, claimed that Whitman was homosexual. With the purpose of showing the contributions made to society and culture by homosexuals, the Committee’s Jahrbuch (1905) contained a collection of biographical studies on notable homosexuals. It was with that liberationist purpose that Bertz contributed a sketch of Whitman’s life and work.36

Bertz’s article was not welcomed by the members of the incipient Whitman cult in Germany, particularly by Johannes Schlaf, its unofficial representative, who reacted violently to the publication. This took Bertz by surprise, since apparently he aspired to become the high priest of Whitmanism in Germany, not realizing that Schlaf had already taken that post. Schlaf’s reaction provoked a counter-offensive on the part of Bertz, who considered “terrorism” the rejection of homosexuality because of societal prejudice. In his counter-attack, Bertz criticized the excesses of the Whitman cult, such as the equation of Whitman with Jesus Christ, which, in his opinion, was “a pathological form of extravaganza.”37 Thus, Bertz (of whom it is not known whether he himself was homosexual38), contemplated any attempt to deny Whitman’s homosexuality as an affront against the homosexual rights movement in its struggle to obtain the abolition of Paragraph 175, which penalized homosexual activity. Schlaf did not understand or accept such a role being assigned to Whitman.

Schlaf was determined “to hold on to Whitman’s heterosexuality, including the well-known cultist-religious elements designed to lift Whitman to the stature of Christ.”39 Soon, a surprising turn takes place in Bertz’s mind. In Whitman-Mysterien (1907), Bertz claims that homosexuality is a pathological phenomenon, a symptom of degeneracy, that can never be accepted as a standard variant of heterosexuality, and that, through the systematic study of Leaves of Grass, he had become convinced, as early as 1889, that Whitman “expresses a pathological anomaly of the sexual urge in the Calamus-Songs and in related poems.” He calls that “a painful recognition.”40 Years later, Bertz would find what he considered a scientific confirmation for his thesis in Whitman’s Anomaly (1913), by British author and medical doctor W. C. Rivers, a book whose sale was restricted to those in the medical profession.

Rivers clearly represents the new scientific thinking about same-sex love. The behaviors that in the nineteenth century seemed, or might have passed as, a natural expression of comradeship, that broad margin society allowed for male-to-male physical contact and shows of emotion, suddenly became suspect:

The present writer—a medical man—chanced one day to take up WW’s LG [Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass], and to open it at the Calamus poems. Almost immediately the strong similarity in sentiment to that of confessions of homosexual subjects recorded in text-books on the human sex instinct became astonishingly evident; so evident, indeed, that it seemed
fifty chances to one the thing must have been noticed before. However, for some time the search proved negative. A psychopathical criticism was outside the compass of W’s contemporaries, because at that time scientific study of sex practically did not exist.\footnote{41}

In support of his thesis, Rivers quotes Peter Doyle’s statement that he never knew a case of Walt being bothered up by a woman, a statement that at the time Doyle made it could be made without raising suspicions (or if it did, it would have been something unspeakable, anyway). Rivers also mentions Whitman’s jealousy attack when Harry Stafford, his eighteen-year-old nurse with whom he fell in love when in his fifties, mentioned the name of a female acquaintance he had met. “The old poet became furious, or rather furiously jealous, denouncing her in these curious and somewhat feminine terms—‘a viper, a sneak, and a hell-cat.’”\footnote{42}

In \textit{Whitman-Mysterien}, Bertz claimed that Whitman’s inner circle of disciples intentionally silenced the issue of Whitman’s homosexuality: “The Whitmanites as a movement, as a sect, know very well that the admission of homosexuality would be fatal to their cause in America. Whitman himself already knew this.” To which he adds that it would be foolish to declare “a degenerate to be a superman.”\footnote{43} Walter Grünzweig rightly points out that public acceptance of Whitman’s homosexuality by his followers might have terminated the successful Whitman cult with its dogmatic interpretation of Whitman as a model human being, and thus it had to be prevented at all costs.\footnote{44}

As the controversy over Whitman’s homosexuality became more acrimonious, Bertz came to consider himself the victim of a conspiracy on the part of Whitmanites and homosexuals, “who attempted to disguise their ‘unhealthy idea’ as idealistic poetry and covertly sell it to the world.”\footnote{45} It was in his 1906 book \textit{Der Yankee-Heiland: Ein Beitrag zur modernen Religionsgeschichte}\footnote{46} (The Yankee Messiah: A Contribution to Modern Religious History) where Bertz launched his frontal attack against both the American poet and his work. In it, Whitman’s nursing activities in the war hospitals are denounced as the lecherous pursuits of a pederast, and his claim that he had suffered a paralysis as a result of his strenuous work with the soldiers is presented as self-deception. The German ex-Whitmanite was particularly incensed about the attempt on the part of Whitman and his disciples to start a new religion: “There is a moral peril in the way fanatics turn a pathological way of feeling into a gospel, even a religion, and poison the normal male youth with such erroneous doctrines.”\footnote{47}

Bertz may have influenced O. E. Lessing, a German critic and former Whitmanite who ended up closing ranks with him. To Lessing “[t]he ‘passionate attachment of man to man’ from which Whitman expects future salvation has an erotic quality,” to which he adds that “Whitman owes significant artistic advantages to his deviant predisposition [. . .] But this excludes him from the ranks of the ‘educators of humanity.’”\footnote{48}
All in all, this early controversy over the homosexual meaning of Whitman’s work and of the poet’s own homosexuality sheds light on the risks inherent in Whitman’s messianic enterprise. Whitman was, indeed, what towards the later part of the nineteenth century was beginning to be conceptualized as a medically defined pathological phenomenon, a homosexual man. However, that was not the conceptualization he made of his feelings and those of other men like himself. He attempted to enshrine those feelings of manly attachment as an exalted expression of comradeship—comradeship being a common, socially accepted, ground where all men could dwell. Bertz and Lessing had the right insight as to what the underlying meaning and purpose of Whitman’s poetry was—only they were making their judgment within the wrong conceptual framework, a conceptual framework which was genuinely alien to Whitman. And that made all the difference.

**Mystical Interpretations of Comradeship**

Among the “orthodox,” that is, non-sexual, interpretations of Whitman’s concept of comradeship, that of Binns in his 1905 *A Life of Walt Whitman* is interesting if only because of the extensive attention he devotes to the subject. Binns maintains that while in sex Whitman found “that Life wherein we are one,” comradeship, “a passion as intense as that of sex,” Whitman beheld as the relation “between spiritual or aetherial bodies.” Binns seems to have been well aware of a tendency to read homosexuality in Whitman’s poems of comradeship, as he warns the reader that “the noblest of passions is the most liable to base misunderstandings.”

Sex passion finds its proper expression in physical rites, it is the passion of the life in Time; on the contrary, the passion of comrades is of eternity and only finds expression in Death. This appears to have been Whitman’s conviction.

Questionable as Binns’s disincarnate interpretation of comradeship may be, it is interesting because it reflects the kind of elevated status Whitman himself wanted to invest comradeship with. Kuebrich, whose overall interpretation of Whitman’s poetry was covered in the second chapter, decidedly favors, like Binns, a purely spiritual interpretation of Whitman’s notion of comradeship. Kuebrich’s interpretation constitutes an isolated exception in current Whitman scholarship. He favors a global mystical interpretation of Whitman’s work. Consequently, his principle also applies to the concept of comradeship as expounded in “Calamus”.

Kuebrich believes it is reasonable to assume that, in light of the spiritual content of “Calamus” and Whitman’s familiarity with Plato and the Bible, one can find underlying the poet’s concept of male comradeship Platonism,
Christianity, and German idealism, “three systems that predicate an ideal realm of the spirit [. . .] ‘the dear love of man for his comrade, the attraction of friend to friend.”\textsuperscript{52} But clumping together the Platonic and the Christian notions of comradeship is a dubious enterprise. These two concepts of comradeship and love are only similar on the most superficial level (they both stress “love”). It is highly questionable whether Christian love can in an essential sense be identified with male comradeship.

While on rare occasions Whitman seems to make the concept of comradeship extensive to women, generally speaking the poet’s ideal of comradeship, as delineated in “Calamus,” is exclusively masculine. Whitman’s relationship with women was always problematic. In his \textit{Reminiscences of Walt Whitman}, Kennedy reports the poet’s answer to someone who asked him why he had not married:

> The whole thing my friend, like the Nibelungen, or somebody’s cat, has an immensely long, long, long tail to it. And the not being married, and the not, and the not, and the not, and the this, and the this, have a great many explications. At the first view it may not be so creditable to the fellow; but go on, explicate still more, and still more, and still more, and still more behind all that—and after a while you see why it must be so in the nature of things. And that is a splendid explication of Robert Burns. You go behind all, and you realize that no matter what the blame may be to Robert Burns, somehow or other you feel like excusing, and saying that this is the reason why, and that is the reason why, and that is the reason why. See?\textsuperscript{53}

Kennedy found Whitman’s “labyrinthine, mystifying reply” very humorous. Nevertheless, the attempt on the part of the poet to completely evade the question is only too obvious. When looking at Whitman’s answer, one gets the impression that there is, indeed, a long, long tail to his relationships with women, a tail that he did not feel comfortable uncovering. Somewhere else, he declared his reason for not marrying to be “an overmastering passion for entire freedom, unconstraint,” although, as Reynolds remarks, his attraction to men was a more likely reason.\textsuperscript{54} Whenever the question was hinted at him, Whitman strongly denied his homosexuality, sometimes by resorting to extravagant lies, as in his reply to the letter from John Addington Symonds, quoted in chapter one.

\section*{Ethical Aspects of Comradeship}

The new ethics of comradeship that Whitman envisages is fueled by intense feelings of manly attachment. The poet does not spell out his new morality in any systematic way. Rather, in a typically messianic fashion, he teaches a principle and presents his own life as an example of how to implement it in practice. It is passionate non-sexual (or at least non-genital) love between males
that constitutes the essence of Whitman’s new morality. The “passionate love of comrades,” as he calls it, finds its proper expression in certain rituals, such as kissing on the lips:

Here to put your lips upon mine I permit you,
With the comrade’s long-dwelling kiss or the new husband’s kiss,
For I am the new husband and I am the comrade.
(“Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand”)

Yet comes one a Manhattanese and ever at parting kisses me lightly on the lips with robust love,
And on the crossing of the street or on the ship’s deck give a kiss in return,
We observe that salute of American comrades land and sea.
(“Behold This Swarthy Face”)

When you, my son and my comrade drop’t at my side that day [...] 
One touch of your hand to mine O boy, reach’d up as you lay on the ground [...] 
Found you in death so cold, dear comrade, found your body son of responding kisses, (never again on earth responding) [...] 
My comrade I wrapt in his blanket, envelop’d well his form, [...] 
Vigil for a boy of responding kisses, (never again on earth responding,) [...] 
(“Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night”)

Of the above selections, the first two are part of the “Calamus” cluster (1860), while the last one, in which a more developed morality of comradeship finds a concrete embodiment, belongs in the “Drum Taps” group (1865). Besides kissing, holding hands is another ritual that gives expression to the morality of comradeship:

O camerado close! O you and me at last and us two only.
O a word to clear one’s path ahead endlessly!
O something ecstatic and undemonstrable! O music wild!
O now I triumph—and you shall also;
O hand in hand—O wholesome pleasure—O one more desirer and lover!
O to haste firm holding—to haste, haste on with me.
(“Starting from Paumanok,” 19)
Walt Whitman’s Mystical Ethics of Comradeship

When he whom I love travels with me or sits a long while
holding me by the hand
(“Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances” [“Calamus”])

You friendly boatmen, and mechanics! you roughs! [ . . . ]
I wish to infuse myself among you till I see it common for you
to walk hand in hand.

(“A Leaf for Hand in Hand” [“Calamus”])

In the rituals of kissing and holding hands, which were actually practiced among Whitman’s disciples, Binns sees more than mere sentimentality. He sees in it an expression of the warmth of manly comradeship that needs to be witnessed.55 Others interpret these rituals as a touch of rebellion against “decrees” of society, as an attempt to free oneself from the irrational fear of gender confusion, from the idea that aggressiveness is reserved for the male and tenderness for the female. Kaplan sees Whitman almost as a precursor of the men’s liberation movement, since, in his opinion, the poet was claiming for men the right to express feelings the way women do:

[Whitman] believed he was doing neither more nor less than claiming for men the emotional freedom and physical expressiveness—holding hands, touching, hugging, kissing—that society allowed women to enjoy with each other.56

Tempting as Kaplan’s hypothesis may be, it is a dubious one. Not only is his assertion of what Whitman “believed he was doing” not supported by any evidence, but also one has only to look at Whitman’s fascination with the masculine to realize that it is hardly believable that the poet would purposefully claim feminine characteristics for his proud males. Indeed, the very magnetism of those males of which Whitman so often talks lies in the fact that they represent the quintessence of masculinity.

Kaplan goes even further by saying that “[a]ndrogyny, the beautiful integrating principle that had stirred poets from Plato to Coleridge, seemed only natural and right to Whitman.”57 The question is a valid one, however, whether these behaviors Whitman wanted to implement among the followers of his religion were socially acceptable masculine behavior, whether kissing and holding hands are not exclusively part of female behavior. One could answer to this that while kissing and holding hands are, indeed, more habitual behaviors among female friends, they also take place among males in certain “marginal” circumstances. This is the kind of behavior that takes place today in a soccer match when one of the players scores a goal, and in other characteristically all-male sports. The other players of his team hug him, kiss him,
and even roll on the ground with him as they mutually kiss and hug. These behaviors also occur in other marginal situations, such as in tragic circumstances of many types. They also occur in religious settings, though in a more ritualized manner. In the Catholic Church, for instance, at a special mass after the elevation of a new pope, all bishops attending the ceremony embrace and ritually kiss the new pontiff.

Kissing and holding hands are, therefore, behaviors that do occur between males and, when they do, they often occur precisely in male-only settings. But they are marginal behaviors in that they take place in special, unusual (and, in that sense, marginal) situations. They constitute what I will call “the marginality of friendship,” that is, the marginality of regular male friendship. Contrary to Kaplan’s claim, then, what Whitman was doing had nothing to do with a desire to move his masculine comrades closer to a nebulous androgynous area of sexual indistinguishability, but rather with giving core status to those marginal aspects of male friendship. Indeed, Reynolds claims that Whitman “makes the common nineteenth-century practice of men sleeping together a means of reconciling his private desires with his reformist instinct towards virtuous conduct.”58 One could add that not only sleeping together, but sustained hugging, kissing, holding hands, and embracing. In a 1905 article in The Conservator, entitled “Whitman’s Message to a Young Man,” we read: “A hand is laid gently, magnetically on the young man’s shoulder. No word need to be spoken. He is comforted and enheartened, for he knows there is some one who understands, not through learning, but with an understanding born of love.”59 This may well sound like homosexuality to us today. And it may well be that the feeling behind those words was one we would identify today as homosexual. But when those words were written, and even more during Whitman’s lifetime, those expressions, those behaviors, and the feeling behind them, represented rather an honorable intersection, not suspect in any way, between what today we would call the heterosexual and the homosexual. Those socially acceptable behaviors provided an emotional, romantic, and occasionally sexual threshold where same-sex oriented men could find emotional equilibrium. Such threshold could be, indeed, extraordinarily ample. In an 1864 letter, Burroughs, wrote about a night when he shared a bed with Whitman: “He kisses me as if I were a girl [. . .] He bathed [. . .] while I was there—such a handsome body, and such a delicate, rosy flesh I never saw before. I told him he looked good enough to eat.” He also mentions how a soldier stopped in the street and kissed the poet.60

Whitman’s great opportunity to practice comradeship materialized during the Civil War, while working as a volunteer nurse at the Washington hospitals. There, he consoled the young soldiers, whom he caressed and kissed. That the war hospitals turned out to be the ideal scenario for the rituals of comradeship is no mere accident, as it is perfectly consistent with the marginality of friendship hypothesis. War hospitals constitute the perfect example of
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a situation that would allow for marginal behaviors, as previously defined, to take place among males. 

Whitman’s activities in the Washington hospitals were first given mythical character in O’Connor’s The Good Gray Poet. The official version (which even today some biographers of Whitman keep uncritically quoting) is that Whitman assisted over one hundred thousand wounded and sick soldiers during the four years he spent in Washington. This amounts to more than twenty-five thousand soldiers per year, about two thousand per month, five hundred per week, seventy-one per day (assuming he went to the hospitals every single day of the week), and seven per hour (assuming he spent ten hours at the hospitals every day of the week, every week of the month, and every month of the year). If we deduce lunch times, sick times, work times and periods outside Washington, we may end up with an even more unrealistic picture. In any case, Whitman’s activities in the hospitals have been the object of not-so-benevolent interpretations by modern critics. Asselineau, for instance, thinks that Whitman’s visits to the hospitals permitted him to satisfy his homosexual leanings without incurring social disapproval or even suspicion. He does not believe Whitman was simply posing as a wound dresser, but he thinks that besides his charitable motivation, Whitman was also moved by his desire to be among young men. Thus, to Whitman his activities in the hospitals furnished proof that his instincts were more normal than he had feared. In Asselineau’s words: “Having dreamed of ‘the comrade’s long-dwelling kiss’ he had now occasion every day to kiss the wounded who were eager for affection and caresses.” Whitman often made references to his affectionate relations with the soldiers in his letters and diaries. In a letter to Mrs. Abby H. Price dated October 11, 1863, he wrote:

Lots of them [the soldiers] have grown to expect, as I leave at night, that we should kiss each other, sometimes quite a number; I have to go round. There is very little petting in a soldier’s life in the field, but I know what is in their hearts, always waiting, though they may be unconscious of it themselves.

“Again,” Asselineau remarks, “nature imitated art and his life was modeled on his work.” It was “their [the soldiers’] beauty which moved him.” He concludes that during the war years Whitman’s homosexual passion was gradually purified and idealized. This way Whitman’s “troubled desires” were succeeded by “an ardent but ethereal and completely Platonic emotion.”

Zweig, who does not elaborate as much on Whitman’s psychosexual metamorphosis during the war years, agrees, all the same, that the poet’s activities in the war hospitals were motivated by more than simple compassion. He believes that Whitman’s excitement as he wandered through the wards “bordered on the erotic [ . . . ] his kisses and caresses to them [the young men] seemed truer to him than poems could ever be.” Zweig sees Whitman’s
concept of comradeship as a veiled euphemism for homosexuality. In his opinion, the hospitals offered a way around the rigid social morality of his time. There, Whitman had no need to be metaphorical about his homosexual passion or ashamed of it:

In the hospitals, the coy play of Cupid and Psyche—the “indirections” that gave his poems their suggestive weaving of themes—was replaced by frank and open acts of love. Here his homosexual ardor was not suspicious or shameful [ . . . ] There was no need to veil it in euphemisms or to project in grand notions of comradeship or democracy [ . . . ] Whitman could simply hug, and kiss, and hold hands [ . . . ] The hospitals were a release for Whitman. They were a way around the self-censorship and the Victorian self-accusations that erupted even amid his strongest Calamus poems.70

Zweig goes on to develop an unusual relationship between love and death as he asserts that Whitman “was alive and loved because others died. He was, in a sense, feeding on death.”71 This remark brings us again to the point that the war hospitals were perfect laboratories for experiencing the marginality of friendship in its utmost intensity. The marginal aspects of male friendship, which involve intense physical contact and other unusual signs of affection between males, can only take place on a continuous basis at a high price, e.g., during ongoing highly dramatic situations, like a war, and especially, for obvious reasons, in a war hospital. That the hospitals offered Whitman a way around the established moral code is not fully accurate, the fact being that hugging, kissing, holding hands and caressing between males constitutes indeed acceptable behavior in particular situations (more than nowadays), such as those Whitman placed himself in. For that reason, he could display those behaviors in the open and write about them in his letters. Whatever his deep personal motivation, Whitman’s behavior in the hospitals was not immoral by the standards of his time. By the same token, that Whitman was “feeding on death” should be read as meaning that Whitman was willing to pay the price of witnessing suffering and death, in order to have the opportunity of experiencing the marginality of masculine friendship in all its intensity, as that is what constitutes the central aspect of his ethics of comradeship.

Whitman’s feelings of “adhesiveness” were particularly intense with a few soldiers. Indeed, he fell in love with some of them. But even in those cases, the poet experienced his very intense feeling as one of comradeship, and even when he proposed to a soldier that they live together, the description of their future life was one of comrades.

But the hospitals were only a laboratory of comradeship. The rituals of comradeship that were justified within their walls could not be extended beyond them into the outside world. When the poet fell in love with Tom Sawyer, one of the soldiers, he suffered terribly as the soldier left without
saying goodbye and without picking up some presents Whitman had pur-
chased for him. The latter included “a strong blue shirt & a pair of drawers
and socks.” In a mild reproach to the soldier, Whitman expressed the reason
for his frustration: “I should often have thought now Tom may be wearing
around his body something from me.” Discarding any reasons for the poet’s
feelings other than the purely sexual, Charles Shively, the author of a gay
interpretation of Whitman’s life and work, remarks: “These were more than
gifts, they were physical tokens, the underwear that Whitman had touched
would then touch Tom’s bulging crotch.” Whatever the case, Whitman did
not give up on Tom easily and, addressing him as “comrade,” soon sent him
what amounted to a love declaration:

Dear comrade, you must never forget me, for I never shall you. My love
you have in life or death forever [. . .] We should come together again
in some place where we could make our living [. . .] and never separate
while life lasts [and if] we do not meet again, here on earth, it seems to
me that my soul could not be entirely happy, even in the world to come
without you.73

Tom Sawyer had someone else help him compose and then copy out a
reply to Whitman’s love letter. The soldier’s reply “might just as well have
dealt with a proposition involving cast-iron stoves,” as Kaplan puts it: “I fully
reciprocate your friendship as expressed in your letter and it will afford me
great pleasure to meet you after the war will have terminated or sooner if cir-
cumstances will permit.” The marginality of friendship could only surface as
acceptable behavior in its proper settings. Outside of that context, it could not
be prolonged. Whitman was bound to experience this bitter disappointment.

RELIGIOUS ASPECTS OF COMRADESHIP

The ideal of manly comradeship is the fundamental ideological element of
Whitman’s messianic project. Whitman surrounds the concept of comrade-
ship with a religious aura right from the start, when he declares that he will
write the “evangel” of comrades (“Starting from Paumanok,” 6). But with-
out doubt the sacralization of the idea of comradeship takes place in the
1860 poem entitled “To Him That Was Crucified,” where the poet repeatedly
addresses Christ as “comrade,” sets himself on the same plane as Christ, and
identifies his own messianic enterprise with that of Jesus. This is a poem that
deserves to be quoted in its entirety, as the emerging picture is particularly
meaningful for our discussion:

My spirit to yours dear brother,
Do not mind because many sounding your name do not
understand you,
I do not sound your name, but I understand you,
I specify you with joy O my comrade to salute you, and to
salute those who are with you, before and since, and
those to come also,
That we all labor together transmitting the same charge and
succession,
We few equals indifferent of lands, indifferent of times,
We, enclosers of all continents, all castes, allowers of all
theologies,
Compassionaters, perceivers, rapport of men,
We walk silent among disputes and assertions, but reject not
the disputers nor any thing that is asserted,
We hear the bawling and din, we are reach’d at by divisions,
jealousies, recriminations on every side,
They close peremptorily upon us to surround us, my comrade,
Yet we walk unheld, free the whole earth over, journeying up
and down till we make our ineffaceable mark upon time
and the diverse eras,
Till we saturate time and eras, that the men and women of
races, ages to come, may prove brethren and lovers as we
are.

Echoing perhaps Emerson’s “Divinity School Address,” Whitman admits
Christ into the society of the supermen, but only as an equal to the poet himself
and the other supermen. The idea, later developed by Bucke in *Cosmic Con-
sciousness*, is also present in this poem that these superior individuals have
surfaced in all ages and places. Still, the most interesting aspect of the poem is
the poet’s identification with Christ as “brethren and lovers,” and as comrades.
Given our previous analysis of the nature of Whitman’s concept of comrade-
ship, such identification of Christ by the poet as “brother,” “comrade,” and
“lover” is suggestive of a number of possibilities. One of them is that Whit-
man assumed the existence underlying the Christian idea of brotherhood of
the same impulse that triggered his “love of comrades”—allegedly, a homosex-
ual impulse. Another possible explanation is that Whitman identified Christ’s
message of brotherhood with his own, while assuming that their respective
motivations may be different. While the latter may seem a weak hypothesis
in view of the tone of intimate understanding that runs through the poem, it
is important to note that this poem is not, nor was it at any time, part of the
“Calamus” cluster, the section devoted specifically to comradeship. “To Him
That Was Crucified” is included in the cluster entitled “Autumn Rivulets,” a
section that contains poems of a more philosophical and ethical character (e.g.,
“You Felons on Trial in Courts,” “To a Common Prostitute,” “Miracles,” etc.).

As we saw, Kuebrich develops a strictly religious interpretation of
Whitman’s ideal of manly comradeship, which excludes as irrelevant
psychoanalytical interpretations of the notion of comradeship. To him, the poet’s ideal of comradeship is to be understood within a purely religious framework of reference:

[A]ny adequate interpretation of Calamus must relate the sequence to Whitman’s effort to establish a new religion because the love Whitman celebrates in Calamus provides both the existential basis and ultimate fulfillment of his faith [. . .]. Whitman conceives of this love as arising primarily out of experiences of intense love between men.75

In other words, Kuebrich thinks that comradeship is all Whitman’s religion is about. To him, the love of comrades provides “the existential basis and ultimate fulfillment of his faith.” Whitman’s religion is, then, the religion of comradeship. One is more than inclined to agree with him on this point.

Kuebrich believes that, in the last analysis, the spiritual function of “Calamus” is quite in keeping with other mystical texts on love “for mystics always stress that love is the soul’s best means to the transcendent.”76 He sees no problem with the exclusively male character of the love of comrades, as Whitman believed in the spiritual superiority of love between members of the same gender, thus “giving fresh expression to an older religious insight”—a reference to monastic life in Buddhism and Christianity, as Kuebrich sees it.77 And he points out that the term “manly”, although without religious significance in Whitman’s use of it, does carry ethical and political significations overlooked in Whitman scholarship.78 One also thinks of the common root of the words “virility” and “virtue,” (a suggestion that virtue is a “manly” attribute).

In brief, Kuebrich gives a non-sexual interpretation to Whitman’s ideal of manly comradeship, while affirming that manly love is an experience of the soul and that the calamus is reserved for a spiritual elite.79 Still, as the all too obvious homosexual leanings of Whitman cannot be ignored, Kuebrich concedes that Whitman was a “repressed homosexual” who had inklings of his homosexuality but never allowed this self-understanding to reach full consciousness. As if to leave no doubt, he concludes: “Far from being a brave pioneer of gayness, [Whitman] continued to repress a discomforting part of himself.”80

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ASPECTS OF COMRADESHP

Comradeship was for Whitman more than a purely spiritual or a private interpersonal experience. In Leaves of Grass and in his prose writings, Whitman repeatedly expresses his belief that comradeship will have important social and political dimensions. In his preface to the 1876 edition of Leaves of Grass, he states that the special meaning of the “Calamus” cluster resides in his political significance. “It is by fervent development of comradeship,” he writes “that the United States of the future [. . .] are to be most effectually welded together, intercalated, annealed into a living union.” Comradeship, Whitman defines
as “the beautiful and sane affection of man for man, latent in all the young fellows, north and south, east and west,” and, as we saw earlier, as the passionate attachment of man to man. There is clearly an eschatological vision in Whitman’s religion of comradeship. In Symonds’s 1893 book *Walt Whitman: A Study*, comradeship is professed to be an indispensable civic virtue with a role in the individual’s life superior to that of sexuality. This British disciple of Whitman also emphasizes the point that Whitman does not conceive of comradeship as a merely personal possession. Rather, he says, Whitman regards it eventually as a social and political virtue. “This human emotion,” Symonds concludes, “is destined to cement society and to render commonwealths inviolable.”

In *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman expresses his concept of democracy and his hopes for its perfect realization in the United States. Whitman’s concept of democracy is definitely poetical, if not purely dreamy. His hope, which he insistently expresses, that the United States will annex Canada and Cuba, combines in his book with detailed descriptions of the American “superman” as he conceives him. A new, indigenous literature will be the fuel of this superior democracy where there will be no room for universal suffrage. In this perfect democracy, perfect women will be, first and foremost, perfect mothers, while male comradeship, “intense and loving comradeship, the personal and passionate attachment of man to man,” that Whitman declares to be “the most substantial hope and safety of the future of these States,” will then flourish.

Comradeship will purify the materialistic democracy of Whitman’s time. The personal and passionate attachment of man to man will have, so he hopes, a purifying and spiritualizing effect. Exalted male comradeship is the natural concomitant of true democracy, as Whitman sees it, and it has the deepest relations to politics. Moreover, without such passionate comradeship democracy is vain and sterile. In *Democratic Vistas* he offers a fully articulate vision of his dream:

> It is to the development, identification, and general prevalence of that fervid comradeship (the adhesive love, at least rivaling the amative love hitherto possessing imaginative literature if not going beyond it), that I look for the counterbalance and offset of our materialistic and vulgar American democracy, and for the spiritualization thereof. Many will say it is a dream, and will not follow my inferences; but I confidently expect a time when there will be seen, running like a half-hid warp through all the myriad audible and visible worldly interests of America, threads of manly friendship, fond and loving, pure and sweet, strong and life-long, carried to degrees hitherto unknown—not only giving tone to individual character, and making it unprecedentedly emotional, muscular, heroic, and refined, but having the deepest relations to general politics. I say democracy infers such loving comradeship, as its most inevitable twin or counterpart, without which it will be incomplete, in vain, and incapable of perpetuating itself.
This political dimension of comradeship was by no means new in Whitman. It had found full poetic expression as early as 1860 in “Calamus,” where Whitman fused the ethical and the political by promising a great democracy based on the indissoluble ties of comradeship:

Come, I will make the continent indissoluble,
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon,
I will make divine, magnetic lands,
    With the love of comrades,
    With the life-long love of comrades.

I will plant companionship thick as trees along all the rivers of America, and along the shores of the great lakes, and all over the prairies,
I will make inseparable cities with their arms about each other's necks,
    By the love of comrades,
    By the manly love of comrades.

For you these from me, O Democracy, to serve you ma femme!
For you, for you I am trilling these songs.

("For You O Democracy")

This poem expresses what Kaplan calls “the ultimate democracy of the heart.” But to a number of authors, this poem and other related lines in Whitman’s work suggest more than a purely subjective democracy. Binns, for instance, thinks that in the “Calamus” poems Whitman asserts the soul’s need of society, life and growth, to which he adds that “[t]he gospel of self-realization thus becomes a social gospel, and the thought gives a political significance to these, the most esoteric of all Whitman’s poems.”

Binns does not overlook the fact that the “Calamus” poems are addressed to the poet’s comrades, for he thinks it is only they who will understand them, although, in a more general sense, the poems are for all. In Binns’s opinion, there will be a progression from the acceptance of Whitman’s ideal of comradeship only among an elite of a few chosen members to an enthusiastic acceptance of it by everyone. In articulating this idea, Binns attempts to echo Biblical language. And, as if to complete his vision of a future world ruled by the love of comrades, in a dramatic eschatological style, he expresses his Utopian vision of how America and even the world will be transformed:

It is to comradeship and not to institutions that Whitman looks for a political redemption. He will bind America indissolubly together into the fellowship of his friends. Their friendship shall be called after him, and in his name they shall solve all the problems of Freedom, and bring America to
victory. Lovers are the strength of Liberty, comrades perpetuate Equality; America will be established above disaster by the love of her poet’s lovers.89

In contrast with Binns’s grandiloquent interpretation of the future society ruled by the principle of comradeship, others believe that what Whitman sought was a homosexual democracy with a not-so-spiritual side to it.90 To Zweig, Whitman saw “Democracy” as a “fluid, lawless, yet orderly exchange of feelings among ‘comrades,’ a network of intimacies on a vast scale,”91 so that in Whitman’s mind, democracy could only succeed as an unimpeded flow of love of which the poet would give the first example with the open manifestation of his true feelings. In The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry (1979), Robert K. Martin finds deep political implications in the sexuality of Walt Whitman. Martin believes Whitman held a sexually inspired revolutionary socio-political vision that centered around the value of anonymous sexuality. According to Martin, Whitman believed in anonymous sex as an important way station on the path to the abolition of distinctions of age, class, beauty, and gender.92 And in an imaginative use of political terminology, he affirms that “[t]o the ‘capitalism’ of heterosexual intercourse (with its implications of male domination and ownership) Whitman opposes the ‘socialism’ of non-directed sex.”93 Martin explores his idea to the point of comparing Whitman with Hegel as a political thinker, as both appear to have seen a connection between the organization of society (concentration of capital and power) and the organization of sexuality (marriage and the subordination of women). He concludes that Whitman’s ideal society requires socialism, democracy and homosexuality.94

While stating that in the “irresistible attraction” that urged Whitman toward some, and which he intuited in others, he saw a tie capable of uniting all men indissolubly, Asselineau does not believe Whitman’s democratic dream consisted of an openly homosexual society. Rather, he contends that a disappointed Whitman opted for a process of sublimation, so that what had been an abnormal liaison became, by virtue of this sublimation, the point of departure for a great democratic utopia.95 His conclusion appears to be that no matter what the origin of the poet’s political ideal, the fact remains that he indeed generated a significant political ideal.

Betsy Erkkila, for her part, goes further. To her, the purpose of Whitman’s poetry was primarily political. In Whitman: The Political Poet (1989), she states that both Calamus” and “Enfants d’Adam” have the purpose of giving new emphasis in democratic literature “to the body, sexual love, manly friendship, and the equality of male and female as a means of liberating the individual from the tyrannical structures of the past,”96 to which she adds that Whitman’s celebration of sexual union and procreation in “Enfants d’Adam” is not through personal love poems but public exhortations to the creation of a democratic future.97 In a later essay (“Whitman and the Homosexual Republic,” 1994) Erkkila is more explicit in defining the poet’s political ideal: “Whitman was talking about physical and emotional love between men as the basis
for a new social and religious order.” And very insightfully she argues that Whitman’s expression of sexual, emotional, and social intimacy among men should be read “as the complex, multiply located, and historically embedded sexual, social, and discursive phenomenon that it was,” rather than as a monolithic homosexual concept.

A tension is present in Whitman’s politico-mystical ideology between narrow nationalism and universalism. At times, Whitman appears to believe that the United States is the supreme outcome of the evolution of the world, while other times we find a wider, more universalistic perspective, possibly indicating, in Asselineau’s opinion, an evolution from the one to the other.

While it is true that the idea of international brotherhood is present in “Passage to India” with a markedly mystical tone, it is more than dubious that the hypothesis of an evolution in the poet’s ideology from nationalism to universalism can be substantiated, in view of the vibrant nationalism that runs through the lines of his 1876 and 1880 Prefaces to *Leaves of Grass*, and “Two Rivulets.” In the latter we find the most fervent association of comradeship with “narrow” nationalism:

*[T]he special meaning of the Calamus, cluster of “Leaves of Grass” [. . .] mainly resides in its political significance. In my opinion, it is by a fervent accepted development of comradeship, the beautiful and sane affection of man for man, latent in all the young fellows, north and south, east and west—it is by this, I say, and by what goes directly and indirectly along with it, that the United States of the future (I cannot too often repeat) are to be the most effectually welded together, intercalated, annealed into a living union.*

In his 1876 Preface, Whitman recognizes indeed an evolution in the political life of the United States, but such recognition is not substantially different from his exalted exhortations in the 1855 Preface to adopt a new religion more apt for the higher degree of evolution of the United States.

The young mechanics and the farmers were the basis for the spiritual democracy Whitman yearned for. It was the common unsophisticated popular types that Whitman indelibly adorned with the aesthetic virtues of his Superman:

*To our model, a clear blooded, strong-fibered physique is indispensable [. . .] of the bodily figure, the movements easy, the complexion showing the best blood, somewhat flushed, the breast expanded, an erect attitude [. . .] and a general presence that holds its own in the company of the highest.*

This is the description of the comrade capable of inspiring Whitman’s sublime emotions of male comradeship. The ideal comrade’s aesthetic attributes are given the most absolute relevance in the picture we get from his
The Love of Comrades

109

description. Again, the homosexual interpretation of Whitman’s concept of comradeship becomes almost unavoidable. If intense love between men became for Whitman the fundamental bond, interestingly half a century later Freud too would ground his idea of the communal feelings in the homosexual aspect of the erotic drives of men and women.105

Kuebrich, as we know, disagrees with any interpretation that might turn Whitman into a homosexual prophet, and suggests that if Whitman has come to be seen in that light it has been accidentally and through misinterpretation. As evidence that Whitman had no particular concern for the rights of homosexuals in society, Kuebrich states that the poet was indeed “sexist,” by which he means that he showed no interest in or solidarity with homosexual females. In his opinion, had Whitman come to a full realization and acceptance of his homosexuality, it seems that he would also have written poems of lesbian love.106

Kuebrich’s inference that the acceptance of homosexual identity automatically generates a “radically subversive consciousness and sympathy for other marginalized groups” is sheer speculation. He is right, however, when he says that Whitman never fully incorporated an attitude of gender equality into his vision of an ideal polity, and that he conceived of males as the principal participants in his new society. Still, faithful to his determination, Kuebrich concludes that Whitman’s purpose was not to encourage homosexuality but “to correct a perceived deficiency in the personality of American males so as to make them better citizens.”107

The interpretations by Binns, Martin, Asselineau, Zweig, and Kuebrich of Whitman’s ideal of comradeship and of its religious and political derivations are all revealing, but still partial. An understanding of the original meaning of male comradeship in Whitman that incorporates the interpersonal, sexual, religious, social and political aspects in a unified manner is missing from their interpretations. Though largely ignored for the wrong reasons, such a unifying understanding of Whitman’s ideal of male comradeship was indeed delineated by John A. Symonds.

WHITMAN’S COMRADESHP AND SYMONDS’S CONCEPT OF “GREEK LOVE”

In the December 1875 issue of the London Gentleman’s Magazine, there appeared an article, later quoted by Bucke in his collage book Walt Whitman (1883), in which Whitman’s concept of comradeship was compared by its erudite author to the exalted male friendships that were common among the Greeks of the classical period. The author, Arthur Clive, who wrote under the pseudonym Standish O’Grady, emphasized the fundamental role of beauty in those Greek comradeships:

In the days of Homer, friendship was an heroic passion [. . .] it was a powerful physical feeling, having physical conditions. Beauty was one of
those conditions, as it is now between the sexes. In the dialogues of Plato we see the extraordinary nature of the friendships formed by the young men of his time, the passionate, absorbing nature of the relation, the craving for beauty in connection with it [. . .] There cannot be a doubt that with highly developed races friendship is a passion, and like all passions more physical than intellectual in its sources and modes of expression [. . .] [Whitman] speaks of the sick, sick dread of unreturned friendship, of the comrade’s kiss, the arm round the neck—but he speaks to sticks and stones; the emotion does not exist in us, and the language of his evangel poem appears simply disgusting.108

To the peculiar rhetorical twist in the final paragraph, Bucke retorts: “Yes, ‘disgusting’ to fops and artificial scholars and prim gentlemen of the clubs—but sane, heroic, full-blooded, natural men will find in it the deepest God-implanted voices of their hearts.”109 In any case, O’Grady is obviously talking about homosexuality in Ancient Greece, which he presents to the reader under the color of a “heroic passion” which surfaces among highly developed races. The same idea was to be developed by John A. Symonds in his 1893 Study of Walt Whitman, and in A Problem in Greek Ethics (1901). The latter, especially, is a scholarly and dense work in which Symonds analyzes in detail the question of homosexuality among the ancient Greeks, with frequent references to original documentary sources.

In the section devoted to comradeship in his Walt Whitman: A Study, after reproducing some representative lines from the “Calamus” cluster, Symonds remarks: “The melody is in the Dorian mood—recalling to our minds that fellowship in arms which flourished among the Dorian tribes, and formed the chivalry of pre-historic Hellas.”110 Next, Symonds engages in excruciating rhetorical gymnastics for the purpose of providing an attenuated homosexual interpretation of “Calamus,” without at the same time betraying the stated will of his beloved master (i.e., that “Calamus” should not be read as homosexual poetry):

Whitman never suggests that comradeship may occasion the development of physical desire. On the other hand, he does not in set terms condemn desires, or warn his disciples against their perils. There is indeed a distinctly sensuous side to his conception of adhesiveness [. . .]. Like Plato, in the “Phaedrus,” Whitman describes an enthusiastic type of masculine emotion, leaving its private details to the moral sense and special inclination of the individual concerned.111

Symonds advances his argument by speculating that the poet himself “appears to be not wholly unconscious that there are dangers and difficulties involved in the highly-pitched emotions he is praising,” only to add a few lines
later that any impartial critic who reads Whitman’s poetry of comradeship will be drawn to the conclusion that the adhesiveness of comradeship is meant to have “no interblending with the ‘amativeness’ of sexual love.”

Thus, according to Symonds’s sophisticated interpretation of Whitman, male comradeship does not “interblend” with sexual love properly (“amativeness,” in the phrenological terminology that Whitman favored), but it does contain, nevertheless, a sensuous side to it that carries “dangers and difficulties,” the private details of which sensuous side are left to the individual discretion. This notion of comradeship Symonds declares to be identical to “the ground qualities in the early Dori ans, those founders of the martial institution of Greek love.” Yet, as if in another proof of conceptual indecision, or calculated ambiguity, he concludes that, despite his previous remarks, it is notorious to students of Greek civilization that the lofty sentiment of masculine attachment in ancient Greece “was intertwined with much that is repulsive to modern sentiment.”

Published at the turn of the century, *A Problem in Greek Ethics* is a systematic and well-documented exposition of the role of homosexuality in the different historical periods of ancient Greek society. Throughout most of his work, Symonds prefers to use the term “paiderastia” to homosexuality, the latter a term he uses only in rare instances. Nevertheless, “paiderastia,” in Symonds’s work, amounts to a broad concept of homosexuality, rather than to our current concept of pederasty. Whitman or his work are never mentioned by Symonds in *A Problem in Greek Ethics*, but the conceptual connection had already been made explicit in his *Study* eight years earlier.

In his introductory lines to *A Problem in Greek Ethics*, the reader is alerted that ancient Greece offers a unique example in history of “a great and highly developed race not only tolerating homosexual passions, but deeming them of spiritual value, and attempting to use them for the benefit of society.” According to Symonds, while homosexual relations were not prominent in the so-called heroic age of Greece, it was nevertheless the love of Achilles for Patroclus, as narrated by Homer, that conferred in a later age of Greek history an almost religious sanction to the martial form of paiderastia. This episode in the *Iliad* inspired in later generations an ideal of manly love, which he describes as “a powerful and masculine emotion, in which effeminacy had no part, and which by no means excluded the ordinary sexual feelings.” To which he adds that the tie created by these relationships was “both more spiritual and more energetic [than] that which bound man to woman.” While Homer knew not about homosexuality, very early in Greek history, however, paiderastia became a national institution soon giving rise, according to Symonds, to a distinction between a noble, spiritual, form of masculine passion, which he calls “heroic love,” and a base and sensual one, which he identifies as “vulgar love.” By quoting from “one of the most eloquent of the later rhetoricians” of ancient Greece, he offers the following description of both types of masculine love:
The one love is mad for pleasure; the other loves beauty. The one is an involuntary sickness: the other is a sought enthusiasm. The one tends to the good of the beloved; the other to the ruin of both. The one is virtuous; the other incontinent in all its acts. The one has its end in friendship; the other in hate. The one is freely given; the other is bought and sold. The one brings praise; the other blame. The one is Greek; the other is barbarous. The one is virile, the other effeminate. The man who loves the one is a friend of God, a friend of law, fulfilled with modesty, and free of speech. He dares to court his friend in daylight, and rejoices in his love. He wrestles with him in the playground and runs with him in the race, goes afield with him to the hunt, and in the battle fights for glory at his side. In his misfortune he suffers, and at his death he dies with him. He needs no gloom of night, no desert place, for this society. The other lover is a foe of heaven, for he is out of tune and criminal.

For an eloquent Greek rhetorician, the organization of the text is rather defective. The first line establishes two types in a particular sequence ("the one" and "the other") of which certain attributes will be predicated logically, one expects, by following a parallel sequence. But that is not the case, since of "the one," which in the first line is "mad for pleasure" and also "an involuntary sickness," we are told next that it is "virtuous," "brings praise" and "is virile." Of "the other," who in the first line "loves beauty" and is "a sought enthusiasm," we are later told that it has its end in hate and that it is effeminate. If the predication of "the one" and "the other" is taken literally along what is the logical pattern of discourse, we would have the most interesting mixture. Otherwise, the reader is left to freely assume that all positive qualities are predicated about the initial "the other," although they might appear under "the one" in certain parts of the text.

The distinction between the two types of masculine love is further specified by Symonds with reference to the Classical period of ancient Greece. And he soon focuses his attention on the type of "heroic" paiderastia, a type of masculine friendship which "in historic times exhibited a sensuality unknown to Homer." This Symonds calls "Greek love," which he defines as "a passionate and enthusiastic attachment subsisting between man and youth, recognized by society and protected by opinion, which, though it was not free from sensuality, did not degenerate into mere licentiousness." Whether or not Symonds's description of Greek love corresponds to historical fact, this ideal undeniably represents an exquisite materialization, in social terms, of Whitman's poetic dreams of manly comradeship and, therefore, the most complete fulfillment of them. This becomes plainly obvious from Symonds's further detailing of the characteristics of Greek love.

We are told, for example that Greek love was, in its origin and essence, military, an assertion which is reinforced by an extensive reference to the so-called
“Sacred Band.” This was an army of lovers, literally speaking. The Sacred Band was formed in Thebes at the time of Pelopidas, and it consisted of a battalion of three hundred young men bound together by affection. Only couples of young lovers were recruited for this particular division. The Sacred Band was an elite corps, and it was considered nearly invincible. They were finally defeated by the Macedonians in 338 B.C.E. at the battle of Chaeronea, where they were all slain. Symonds also mentions how among the Spartans, a martial and warlike people, it was reckoned a disgrace if a youth found no man to be his lover.

According to W. S. Kennedy, Whitman had read about the Sacred Band of Thebes in Plutarch’s *Pelopidas*, where he found the inspiration for “I dream’t in a dream” and “What Place is Besieged.” There is little doubt that the martial character of Greek love would have deeply satisfied Whitman’s idealization of masculine comradeship. Let us not forget that the closest Whitman came to realizing his ideal of comradeship in real life was during the Civil War, while living among the wounded and dying soldiers. The soldier figure came to be for Whitman the comrade he dreamed of par excellence. The section “Drum Taps,” where most of the poems deal with soldierly life and the Civil War, is, next to “Calamus,” one of the clusters where the ideal of comradeship is expressed with more fervent emotion:

Vigil for a boy of responding kisses, (never again on earth responding,)
Vigil for a comrade swiftly slain, vigil I never forget, how as day brighten’d,
I rose from the chill ground and folded my soldier well in his blanket,
And buried him where he fell.

(“Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night”)

(Many a soldier’s loving arms about this neck have cross’d and rested,
Many a soldier’s kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)

(“The Wound Dresser”)

As I lay my head in your lap camerado,
The confession I made I resume, what I said to you and the open air I resume [.]

(“As I Lay My Head in Your Lap Camerado”)

In most of these lines from Drum Taps we see how the semi-erotic ideal of comradeship depicted in “Calamus” is transformed, as the poet experienced it
in reality in his relation with the soldiers. As if echoing the story of the Sacred Band, we are told that liberty will depend upon invincible lovers:

Over the carnage rose prophetic a voice,  
Be not dishearten’d, affection shall solve the problems of freedom yet,  
Those who love each other shall become invincible,  
They shall make Columbia victorious.

It shall be customary in the houses and the streets to see manly affection,  
The most dauntless and rude shall touch face to face lightly,  
The dependence of Liberty shall be lovers,  
The continuance of Equality shall be comrades.

These shall tie you and band you stronger than hoops of iron,  
I, ecstatic, O partners! O lands! with the love of lovers tie you.  
("Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice")

Symonds writes that “the distinctive feature of Dorian comradeship was that it remained on both sides masculine, tolerating no sort of softness.” In a very revealing comment (in light of our considerations in the previous chapter), he points out that it was the effort “to elevate paiderastia according to the aesthetic standard of Greek ethics” that constituted the distinctive quality of the Greeks. The idea that an aesthetic morality was at the heart of ancient Greek male comradeship is reinforced by the fact that the cities of Elis and Megara instituted contests of beauty among young men.

Another relevant parallelism between Greek love, as described by Symonds, and the concept of male comradeship as expressed by Whitman is the close association between gymnastics, manly virtues, and paiderastia. Symonds’s work abounds in quotations by ancient authors that support his contention that male love was considered ethically superior to the love of women, and that love between men was a characteristic that distinguished warriors, gymnasts, poets and philosophers from the common multitude. He informs the reader that Plato went as far as defining the highest form of human existence to be “philosophy with paiderastia” while others declared that the male form is the most perfect image of the deity, and that “supreme beauty is rather male than female.” All these aspects of the concept of Greek love seem to perfectly spell out on a social and historical level Whitman’s aspirations for a democracy of comrades.

Although it took Symonds some time to overcome some initial “aesthetic repulsion” he felt toward Leaves of Grass, due to his “academical prejudices, the literary instincts trained by two decades of Greek and Latin studies, the
refinements of culture, and the exclusiveness of aristocratic breeding,” the process of acceptance took only a short time, and soon Whitman “delivered my soul of these debilities.”\footnote{130} And it was not just acceptance, Symonds was soon overcome by the most intense fascination with *Leaves of Grass*—and its author. He goes as far as volunteering the most extraordinary confession of faith in Whitman, whom he calls his master:

I may confess [Whitman’s religion] shone upon me when my life was broken, when I was weak, sickly, poor and of no account, and that I have ever lived thenceforward in the light and warmth of it. In bounden duty toward Whitman, I make this personal statement [. . .]. During my darkest hours [*Leaves of Grass*] comforted me with the conviction that I too played my part in the illimitable symphony of cosmic life. When I sinned, repined, sorrowed, suffered, it touched me with a gentle hand of sympathy and understanding, sustained me with the strong arm of assurance that in the end I could not go amiss [. . .] For this reason, in duty to my master Whitman [. . .] I have exceeded the bounds of an analytical essay by pouring forth my personal confession.\footnote{131}

By the time Symonds wrote these lines, his fascination with Whitman was becoming an obsession, and he was beginning to entertain the fantasy of meeting him in the other world. As if evoking his master, he not only wrote a group of poems about “passionate friendship” between men but also took to visiting soldiers’ barracks and male brothels.\footnote{132}

Symonds’s extraordinary devotion to Whitman points once again to the fact that *A Problem in Greek Ethics* was written with the purpose of offering some solid historical, moral and intellectual justification for Whitman’s ethics of comradeship. It also suggests that the relationship between the concept of Greek love and Whitman’s notion of comradeship might have already taken shape by 1875, and, for unknown reasons (maybe of a social character), he may have communicated them to O’Grady for publication. Also, the fact needs to be taken into consideration that O’Grady’s article presupposes an extensive knowledge of the classics such as probably not many were in possession of.

Symonds interpreted Walt Whitman’s ideal of comradeship as an attempt to claim for his age and society a revival of the accepted social role male homosexual liaisons played in ancient Greece—an interpretation which, in view of our findings in the previous chapter, turns out to be a very probable one. However, one obvious question still remains unanswered: Why has Symonds’s interpretation of Whitman’s ethics of comradeship been systematically ignored, or, at best, overlooked by critics? The answer may partially lie in the fact that Whitman himself rejected the idea of defining himself as a member of a separate minority within society, and that in order to stop Symonds’s incessant questioning he even lied, in his now famous 1890 reply to the British scholar about his relationships with women. This lie on the part of Whitman may
have deterred some scholars, particularly early ones, from further study of Symonds’s theories. It was Symonds’s explicit mention of, and insistence on, the sexual aspect of camaraderie, that prevented him from obtaining Whitman’s full blessing for his theory, a theory that goes to the heart of Whitman’s ethics of comradeship.
Whitman, the Moral Reformer

[Whitman] was a theoriser about society before he was a poet.

Whitman said of Leaves of Grass that it is “a book for the criminal classes.” When asked by Horace Traubel about the meaning of that statement, he replied: “It is a fact. The other people do not need a poet.” This is the brief dialogue that followed: [Whitman asked Traubel:] “Are you in the criminal class yourself?” “Yes, certainly. Why not? [. . .] Let me in?”¹ Whitman’s statement that his work—his bible—is a book for the criminal classes, the ones in need of a poet, is somewhat enigmatic. It is not clear whether he meant that Leaves of Grass is a book intended for the reform of the criminal classes, or rather that it is a hymn of praise to “criminals.” Both interpretations are possible, and, in fact, I’d like to look at two theories that offer respectively those opposite explanations for Leaves of Grass. Whatever the case, in the last analysis, we are bound to conclude that moral reform was indeed the ultimate goal of Whitman’s poetical-religious enterprise.

In this final chapter, we will discuss the content of the new morality Whitman proposed, a morality that has its foundation on an idealized form of masculine comradeship. But first we’ll look at the theories of Arthur E. Briggs, Robert K. Martin, David Kuebrich, and David S. Reynolds that attempt to offer a rationale for Whitman’s moralizing attitude. Following our discussion of Briggs’s theory, we will take a detailed look at Whitman’s ethics of war.

P O E T R Y  A N D  E T H I C S :  W H I T M A N ’ S  M O R A L  C O N C E R N

Whitman found in literature the perfect instrument for moralizing.² In Democratic Vistas, he approvingly quotes the librarian of Congress: “The
true question to ask respecting a book, is, has it help’d any human soul.” He goes on to say that even though all works of art are to be tried first by the aesthetic qualities, “whenever claiming to be first-class works, they are to be strictly and sternly tried by their foundation in, and radiation, in the highest sense and always indirectly, of the ethic principles, and eligibility to free, arouse, dilate.”

Zweig believes that Whitman, like many Americans of his day, was sternly moralistic. Where literature was concerned, “a book had to ‘do good’; it had to be ‘democratic.’” Indeed, in Democratic Vistas, Whitman reflects on the idea that while in the Middle Ages the highest thoughts and ideals had to be expressed in the plastic arts more than in literature (presumably due to general illiteracy), in the nineteenth century literature “is not only more eligible than all other arts put together, but it has become the only general means of morally influencing the world.” This moral instrumentality of literature Whitman hopes for will not merely copy and reflect “existing surfaces,” or bend over to “what is called taste—not only to amuse, pass away time, celebrate the beautiful, the refined, the past, or exhibit technical, rhythmic or grammatical dexterity.” Rather, he believes in a literature “underlying life, religious, consistent with science, handling the elements and forces with competent power, teaching and training men.” Interestingly, a precious result of this moral literature will be to achieve the entire redemption of woman “out of these incredible holds and webs of silliness, millinery, and every kind of dyspeptic depletion—and thus ensuring to the States a strong and sweet Female Race, a race of perfect Mothers.”

Binns expresses his conviction that there is something essentially Platonic in Whitman’s attitude towards poetry, for Whitman was, in his opinion, a moralist in the highest sense. Like Plato, Binns says, Whitman dreamed always of the Republic, and that dream was the moving passion of his life. In some personal annotations made in a scrap of paper (possibly in preparation for some future lecture or publication) concerning the need for a “moral conscience” in society, Whitman declares moral sensitivity to be more important than any other kind of sensitivity:

We cannot pronounce too strongly, the evident need [...] of the promulgation the bringing to the front again, among the consciences, & setting up, the greatest of all, namely the absolute, uncompromising moral one. The intellectual or critical conscience is amply attended to—the esthetic is not neglected—the spiritual in crude & erratic treatment has its theories [...] But the purely moral, seems [...] to me to be as on the current map of humanity [...] to be one fitly to be designated by a blank incognita a dismal vacant patch.9

In another manuscript, Whitman complains that, while all the essential elements of the grandest development of the moral nature exist latent
in the average American, not only a powerful “National Moral Nature” has not only not yet been developed but there seems to be a strange decadence in moral nature.10

In order to understand what Whitman means by “moral nature,” it may be helpful to see how this concept was used by R. M. Bucke, one of his closest disciples. Inspired by the “most exalted moral nature” of Walt Whitman, Bucke wrote *Man’s Moral Nature* (1879).11 In this work he divides man’s moral nature into three parts: his active nature, with which he performs the acts he is capable of; his intellectual nature, with which he knows, and his moral nature properly, with which he feels. Lozynsky believes “moral” amounts to “emotional” in Bucke’s classification. To Bucke, all that we feel can be reduced to positive and negative functions. The positive functions are love and faith, and the negative ones hate and fear. Man’s moral nature has a physiological basis (in the sympathetic nervous system) as well as an intellectual nature (in the cerebrospinal system). Bucke assumes there has been an evolution in man’s moral nature that reflects a development of his sympathetic nervous system. He speculates that the average life of the Jew is at least six or eight years longer than the average life of the non-Jewish inhabitants of those countries where the Jews live. The Jews, then, he concludes, have an extraordinary amount of vitality because they lead a more moral life than other people. This Bucke considers an instance of length of life associated with a high moral nature. Concerning the relationship of religion and art to man’s moral nature, Bucke believes that both are the expression of moral nature (religion is the expression of faith, and art is the expression of love). In his book, Bucke states his belief in the instrumentality of art as a means to moral improvement.12 To Lozynsky, Bucke’s notion of moral nature was based on two concepts: the scope and physiological foundation of man’s moral nature, and the all-pervasive force of evolution.

Still, Bucke’s theory of man’s moral nature was not presented or intended as an interpretation of Whitman’s concept of moral nature. And while Whitman read the book, we don’t know what his opinion was about it. Nevertheless, even if Whitman did not subscribe to all the particulars of Bucke’s theory, some fundamental associations in his book (e.g., the relationship between the physiological and the moral planes, the notion of religion and art as two different expressions of the moral nature, and the moral instrumentality of art) seem to perfectly match some of Whitman’s dearest beliefs (including his life-long passionate attachment to phrenology).

While, because of lack of positive evidence, Bucke’s concept of man’s moral nature can only be taken as an approximation to Whitman’s, it offers a specific (and probable) content to the poet’s vague use of the terms “religion” and “moral nature.” It places Whitman’s concepts of morality, religion, and art in a satisfactory hierarchy. Zweig concludes that for Whitman great art is rooted in moral grandeur and physical beauty,13 this being a principle that John Burroughs, in his 1896 discussion of Whitman’s new
morality, presents as crucial in the mind of the poet. Burroughs himself reiterates the same idea when he states that “a healthy spirituality can only flow of a healthy animality.”

In Whitman’s thought, the political and the ethical concerns are inseparable. This points to its deep roots in the American traditional belief that a republican government requires a virtuous people. During Whitman’s times, at least a fraction of the Democratic party believed in the possibility of organizing a society free from laws and governmental controls, where people would have the capacity to rule themselves. In the New York Aurora, Whitman warned against excessive legislation, maintaining that laws not only fail to improve morality but they also hamper the holy cause of human progress. It was clearly moral improvement of a particular kind that mattered to Whitman. Indeed, Whitman believed that America, for all its troubles, alone possessed the prerequisites for a great moral and religious civilization, and Binns was convinced that the poet saw a moral purpose to the universe.

THE CHARACTER OF WHITMAN’S NEW MORALITY

That the moral purpose of Leaves of Grass was present at the very inception of the work is evidenced by the moralistic tone of the first Preface (1855). The following passage, which is reminiscent, in its style, of the Sermon on the Mount, sheds light on the content of Whitman’s new morality:

This is what you shall do: Love the earth and the sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful educated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem.

Whitman’s precepts seem to define a morality close to that of the good savage, as idealized by the Romantics. His morality reflects typical Romantic individualism and mistrust of established society. It also reflects the belief that not only there is no contradiction between nature and culture, but even that nature provides the model for human morality:

I think I could turn and live like the animals, they are so placid and self-contain’d,
I stand and look at them long and long.
They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of
owing things,
No one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands
of years ago,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.

(Song of Myself, 32)

Judging from this poem, Thoreau’s remark about *Leaves of Grass* that it
is as if the beasts spoke, Whitman might have well considered a compliment.
Whitman’s admiration for the amoralism of animals soon turns into what
happens to be an openly subversive morality that accommodates evil as much
as good:

I make the poems of evil also, I commemorate that part also.

(“Starting from Paumanok,” 7)

I am not the poet of goodness only, I do not decline to be the
poet of wickedness also.

What blurt is this about virtue and about vice?
Evil propels me and reform of evil propels me, I stand
indifferent.

(“Song of Myself,” 22)

Nor will my poems do good only, they will do just as much
evil, perhaps more [. . . ]

(“Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand”)

According to Burroughs, what characterizes Whitman’s subversive
morality is his reliance upon absolute nature. He sees the collision between
traditional Christian morality and Whitman’s nature morality as inevitable,
since the latter “reverses many of the old ascetic theological conceptions.”
Messianic expressions permeate all of Burroughs’s discussion of Whitman’s
morality. At one point, he affirms that Whitman’s “heroic sacrifice [. . . ]
atones for the sins of us all,—the sins of perverting, denying, abusing the most
sacred and important organs and functions of our bodies,” and that Whit-
man “has taken our sins upon himself.”

Burroughs believes that Whitman “blends” the good and the bad because
that is the way they are in nature and in life, and nature shows that there is
no good without evil, no light without darkness, no life without death, no
growth without pain. In Burroughs’s view, to Whitman evil is “an unripe kind
of good.” And, in Whitman’s name, he warns: “Beware the emasculated good,
the good by exclusion rather than by victory.”

In “Starting from Paumanok” (7), Whitman writes: “I am myself just as
much evil as good, and my nation is—and I say there is in fact no evil.” In other
words, the underlying idea is not that he finds evil as such acceptable, but only
that it is an unripe kind of good, a temporary stage, an illusion (“there is in
fact no evil”), leading in the long run to improvement, to good results. One
possible explanation for Whitman’s moral conception of evil is to consider
it the logical outcome of his kosmic vision, as discussed in Chapter 3, with a
strong accent on teleological evolution. With this perspective in mind, Zweig’s
statement about the moral instrumentality of art in Whitman’s thought (“a
book had to do ‘good’”) does not necessarily turn out to be mistaken when
contrasted with Whitman’s assertions that he is the poet of evil also and that
his poems will do just as much evil, or perhaps more evil than good. It simply
represents the existential perspective in Whitman (see Chapter 3).

Burroughs reminds us that Whitman entertained the idea that his poems
might help contribute to the production of a “race of splendid and savage old
men.” But whether or not his poems could contribute to that goal, and despite
Whitman’s blending of good and evil, in Democratic Vistas he contemplates
an ideal society which only in the heights of Romantic idealism can be recog-
nized as the product of uncorrupted nature, as the “civilization” of the good
savage (somehow like that version of the Tarzan story in which the “savage”
but sensitive, compassionate, and gentlemanly Tarzan earns his degree at a
university in England and then returns to the wilderness). These are, accord-
ing to Whitman, the individuals that should arise with the new morality:
“men worthy the name,” “athletes,” “perfect women,” “crops of fine youths
and majestic old persons.” Whitman does not find around him the moral
altitude he expects and, somehow rhetorically, asks: “Is there a great moral
and religious civilization—the only justification of a great material one?” His
answer amounts to a bitter complaint:

Confess that to severe eyes, using the moral microscope upon humanity,
a sort of dry and flat Sahara appears, these cities crowded with petty gro-
tesques, malformations, phantoms, playing meaningless antics. Confess
that everywhere, in shop, street, church, theatre, barroom, official chair,
are pervading flippancy and vulgarity, low cunning, infidelity—every-
where the youth puny, impudent, foppish, prematurely ripe—everywhere
an abnormal libidinousness, unhealthy forms, male, female, painted,
padded, dyed, chignon’d, muddy complexions, bad blood, the capacity
for good motherhood deceasing or deceas’d, shallow notions of beauty,
with a range of manners, or lack of manners, (considering the advantages
enjoy’d,) probably the meanest to be seen in the world.
From Walt Whitman’s inventory of what is missing in American society as a result of her moral decadence, a picture emerges of his ideal society, in which the aesthetic aspects are given the utmost relevance, an ideal society that to the modern reader is hard to associate with the state of nature. Central to Whitman’s conception of the moral society are the athletic comrades and the perfect mothers (the role reserved for perfect women). Within the general moral decadence of America, it was especially women’s disregard for their role as mothers that concerns Whitman. In a footnote to Democratic Vistas, he declares the two most serious “moral hiatuses” to be the absence of moral conscience and “the appalling depletion of women in their powers of sane athletic maternity, their crowning attribute.”

It wasn’t only those hiatuses that account for the bitter tone of disappointment we find in parts of Democratic Vistas (in contrast with the optimism one finds in the Preface to the first edition of Leaves of Grass). In a society that was making its transition to heavy capitalism Whitman saw the progressive loss of idealism, which made him write about “our materialistic and vulgar democracy.”

Whitman sought to remedy these hiatuses in the American people, whom he also calls “the peaceablest and most good-natured race in the world, and the most personally independent and intelligent.” Indeed, he was fully aware that the nineteenth century was one of those historical crossroads in which deep revolutions take shape. But he also makes it known that he is aware that true revolutions are of the interior life and of the arts, “[f]or so long as the spirit is not changed, any change of appearance is of no avail.” Whitman intended his moral revolution to be the result of a gradual process, as if obtaining from planned evolution, not through sudden change.

Zweig contends that Whitman grasped the moral revolution contained in his own idea of the city, by including the prostitute, the criminal, and the poor among his multitude of lovers. Leaves of Grass is “the voice of a wayward, slightly dangerous man, who calls for ‘comrades’ while also warning them against himself.” Zweig finds that because the “Calamus” poems were so unequivocal, so straightforward, in their homosexual meaning, they were able to challenge with virtual impunity the taboo surrounding homosexuality. It was as if the “Calamus” poems were ignored, as if the minds of the readers who were disgusted by Whitman’s heterosexual poems were unwilling or unable to process the homoerotic imagery in “Calamus.”

Whitman’s moral revolution was to be carried out by conversion, and, as with the traditional saints, he was to set up an example in his own life capable of triggering the desired change in those around him.

**AN ANALYSIS OF WHITMAN’S MORALITY: BRIGGS’S THEORY**

In Walt Whitman: Thinker and Artist (1952), Arthur E. Briggs, a mid-twentieth century Whitmanite convert, carries out an extensive study of what he calls
Whitman’s “new morality.” A brief look at it will give us an insight into how later disciples of Whitman understood his ethical doctrine.

Briggs begins his discussion of what he calls “the new morality” by warning the reader that morality is the most difficult, for general comprehension, of Whitman’s themes. He opens his study of Whitman’s ethics with a rather insipid discussion of the poet’s concept of good and evil in which he concludes that for Whitman evil is not an entity but a condition, and that Whitman’s belief in the ultimate triumph of good is a philosophic view and a rational faith. Briggs expounds on these ideas by asserting that Whitman’s morality is “attitudinal” (a reference to moral relativism). “In such a moral philosopher,” says Briggs about Whitman, “we should expect attitudes to be treated as having more importance than cardinal virtues” (which he identifies as absolute moral principles). He offers no explanation for why this is so, although after stating that the latter are difficult to make out in Whitman’s scheme of goodness, he proceeds to list a few of them: “love, truth, wisdom, prudence, justice, freedom, equality.” As he points out, nevertheless, even these cardinal virtues in Whitman’s vocabulary signify no absolute ideas but are only relative or attitudinal virtues. And he rhetorically wonders whether not all virtues are attitudinal.

He finds a perfect application of his concept of attitudinal morality in Whitman’s treatment of good and evil:

Whitman conceived good and evil as in some respects interchangeable terms. Evil is translated into good. If disease is evil, in natural processes it is turned into good: dead matter becomes earthy compost, the matter in which life takes root and grows again abundantly. Nature sweetens foul waste things and makes them useful. The analogy carries into human life. There too may not crime, wrongs, suffering serve out spiritual growth, become at least a lesson for us? Both evil and the reform of evil thus propel us forward.

Briggs’s understanding of Whitman’s evolutionary and kosmic conception of evil as a circumstantial perception of the individual is correct. Still, this is a passive understanding on the part of Whitman, a way to make sense of a reality beyond human control. It is erroneous, though, to assume that Whitman proposed his kosmic vision as a human moral code properly, which is what Briggs seems to suggest. An “attitudinal morality” of that kind would have indeed blurred any distinction between good and evil in Whitman’s mind, which was not the case. As we saw earlier, Whitman had a very well defined moral ideal. He had a vision of the kind of society he wanted. He complained bitterly about the moral decadence of America, and he thought of literature as an instrument for moral change. In other words, outside his grandiose, kosmic poetic-mystical vision, Whitman had a well-defined idea of good and evil, and he pursued the good by moral means.
As if unaware of the logical consequences of classifying Whitman as an attitudinal moralist who does not recognize evil or is, in any case, indifferent to it, Briggs adds that by considering Whitman an attitudinal moralist we may be prepared for his yet “profonder conception of morality” as the making or building of personality. This profonder conception of morality, resulting from Whitman’s alleged attitudinal morality, turns out to be a synthesis of virtually every major system of morality, as Briggs sees it. He compares Whitman as a moral thinker with the latitudinarian Christian moralists, with Nietzsche, Aristotle, and Confucius, as well as with the Epicureans, the Stoics, and the German idealists. In Whitman all of them are contained to a certain extent. Briggs believes that it is very difficult to catalogue Whitman within the established ethical systems and that he is to be considered an attitudinal moralist “as different from the narrow mindedness of absolutists.” He concludes that Whitman should be better classified as a personal humanist.

Briggs develops further his analysis of Whitman’s thought by discussing specific issues, such as what he considers to be his warlike virtues, Christian virtues, social morality, individual morality, and idealistic virtues. In most cases his commentaries are rather uncritical and apologetic. One of those categories though—Whitman’s ethics of war—deserves special attention, as it was his war experience that was crucial in shaping his worldview.

**Whitman’s Attitudes to War**

Of Whitman’s “warlike virtues,” Briggs says that the poet understood them, while abhorring war itself. He carries out a comparison between Nietzsche’s “bold, vigorous, joyful, cruel, self-reliant” warring supermen and what he considers Whitman’s more realistic conception of the soldier. He concludes that “[O]ut of the putridity of murderous war Whitman saw rising its opposite, Love, as grass grows in the compost of rotted vegetation.” The fact is, Whitman’s attitude to war oscillated between dreamy idealization and absolute horror and disgust when confronted with the reality of it, both positions underlying a suspicious pacifism that prevented him from enlisting. When war broke out in 1861, Whitman welcomed it with enthusiasm. In his opinion, peace was not always best for a country. In war, the true character of a people reveals itself, Whitman believed. Asselineau suggests that before Whitman had direct contact with the horrors of war, his view of war was aesthetic, hence the attraction he felt for it. As a commentary to the poem entitled “1861,” of the “Drum Taps” group, Asselineau points out that Whitman celebrated war because it was for him the synonym of energy, of manly vigor and generous spirit and a virile undertaking. Whitman was acquainted only with “the sound of the cannon, far or near, rousing, even in dreams, a devilish exultation, and all the mad joys in the depths of my soul,” not having seen war at close range. In his dream of glory and heroic death, Whitman wanted total
war. Even if these poems were written before Whitman’s activities in the war hospitals, the fact is they were published for the first time in 1865, after Whitman had experienced the horrors of the war. When at the height of his war-like enthusiasm, Whitman called for the mobilization of all men old enough to bear arms—without any exception.\(^\text{45}\) Paradoxically, before that, Whitman had sided at least momentarily with those who rioted against the draft laws in New York.\(^\text{46}\) Whitman was exempted from the draft and he never enlisted as a volunteer; the reason, he confessed to Traubel, was that “I can never think of myself as firing a gun or drawing a sword on another man.”\(^\text{47}\)

Whitman became horrified by what he saw during his war service as a nurse. One day, while visiting friends, he became angry and began to pace on the floor and cry out: “I say stop this war, this horrible massacre of men!” And in a letter to his mother, he wrote: “Mother, one’s heart grows sick of war, after all when you see what it really is; every once in a while I feel so horrified and disgusted.” From then on, according to Traubel, instead of celebrating the exaltation of the volunteers going into combat, Whitman chanted his infinite pity for the young men whose death made him think of Christ on the cross.\(^\text{48}\) In section 7 of “The Song of the Exposition,” a poem that Whitman composed in 1871 in response to the invitation of the American Institute, we read:

Away with themes of war! away with war itself!  
Hence from my shuddering sight to never more return that  
show of black’n’d, mutilated corpses!  
That hell unpent and raid of blood, fit for wild tigers or for  
lop-tongued wolves, not for reasoning men.

It certainly took Whitman many years to reach those pacifist ideas. Years before the outbreak of the Civil War, he had vociferously encouraged the Mexican War. In the May 11, 1846 issue of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, Whitman wrote:

YES: Mexico must be thoroughly chastised:—We have reached a point in our intercourse with that country, when prompt and effectual demonstrations of force are enjoined upon us by every dictate of right and policy [. . .] Mexico, though contemptible in many respects is an enemy deserving a vigorous “lesson” [. . .] we are sure the people here, ten to one, are for prompt and effectual hostilities. Tame newspaper comments [. . .] and the contemptible anti-patriotic criticisms [. . .] do not express the sentiments and the wishes of the people. Let our arms now be carried with a spirit which shall teach the world that, while we are not forward for a quarrel, America knows how to crush as well as how to expand!\(^\text{49}\)

Ralph W. Emerson, Henry D. Thoreau and even Abraham Lincoln were among those who denounced publicly the Mexican War as unnecessary and
criminal. It would still take another twenty-five years and the direct witnessing of atrocities for Whitman to denounce wars as inhuman.\textsuperscript{50}

\textbf{ROBERT K. MARTIN’S THEORY:}
\textbf{“FUCKED BY THE EARTH”}

In \textit{The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry} (1979), Robert K. Martin discusses a number of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American authors who were allegedly homosexual. Virtually half the book is devoted to Walt Whitman. In his introduction, Martin states that his purpose is to consider the extent to which an author’s awareness of himself as a homosexual has affected how and what he wrote. He adds that his selection is restricted to authors who, to some degree, may be considered to have defined themselves as homosexual and to have given expression to their sexuality in their work.\textsuperscript{51} Of Whitman, he says that “[n]o other poet, until the present time, has so clearly defined himself in terms of his sexuality and so clearly defined his poetic mission as a consequence of his homosexuality.” Martin believes that this is true despite the attempts on the part of the poet in his late years to conceal his homosexuality from outsiders.\textsuperscript{52} Based on what he considers textual evidence, he thinks it unlikely that Whitman was celibate;\textsuperscript{53} moreover, he believes the poet must have been promiscuous.\textsuperscript{54} And he thinks that there has been a conscious effort to falsify the evidence and to present Whitman as a heterosexual.\textsuperscript{55}

While Martin charges a good number of Whitman scholars with dishonesty, his forced interpretation of the limited evidence he takes into consideration turns out to be as arbitrary as anyone else’s, to say the least, and thus liable to the same kind of accusation he makes against others. A sign of his arbitrariness is the fact that he did not include Auden in his repertoire of homosexual authors because the said author “insisted so often that his poems must not be seen as homosexual, that they are universal.”\textsuperscript{56} Exactly the same reasoning could apply to Whitman.

According to Martin, homosexuality meant to Whitman “a heightened political awareness, a sensitivity to the situation of women in a patriarchal society, and a belief that a homosexual society, freed from the impulse to power, might devote itself to pleasure.”\textsuperscript{57} As he does not provide any specific evidence, one can only wonder what the basis is for such a statement. It is one more familiar attempt to canonize Whitman—this time from the perspective of someone who holds the curious belief that homosexuals are freed from the impulse to power and have a tendency to devote themselves to pleasure. Furthermore, according to Martin, Whitman intended his work to communicate his homosexuality to his readers, adding that most critics have not been willing to take Whitman at his word.\textsuperscript{58} Again, quite an amazing statement on the part of Martin, who does not seem to care much for the explicit and repeated denial on the part of the poet himself of any homosexual meaning in \textit{Leaves of Grass}.\textsuperscript{59} Of such an impressive evidence that Whitman did not
Walt Whitman’s Mystical Ethics of Comradeship

want to be seen as a homosexual writer, Martin simply says that, in his old age, Whitman “played the role of good citizen,” and that as long as the text reflects the poet’s awareness of himself as homosexual it makes no difference what he told John Addington Symonds. This is, of course, quite an unconvincing explanation since what the text “reflects,” precisely because of its poetic character, is given to widely disparate understandings, while Whitman’s letter to Symonds, as well as the poet’s other comments on the same matter, testifies beyond doubt to his personal position on this matter. Still, with a strong determination, Martin goes on to declare that *Leaves of Grass* is “homotextual.”

Whitman’s homosexual impulse is, according to Martin, inherently non-aggressive, based on sharing rather than on the drive for power. Also, it is “not directed toward the creation of a product (the child) which will continue to feed the economic system.” Such an interpretation runs counter the fact that Whitman considered motherhood, the production of new children, the first and most important mission of perfect women.

Martin interprets section 11 of “Song of Myself” as a clear defense of the anonymity of sexual encounters, the type of experience that, in his words, could well be repeated in almost any steam bath of a large modern city. He further elaborates on the idea of anonymous sex by adding that “not asking, not knowing, and not thinking are integral parts of Whitman’s democratic vision.” In the long catalogues that characterize *Leaves of Grass*, Martin sees a way through which Whitman expresses his relationship to the world in terms of love, “a nonselective, divinely promiscuous love.” And in the following verses, he sees a metaphor for homosexual intercourse, despite the fact that, as he himself acknowledges, the content appears to be heterosexual: “Thruster holding me tight and that I hold tight! / We hurt each other as the bridegroom and the bride hurt each other.” In Martin’s interpretation, Whitman resorts to the male marriage metaphor because he wants to suggest his closeness to experience and his role as a passive receiver of inspiration. Whitman is, Martin concludes, “fucked by the earth, as a man may be fucked by his ‘thrusting’ partner.” He believes that as the poet imagines himself making love his assertions become bolder. In this change of poetic mood, Martin sees a transition from the passages of sexual awareness to those of political awareness: “Recognizing his position as an outsider, as marginal or criminal, [Whitman] asserts his rights and those of others who have been made victims of arbitrary ethical codes.”

In “Song of Myself,” Whitman was depicting specific sexual activities, an act of fellatio being the prelude to and precondition of the ecstasy which he enters, according to Martin, who concludes that sexuality in Whitman is not a metaphor but an act. Moreover, he thinks that Whitman’s poetic mission will be carried on by his disciples, who can learn the meaning of the words only if they have followed out the sexual patterns of the poem and have in fact become the poet’s lovers.
Martin finds a purely homosexual sexual meaning in most of *Leaves of Grass*. He finds sexual innuendos everywhere, giving rise to rather implausible interpretations. Thus, for example, in certain verses of “Song of Myself” he sees the euphoria of the satisfied lover. Having made love, Martin explains, the poet is calm. In his vision of unity, he can now accept the death of the world “only after transcending individual death, overcoming the fear of the ‘little death’ [ejaculation] in the conviction that all death brings resurrection, that the penis shall rise again.” “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” is a poem which Martin believes reinforces his point. After quoting from it, he concludes: “Out of the cycle of the penis is born the cycle of the soul; out of his erections, ejaculations [ . . . ] and reerections comes Whitman’s faith in a cycle of the world which will comprehend and conquer death.”

Martin’s references to “resurrection” (e.g., “the penis shall rise again”) are accompanied by other similar uses of religious terminology, by which he tries to root out any possible spiritual meanings in *Leaves of Grass*. He even goes as far as wondering whether Whitman was aware of the theory that Christianity had in fact begun as a homosexual cult, a theory for which he offers no documentary source.

With reference to the verse, in a poem of the “Calamus” cluster, where the poet declares that he is talked to “by tongues aromatic” (“In Paths Untrodden,” 9), Martin says that Whitman conveys his mystical experience in traditional terms. Then he adds: “But the ‘tongues,’ the Pentecostal voices, merge with the reeds of calamus and hence with the male genitals. If ‘the scent of these armpits’ is ‘aroma finer than prayer,’ how much holier must be the incense of the pubis?”

Martin also finds political implications in Whitman’s poetry (always associated to the poet’s homosexuality). As a matter of fact, his sociological interpretations and observations blend indistinguishably with the strictly political. He claims, for example, that, according to Whitman, it was to be in America above all that homosexuality should find its expression, as homosexuality was implied in the entire history of American experience, and that homosexuality was for Whitman the sexual expression of community, that would necessarily follow in a true socialist society.

Martin interprets the poetry of Whitman as that of an activist of the homosexual rights movement, with his conclusions lacking, in my opinion, sufficient documentary basis. For instance, of the reasons for the social rejection of homosexuals and of the rituals of adhesiveness, such as holding hands, he states that “[i]f men walk arm in arm in the streets, they are not busy in the factory or begetting children. Hence their danger to society,” adding that it is precisely as an opponent of dominant social values, “as an exponent of the ‘feminine’ in culture,” that Whitman wants to be remembered.

It is highly improbable that Whitman wanted to be remembered as an exponent of the feminine in culture: if anything, the opposite. As to the idea that homosexuals are considered a public danger because they spend their
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time walking arm in arm in the streets rather than begetting children or working at the factory, I find that to be a highly speculative hypothesis.

At times Martin seems to be willing to make concessions in the direction of a more psychological interpretation (versus the strictly sexual) but only as a prelude to the sexual and genital: “[Whitman] seems to suggest that men need to learn to touch each other even more than to fuck each other [. . .] fucking a man does not necessarily require a rethinking of oneself: touching a man does.” In some of Martin’s remarks, Whitman is made to appear as a twentieth-century radical gay activist, as for instance when he asserts that Whitman is not asking for understanding or tolerance for a minority, but rather that his position is much more radical: that all men are potentially homosexual and will be fulfilled only when their homosexual impulses are recognized and given expression.

Martin’s theory lacks balance and objectivity. It is the theory of a social and political activist. His frequent use of strong language reveals his radicalism as an activist. He chooses to ignore the fact that there is no record that Whitman ever addressed the issue of homosexuality in writing or in speech, and he shows also arbitrariness in the way he discards as irrelevant the poet’s strong denial of Symonds’s homosexual interpretation of his poetry.

Among contemporary academics, Martin is not alone in his appropriation of Whitman for today’s gay cause. Recent examples of it are Alan Helms (1992), Charley Shively (1987), Byrne Fone (2000) and, more prominently, Gary Schmidgall (1997). In their works, Whitman is made to appear as a disguised late-twentieth-century gay activist carrying out a carefully calculated revolutionary mission in nineteenth-century America. Ed Folsom sounds a warning when dealing with those interpretations of Whitman. It is a tricky matter, he says, to draw inferences from nineteenth-century discourses of intimacy, as we inevitably read Whitman from a post-Freudian, post-Stonewall point of view, a point of view that is both distorting and illuminating.

Next, we look at an analysis of Whitman’s writings that renders a disincarnate interpretation of his work—in a sense, the very opposite interpretation to that of Martin and the above authors.

**DAVID KUEBRICH’S THEORY: POST-CHRISTIAN MILLENNIALISM**

In *Minor Prophecy*, Kuebrich puts forward a hypothesis which attempts to explain the moral impetus in Whitman’s work from a radically opposite perspective to that of Martin. Kuebrich maintains that Whitman’s optimistic belief in the possibility of moral reform through evolution was mainly the result of the “peculiar fusion of American nationalism and Christian millennialism that became a widespread public faith during the decades between the American Revolution and the Civil War.” This “public faith” he considers the earliest and most important source of Whitman’s faith in moral progress,
more so than the combination of post-Revolutionary nationalism and the Victorian faith in material advancement reinforced by evolutionary science and Hegelian philosophy. Kuebrich thinks the fascination Americans felt with the millennium was rooted in the New England Reformed tradition and its missionary outlook, which early in the nineteenth century spread throughout the nation and beyond denominational structures into the various political and moral reform movements, and into the communitarian experiments and new scientific and religious fads with their promise to renovate society and redeem the human race.81

Kuebrich considers it an impossible task to trace all of the sources for Whitman's millennial views, as they are too numerous; therefore, he only deals with those he considers more relevant. He classifies phrenology as one of the millennialist-inspired pseudoscientific theories that proliferated in the nineteenth century, thus becoming one of the avenues whereby Whitman absorbed the millennialist ideas.82

It was the millennial antebellum tradition of religious nationalism which, according to Kuebrich, provided Whitman with both his notion of America as a nation chosen by God to be a model to the world, and his view of American history as a progressive movement towards an imminent millennial future. Moreover, he thinks that this tradition provided the ultimate foundation as well as the closest parallels for Whitman's belief in the possibility of producing a new race of perfect men and women, and for his dream of a future religious democracy. The latter Kuebrich interprets to mean “a holy nation whose citizens, united with one another in a spirit of mystical affection, would live free of external constraints because of their voluntary obedience to the laws of God.”83

Far from being a static doctrine, Christian millennialism has assumed different forms in keeping with the character of different historical situations. Indeed, Kuebrich reviews some of these forms as a useful background for a better understanding of his own theory of Whitman's special type of millennialism. Millennialism was originally of an eschatological and apocalyptic type. It had its basis in the Book of Revelation and consisted in the belief in a triumphant second coming of Christ surrounded by his saints, and in their victory over the Antichrist. This would be followed by the establishment of God's kingdom on earth for one thousand years, and finally a brief period in which Satan would be again released upon the world before encountering his final defeat. With Augustine, a new interpretation of millennialism took shape based of an allegorical reading of the millennial vision. Lutheran, Calvinist, and Anglican reformers of the sixteenth century followed the Augustinian interpretation, which was also the official interpretation of the Catholic Church. In the minds of these reformed churches, though, the Roman Church and the papacy came to be identified as “Babylon” and the “beast.”

Some seventeenth-century English biblical scholars developed a third type of millennialism. They revived the primitive type of millennialism with
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its belief in a coming earthly millennium, but with an important difference: the advent of the millennial era, formerly conceived as an apocalyptic event that dramatically reversed the process of history, was now described as an ongoing process of individual conversions and social amelioration. According to the doctrine of progressive millennialism, the approach to the end times had begun with the Reformation, which substantially weakened the dominion of the Antichrist, and history was now rapidly moving towards its consummation. While apocalyptic millennialism (also called “pre-millennialism” or “millenarianism”) denied historical progress and expected Christ to come before the Millennium, “progressive millennialism,” as Kuebrich terms the third type, was optimistic about the possibilities for moral improvement, and placed the Second Advent at the end of the thousand years of blessedness, when Christ would come to vanquish Satan after the latter’s brief re-emergence. This progressive post-millennialism became widespread among British and American Protestants during the eighteenth century, so that most antebellum American millennialism was of a “progressive” nature.84

In the antebellum period, millennialism pervaded virtually every aspect of American Protestantism, and Kuebrich sees a connection between millennialism and the communitarian experiments, reform organizations, the peculiar American enthusiasm for health, fads and the new half-sciences of phrenology and spiritualism. All these activities were conceived of, more often than not, as means to the millennium. In support of this idea, Kuebrich quotes a statement by the Grahamite American Physiological Society, which expounded the doctrines of health reformer Sylvester Graham concerning proper diet and sexual conduct: “the millennium can never reasonably be expected to arrive, until those laws which God has implanted in the physical nature of man are, equally with his moral laws, universally known and obeyed.”85

Kuebrich believes that the millennialist scheme (that of American progressive millennialism) underlay Whitman’s ideology and his belief in progressive moral evolution leading to a society of perfect men and women. He points out, though, that it is only the ideological structure of millennialism which Whitman preserved, not the doctrinal content of it, since Whitman replaced the biblical theology and vocabulary with his own religious language and ideas. For this reason, he concludes, it seems appropriate to call Whitman’s theory of progress a “post-Christian millennialism.”86 One important difference between the Christian doctrine and Whitman’s own conception of individual and social morality is that, as Kuebrich puts it, Whitman was convinced there could be no perfect American personality and no millennial era unless humans freed themselves of repressive sexual conventions.87

While the Revolutionary generation had increasingly associated the idea of freedom with a progressive millennium until Republican liberty itself became both a prerequisite for and a fundamental element of the latter-day glory, Kuebrich finds that the most notable feature of Whitman’s early use of the millennial tradition is that he extends the process of politicizing the
millennium. In Whitman’s millennialist scheme, the Protestant faith is not mentioned, and political piety, not liberty, is the essence of the millennial character. Whitman believed the United States to be the agent for the liberation of humanity, a belief that Kuebrich roots in Whitman’s millennial ideology, and which explains Whitman’s virulent editorials on the Mexican War in the *Eagle*. Throughout his discussion, Kuebrich dwells at different times on the crucial influence spiritualism (including animal magnetism) and phrenology had on shaping the ideas Whitman expresses in *Leaves of Grass* and in the prefaces. According to him, in addition to millennialism, Whitman was also attracted to these two pseudosciences by a number of other ideas that were associated with them. Phrenology, especially as promoted by the Fowler brothers, stressed human improvability and perfectibility. Kuebrich also discusses briefly the possible influence of the Transcendentalists’ millennialism, Emerson’s in particular, in shaping Whitman’s own brand. However, he discards Emerson’s influence as relatively irrelevant, as he believes that Whitman had a rather fully developed millennial theory of history before he read Emerson closely. While Whitman, amid self-contradictory statements, claimed not to owe any important ideological influence to Emerson, we know that during his years on the *Brooklyn Eagle*, specifically in 1846, he reviewed books by Emerson. We do not know whether these readings, done almost ten years before the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, qualify as “close” readings in Kuebrich’s opinion.

It is hard not to see Emerson’s influence on Whitman’s central concepts. Some of the central ideas and ideals in Emerson’s “The Poet,” “Nature,” and “Divinity School Address” find unmistakable expression in Whitman’s poetry and self-idealization. In any case, if Kuebrich is accurate in his assertion that Whitman’s support for the Mexican War was part of his millennial ideology, then he is also probably correct in assuming that the poet had a fully developed millennial theory of his own by then.

The transition to Whitman’s ideal spiritual democracy was to be brought about by a new order of religious poetry that would nurture a cultural revolution. Kuebrich believes that Whitman rejected not a belief in God, but in the idea of God as presented in previous religions. Whitman’s poetry consists of an assault upon the strongholds of repression. To liberate his readers from the fear that human existence was without meaning, Whitman would show that evolution and history both revealed a divinely ordained movement toward perfection in which death was merely a transition to a higher life. Within this framework of interpretation, the perplexing catalogues in Whitman’s poetry were designed to promote the readers’ moral and spiritual development, according to Kuebrich, while the poet’s emphasis on nature as a model for morals had the purpose of nourishing the soul by freeing it from the repressive influences of an excessive intellectualism and artificial moral restrictions. In Kuebrich’s view, the ultimate goal of the moral reform Whitman intended for the individual and society was essentially otherworldly.
Kuebrich attributes the belief in moral progress to the influence of millennial theories, but I find it more likely that the influence came from evolutionary theories. The notion of teleological evolution was widespread during Whitman’s times, and it found philosophical formulation in Hegelianism (which Whitman always claimed as an important source of inspiration). Also at the heart of Whitman’s religious and moral enterprise Kuebrich places the new conceptions of sex and male friendship. To deliver his readers from sexual repression, he points out, Whitman would proclaim the sanctity of the body and passions. And he would release males from estrangement from their deepest selves and from other men by encouraging masculine friendships as the highest form of religious experience. On this point, Kuebrich appears to overlook the fact that Whitman refused to lend his support to the free-love movement, and almost nothing is known about his sexual life, if he had one at all. In any case, it is in American millennialism that Kuebrich finds the original source of inspiration for Whitman’s enterprise of moral reform. Moreover, he finds the roots of the idea of progressive moral reform in Arminianism, a kind of theology with a strong emphasis on Christian perfectionism, which became dominant in Protestant America during the antebellum era.

The emphasis on Christian perfectionism led to the development of experimental religious communities, particularly in the 1830s and 1840s, and it also extended to areas such as phrenology and spiritualism. Utopian communities had begun to flourish in America since very beginning of the nineteenth century (for example, the Shakers, New Harmony, Oneida, and Nashoba), and between 1841 and 1855 alone twenty-seven of those communities were established. In other words, utopianism, social reform and experimentation were living ideas to which Whitman had been exposed since a young age, although it seems he took only a passing interest in them. That kind of social experimentation was not always—perhaps not even in most cases—inspired by ideals of Christian perfectionism—in fact, their sexual and communal arrangements resembled at times those of the 1960s and 70s!

Whitman’s “prophecy” of a new race of perfect men and women is only one instance of the widespread optimism that characterized American religion in the period before the Civil War. Kuebrich believes that, in marked contrast with this emerging perfectionism, Emerson, in keeping with his non-millennial view of history, does not expound a theory of human perfectibility (the point being that Emerson could not have influenced Whitman in this respect). In support of his contention, Kuebrich quotes from Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance” a line that appears to deny the possibility of moral improvement: “No greater men are now than ever were.” We find the same idea, though, in “Song of Myself,” where Whitman states that “[there] will never be any more perfection than there is now.”

Kuebrich sees no difference between moral improvement and moral reform, as he uses both concepts interchangeably. Therefore, there is no room in his interpretation for the fact that Whitman finds absolute perfection in
the present and still seeks reform. Whitman seems to suggest that moral reform will not produce more perfection, but simply a different configuration, i.e., an aesthetically different type of perfection more appropriate to the times. Still, Kuebrich plainly asserts that “Whitman intended for the Leaves to be the manifesto of humanity’s final liberation from the impediments to perfection,” his prophetic mission being “to depict images of divine men and women as models for his readers.” He concludes that Whitman’s moral enterprise, with its political implications, had a definite religious and mystical goal: a new hypostasis that would include all men and women:

Like Christian mystics who defined the highest state of spiritual development as a union of human and divine wills, Whitman also believed in the possibility of a fusion of human and divine natures. His notion of a religious democracy presupposes a race of such fully developed religious men and women.

Kuebrich, in summary, considers Leaves of Grass a manual for moral reform, a moral reform that is carried out through the depiction of images of divine men and women as models for the readers—very much, as pointed out earlier, the same role that was ascribed to the narratives of the lives of saints in traditional Catholic education. In Kuebrich’s view, Whitman’s drive for the moral reform of individual men and women and of society as a whole stems from his absorption of Arminian millennialist theology. At times, he appears to take Whitman’s assertions at face value, while at other times he is highly interpretative. Sociological and psychological variables are barely taken into consideration in his interpretation. Only the purely theological seems to account for motives in the launching of Whitman’s moral enterprise. In contrast with Kuebrich’s point of view, next we look at a theory that attempts to explain Walt Whitman’s preoccupation with moral reform exclusively from a sociological point of view.

**REYNOLDS’S THEORY: “IMMORAL DIDACTICISM”**

David S. Reynolds, professor of American literature and director of Whitman Studies at Rutgers University at Camden, is the author of Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville (1988), Walt Whitman’s America (1995), and other studies on Whitman. While in Kuebrich’s case we dealt with an interpretation of Whitman by a scholar in the field of religion, we look now at the perspective of a literary critic with heavy sociological leanings (who, as it is, focuses his attention heavily on the moral aspects of Whitman’s poetry). Reynolds claims that the rise of literary texts that took place in the antebellum period was due to a widespread shift in the style of popular religious discourse from the doctrinal to the imaginative—“What was the province of
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the theologians,” he writes, “became the business of creative writers,” thus becoming the press “mightier than the pulpit.” Among the major writers of the antebellum period, Whitman, according to Reynolds, was one to be strongly influenced by the experimental developments on the popular religious scene.

The antebellum period was a time when the gap between sermons and novels, between religious poetry and secular poetry, between sacred allegory and earthly story, Reynolds points out, suddenly became far narrower than it had been in Puritan times. This being so, it is not difficult to make sense of Emerson’s fear that religion would end up consisting of nothing else than the progressive introduction of apposite metaphors, and of his final view of the poet as priest, a view that Reynolds also discusses.

Reynolds finds the roots of Whitman’s moralizing vocation in the fact that the poet developed an extraordinary fascination with the black preachers and orators who became prominent in New York during the antebellum years. A figure he finds particularly relevant to the American literary renaissance is Edward Thompson Taylor, a popular evangelical minister of the Seamen’s Bethel Church in Boston, popularly known as “Father Taylor.” Whitman, who always dreamed of being an orator, called Father Taylor America’s “only essentially perfect orator.” Father Taylor brought to the pulpit a secularized, showman-like style which combined the socially explosive with the mild theology of Boston liberalism and the imagery of colloquial revivalism, a new sermon manner that was simultaneously “all style and no style.” To Emerson and Whitman, this combination of artifice and artlessness made of Taylor a “natural poet,” and placed him side by side with Robert Burns or the great Renaissance poets.

Reynolds points to Emerson’s “Divinity School Address” (1838) as an important event in the transition from the dogmatic to the subversive in religious discourse. Emerson’s “Address” is a critical text about religion and a literary work in its own right, which took, as Reynolds puts it, the free-flowing sermon of his time and the humanized religion of his day to its natural conclusion: the subversion of dogmatic Christianity and the joyous assertion of poetic creativity. By defining the sermon as “the speech of man to men,” Reynolds points out, Emerson was choosing artistry and humanity above Christianity. Whitman’s avid intellect could hardly have been indifferent to these stylistic and doctrinal trends in religious social discourse. In Reynolds’s opinion, Father Taylor’s stylistic innovations and the concepts expressed by Emerson in his 1838 Address certainly seem to have been among the seeds out of which Whitman’s Leaves grew.

Reynolds also discusses Elias Hicks, the maverick Quaker preacher whose heretical, anti-institutional, and inspirational stand unquestionably exerted an influence upon Whitman—a subject that was discussed in Chapter 1. To Reynolds, Leaves of Grass, with its startling combinations of the divine and the earthly, represents the fruition of the secularization of religious discourse
that the popular preachers had begun.\textsuperscript{120} To such an extent this is so that he suggests that \textit{Leaves of Grass} as a whole can be read as a sermon, a sermon in which the sacred and the secular, the mystical and the lowly, are interwoven in an extraordinarily easy manner.\textsuperscript{121}

The background information Reynolds offers concerning the stylistic and ideological currents in the antebellum period helps us understand Whitman’s drive for moral reform. Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, according to Reynolds, reflected in their writings “the feisty spirit of subversive reform while avoiding its excesses, and retained the judiciousness of conventional reform while avoiding its staidness.”\textsuperscript{122}

Walt Whitman, Reynolds says, came closer than Thoreau to reproducing the seamy, morally variegated quality of his environment.\textsuperscript{123} This is understandable, he adds, in view of Whitman’s concept of literature, which was to be “a great mirror or reflector.”\textsuperscript{124} Reynolds is not surprised at the apparent gap between Whitman’s early conventionally moralistic novels and the morally subversive spirit of \textit{Leaves of Grass}:

The standard view is that Whitman had begun as a conventional hack writer of moralistic fiction and poetry and then experienced some dramatic change that made him a literary iconoclast. The fact is that from the start Whitman had experimented with popular genres which had themselves taken on subversive and progressive qualities.\textsuperscript{125}

In support of the idea that Whitman’s reformist impulse was a permanent drive in him, Reynolds quotes a statement in the poet’s diaries in which the latter declares his aim to concentrate around him the leaders of all reforms,\textsuperscript{126} and makes reference to John Burroughs, as well, who wrote that Whitman has “the character of a reformer.”\textsuperscript{127}

Reynolds finds one major stimulus for Whitman’s moral reformism in the “fanatical reformers” whose lectures he loved to attend at the Broadway Tabernacle.\textsuperscript{128} The poet was well aware that their zeal, when carried to an extreme, subverted the very morality they were attempting to defend. This type of radical reformism that dwelled on the detailed presentation of the darkest and sensual aspects of sin Reynolds calls “immoral didacticism.” In it, he finds an explanation for Whitman’s self-proclamation as the poet of goodness and of weakness, and concludes that the daringly experimental outlook of \textit{Leaves of Grass} was shaped by Whitman’s developing understanding of immoral didacticism.\textsuperscript{129} As evidence for his hypothesis, Reynolds quotes the following lines by Whitman in the December 22, 1846 issue of the \textit{Brooklyn Daily Eagle}: “The duty of the promulger of moral reforms [is] to advocate and illustrate, the more enthusiastically the better, his doctrine.”

Reynolds makes a point of showing the incongruence on the part of Whitman’s moralism when it came to practical matters. Whitman, in the 1840s and early 1850s, wrote newspaper articles on temperance, anti-prostitution,
anti-capital punishment, labor reform and antislavery. We do not need to elaborate on Whitman's dubious attitude towards slavery and blacks when it came to the practical and political, since that matter has already been dealt with in a previous chapter, but in the area of prostitution he showed the same ambiguous attitude. Reynolds wonders how Whitman, who in his poetry offers a warm embrace to prostitutes, actually wrote a number of articles decrying prostitution with righteous indignation: “How could the liberal poetic defender of whores become so prissy as to devote an 1858 article in the Brooklyn Daily Times to denouncing their trade as ‘the great vice of the age,’ a ‘damning plague spot,’ a ‘horrid abyss of depravity and disease’?”

Reynolds attempts to make sense of Whitman’s contradictions by stating that the ultra-Puritan and the ultraliberal are bound by their fascination with the tabooed, the driving force behind both being the subversive imagination that surrounds the tabooed with mythic images.

It was the intensity of the dark reform rhetoric of his youth that carried Whitman beyond conventional moral categories altogether, Reynolds suggests. Whitman, who had devoted much of his young literary career to the exposure of sin, could now blithely declare that he does not believe in sin. “The gross exaggeration of sin has led naturally to the negation of sin,” says Reynolds, who emphatically concludes, “The poetization of sin has led towards literariness.” To him, the “all-encompassing persona of Leaves of Grass (1855),” the “Me imperturbable,” was the result of the liberation of dogmatic moralism, achieved mainly through dark reform writing, in combination with an intense individualism learned in part from Emerson.

About the relative meaning that “good” and “evil” or “reform of evil” had for the mature Whitman, Reynolds points out that by the time the first edition of Leaves of Grass was published, terms like “goodness,” “wickedness,” or “reform of evil” had commensurate import for the writer who having begun as a popular reformer, and who having used popular rhetoric to get rid of conventional moral categories, now placed himself above all moral distinctions and limited reforms.

In the 1881 version of the poem entitled “You Felons on Trial in Courts,” of the cluster “Autumn Rivulets,” Reynolds finds proof that Whitman is assuming the final immoral reform stance. Whereas previous immoral reformers had religiously denied charges of obscenity against them, here Whitman “honestly accepts the charge and in fact proudly brandishes his lust and wickedness.” He concludes that with Whitman, “the ante-bellum reformer’s transparent veil of pretended piety is finally removed from hidden subversiveness.” These are the relevant lines in the final version of the poem, as it appears in the deathbed edition:

You felons on trials in courts,
You convicts in prison-cells, you sentenced assassins chain’d
and handcuff’d with iron,
Who am I too that I am not on trial or in prison?  
Me ruthless and devilish as any, that my wrists are not chain’d with iron, or my ankles with iron?

You prostitutes flaunting over the trottoirs or obscene in your rooms,  
Who am I that I should call you more obscene than myself?

However, the fact is that, judging by the position it occupies in the cluster where it appears and from the prior version of it (1860), the meaning of “You Felons on Trial in Courts” could be construed in quite a different manner from the way Reynolds does. In the cluster where it is found, the poem is preceded by “To Him That Was Crucified,” a mystical poem where the poet addresses Christ. The tone of it prepares the reader for a confession of humility on the part of the poet. The poet reminds the reader of Christ, who pardoned criminals and prostitutes and, being innocent himself, was killed like one of them. After this, Whitman, the priest, the moral teacher, finds himself impelled to place himself among those who need spiritual cleansing. That “You Felons on Trials in Courts” should be read as such a confession is clearly confirmed by the 1860 version of it, from which the following lines were later removed by Whitman:

O bitter sprig! Confession sprig!  
In the bouquet I give you place also—I bind you in,  
Proceeding no further till, humbled publicly,  
I give fair warning, once for all.

I own that I have been sly, thievish, mean, a prevaricator, derelict,  
And I own that remain so yet.137

Thus, it seems clear that the intended meaning of the poem was a self-humiliation and a confession, rather than a definite challenge to “dogmatic morality,” or a step beyond dark-moralism, as Reynolds affirms.

Another matter that seems to cast doubt over Reynolds’s hypothesis is his interpretation of the poem entitled “Respondez,” which was excluded by Whitman from the 1881 and later editions:

RESPONDEZ! Respondez!  
(The war is completed—the price is paid—the title is settled beyond recall;)  
Let every one answer! let those who sleep be waked! let none evade!  
Must we still go on with our affectations and sneaking?  
Let me bring this to a close—I pronounce openly for
a new distribution of roles;
Let that which stood in front go behind! and let that which
was behind advance to the front and speak;
Let murderers, bigots, fools, unclean persons, offer new
propositions!
Let the old propositions be postponed!
Let faces and theories be turn’d inside out! let meanings
be freely criminal, as well as results!
Let there be no suggestion above the suggestion of drudgery!
Let none be pointed toward his destination! (Say! do
you know your destination?)
Let men and women be mock’d with bodies and mock’d with Souls!
Let the love that waits in them, wait! let it die, or pass still born to other
spheres! [. . .]
Let contradictions prevail! let one contradict another!
and let one line of my poems contradict another!
Let people sprawl with yearning, aimless hands! let their
tongues be broken! let their eyes be discouraged! let none
descend into their hearts with the fresh lusciousness of
love! [. . .]
Let the crust of hell be neared and trod on! let the days be
darker than the nights! let slumber bring less slumber
than waking time brings! [. . .]
Let the churches accommodate serpents, vermin, and the corpses
of those who have died of the most filthy of diseases!

“Respondez!” is one of the longest single poems in *Leaves of Grass*,
thus indicating that Whitman took pleasure in describing such a Satanic
vision in detail. Reynolds attempts to use this “quite disgusting poem,” as
he calls it, as further evidence for his hypothesis. But then, he cannot help
expressing his perplexity that at the same time when this poem was being
written (1856) Whitman was also “posing as a pious reformer” in his arti-
cle attacking prostitution. In fact, Reynolds, who quotes a few lines of the
poem but does not quote the first six verses, is selective in the evidence for
his hypothesis, and appears to simply exclude that which does not support
it. One important key to the original meaning of the poem is to be found
in the second part of verse number nine (which Reynolds does not quote):
“let meanings be freely criminal, as well as results!” Whitman is criticizing
social hypocrisy and corruption. In fact, the original title of the poem was
“Poem of the Propositions of Nakedness.” And the revisions added after the
Civil War (a reference to “war” is in the second verse of the poem), reflect the
postwar corruptions which Whitman excoriated that same year (1871) in
the prose of *Democratic Vistas*. Reynolds’s misinterpretation of this poem
does not invalidate his overall theory, but it suggests the possibility that he
may be making Whitman’s unique inspiration far too dependent on socio-cultural variables.

A PROBABLE SYNTHESIS: NATURE, SCIENCE, AND EVOLUTIONARY THEORY

Whitman was strongly influenced by the ideological currents of his time, among those a Romantic return to nature, evolutionary theory (both Darwinian and pre-Darwinian), faith in science, and, quite linked to evolutionary theories, aesthetic morality. In Whitman’s writings, we find an extraordinary synthesis of those ideas. His “Hurrah for Science!” expresses the intense fascination with science that periodically surfaces in his poetry. At the same time, the centrality of nature, an idealized, Romantic, conception of nature, in his poetry—hinted at in the very title of his book—places him in the company of Thoreau, Emerson and, generally speaking, in the context of American Transcendentalism.

Evolutionary theory, both Darwinian and pre-Darwinian, had a strong influence on nineteenth-century philosophers (Hegel and Nietzsche among them), ideologues, and theorists of all brands (including Marx, Comte, and Freud), and even on twentieth-century political and social ideologies (Nazism, eugenics), and on sociological theory. The full dimensions, and the consequences, of this all-pervasive ideological influence on such a diverse set of thinkers is only beginning to be acknowledged. Whitman, as a grand theorist of his time, was by no means immune to the influence of evolutionary theory. In fact, he was quite an enthusiastic believer, who found evolution at work in all aspects of society and culture, including literature and religion. He did not see a conflict between evolution and religion. Neither did Symonds, who in his essay entitled “The Philosophy of Evolution” states: “It cannot be too emphatically insisted on that much-dreaded Darwinism leaves the theological belief in a Divine Being untouched,” and in another essay entitled “On the Applications of Evolutionary Principles to Art and Literature,” he gives theoretical formulation to much of what Whitman had expressed in poetic form. Evolutionary ideas did indeed play a crucial role in Whitman’s worldview. In a 1888 conversation with Traubel, when expressing his skepticism concerning the amalgamation of blacks and whites, he said: “I don’t believe in it [amalgamation of whites and blacks]—it is not possible. The nigger, like the Injun will be eliminated: it is the law of races, history, what-not: always so far inexorable—always to be. Someone proves that a superior grade of rats comes and then all minor rats are cleared out.” Folsom sees also “a kind of Darwinian view of race” in an annotation made by Whitman in a manuscript fragment that appears to have been written as part of Democratic Vistas but was never published:

The blacks must either filter through in time or gradually eliminate & disappear, which is more likely though that termination is far off, or else they
must so develop in mental and moral qualities and in all the attributes of a leading and dominant race (which I do not think likely). 141

To Whitman, the same as to many of his contemporaries—philosophers, ideologues, and common people—evolution was an *inexorable* law, the way of nature, always leading to new forms of perfection (think of Bucke’s cosmic consciousness, a result of the evolution of the human intellect, as he defines it). Thus, it was something that called for our cooperation. Through conscious cooperation, the pace of evolution could be sped up, the goals, both good and inevitable, reached sooner. That belief underlies Marx’s theory, as well those of Hegel, Comte, Nietzsche, and, of course, Whitman. With Comte, Marx, Nietzsche, and other grand theorists of his time, Whitman also shared in their messianic aspirations. In his final years, Nietzsche too founded a new religion (or at least he attempted to142), and even signed his name as “Christ,” while Marx started a true civil religion, with strong messianic and eschatological components. Similar messianic elements are found in other contemporaries of Whitman.

Seen as a moral reformer, Whitman synthesized an idealized form of the intellectual currents of his time—with his particular addition of the love of comrades. It is the love of comrades that constitutes Whitman’s truly unique contribution to an ideology of moral reform which otherwise faithfully reflects and synthesizes a set of dominant ideas that equally influenced many of his contemporaries.
Conclusion

To Paul Zweig, Whitman was “an astonishing combination of poetic genius, street theater and fraud.” Zweig’s remark is not to be taken as derogatory. Whitman’s poetic genius is acknowledged. Added to that is the dramatic (or “theatrical”) aspect, and finally the illusory, the deceptive, the fraud. Still, what has survived of Whitman is his poetic genius and his enduringly original message. Neither Whitman the messiah nor the wounddresser are much remembered nowadays, and his anonymous self-reviews, whether or not they achieved their objective, are not needed any more, as Leaves of Grass stands on its own merits.

Whitman is a complex figure, and despite his declaring himself divine inside and out, an all too human one as well. In an attempt to go beyond the myth, here we have investigated the real Whitman. The result is an uncomfortable mixture of good and bad. Whitman was not the supra-human figure above all weaknesses and inconsistencies that the missionaries of his religion represented him to be. While he was prophetic, mystical, and messianic in his style, he was neither a prophet, nor a mystic or a messiah. His style simply reflected the aesthetics and world-shattering intellectual scene of his time, with other such messiahs and prophets as Comte, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud claiming as well social, religious, and intellectual revolutions of an apocalyptic magnitude for their grand theories. This is Whitman’s proper context. He was first and foremost a grand theorist, a typically nineteenth-century grand theorist. He should be classified side by side with the other grand theorists of his time. He used poetry as a preferred vehicle for communicating his ideas, but he also made it very explicit that he did not want to be looked at primarily as a literary figure. And it is perhaps his having been treated exclusively as a literary figure throughout the twentieth century that may have clouded his true dimensions as a grand theorist.

Whitman’s grand theory was impressionistic rather than systematic. Still, he indeed had a distinct theory of human nature, which was embodied in religious language of mystical overtones. He sought to give social expression to
his theory of human nature through a new moral code of which the ethics of comradeship constitutes the dominant aspect. Moreover, he reveals himself as a reformer who, besides implementing his new ethics of comradeship, sought a more comprehensive moral reform.

That Whitman founded a new religion is not a new finding. While, as we saw in Chapter 1, William James believed orthodoxy was beginning to be defined in the Whitman cult, it was a religion, nevertheless, that was devoid of institutional structures and dogma. The religious project did not last long enough to crystallize into an institutional structure or to develop a systematic creed. Thus, despite the numerous references to “religion” we find in Whitman’s own writings and in those of his early followers, it would be, perhaps, more accurate to see it as a new type of spirituality. In any case, this is a crucial aspect of Whitman’s legacy that, as a general rule, tends to be downplayed by modern biographers, and simply ignored in the less technical discussions of the poet. The fact remains, however, that the original meaning of his work lies in his attempt to impress upon the world his mystical and messianic view of human nature. In attempting a revolutionary change of historic dimensions, and in starting a new religion, Whitman is also comparable to the other grand theorists of his time. Indeed, he was one of them, and one who avidly absorbed the ideological currents and cultural trends that were dominant then (he was a “cultural ventriloquist,” in Reynolds’s words²). That Whitman started a new religion should not come as too much of a surprise when we consider both the fact that other grand theorists of his time did too, and that nineteenth-century America was a place of religious creativity (let’s think, for example of Joseph Smith, and Mary Baker Eddy).

Whitman was homosexual. There is very little doubt about it, despite the attempts, specially by his early biographers, to show that he was not. While the homoerotic expressions in the “Calamus” poems could arguably be interpreted metaphorically, what we know about his private life leaves very little room for doubt. The annotations in his diaries, his emotional effusions to the soldiers (accompanied by caresses and kisses on the lips), his love letters to some of them, his non-reciprocated romantic love for Peter Doyle and, in later years, his passion for eighteen-year-old Harry Stafford (“Hank”), with whom he exchanged rings and shared a bed when travelling together, in combination with his lack of romantic interest in women, are facts that point clearly to a homosexual orientation. Whitman’s sexual and romantic orientation is an important fact in that, in the last analysis, it reveals the meaning of his poetry and of his messianic enterprise, although not in the blunt sexual and genital sense Robert K. Martin and others claim. The fact is there is not much, if anything at all, we know about Whitman’s sexual life, if he had one indeed.³

The poet never acknowledged his homosexuality publicly. Perhaps he never fully did to himself either. He could not accept the notion of homosexuality as a marginal, socially stigmatized phenomenon, not even as a circumstance affecting just a minority of the people. At times, he seemed to believe
that it was only prudishness and social or religious fears that prevented all men from giving free expression to those intense impulses of comradeship (not homosexual impulses, as R. K. Martin suggests, the difference in conceptualization being crucial). While the calamus plant is clearly a phallic symbol, Whitman’s ideal of male love (“adhesiveness”) seems to suggest an exalted and idealized male friendship, rather than homosexual sexual intercourse. The latter cannot be totally discarded, however, since a number of expressions in his poetry appear to contain ambiguous meanings that could arguably be interpreted as a veiled reference to sexual intercourse. Whitman, indeed, liked to play with ambiguity as a way to allow the reader to do his or her reading and interpretation of his poetry. The very title of his book is a good example of it, as it does not necessarily or exclusively refer to blades of grass. “Grass” was a term used by printers when referring to unfinished or experimental typesetting, while the “leaves” were the actual leaves or scraps of paper on which Whitman wrote the poems that he was to arrange and rearrange over the course of the many editions of his book.

In any case, Whitman did not see homosexuality as separate from heterosexuality (using somewhat anachronistically today’s concepts). Although he must have become aware, particularly after leaving the Washington hospitals, that not every man shared or even understood his emotional impulses, in his poetry he encourages every male to share the feeling of adhesiveness and to express it in his relationships with other men. Through a process of painful experiences, perhaps beginning with his horrifying experience as a young school teacher, Whitman must have become aware of the fact that the true nature of his feelings was of a socially unacceptable kind, simply unspeakable. In old age, he certainly knew perfectly well what the rules of the social game were, as demonstrated by his remarks to Traubel in an old letter describing the idyll between an American man and a native Hawaiian boy.

In 1869, Whitman had received a letter from Charles Warren Stoddard, an admirer of his poetry to whom the “Calamus” poems were a true revelation. Going over a bunch of old letters three years before his death, Whitman came across Stoddard’s, and asked Traubel to read it aloud to him. He liked that letter, he said. Stoddard wrote his letter from the Hawaiian Islands, where he had found the true Paradise of camaraderie. In his missive, he described how he travelled from hamlet to hamlet, sometimes a village consisting of only a few isolated straw huts, and how, upon his arrival at a new place, the natives would surround him and stare at him with curiosity. Stoddard, for his part, also scrutinized the natives, while fixing his eyes on the handsomest lad:

I mark one, a lad of eighteen or twenty years, who is regarding me. I call him to me, ask his name, giving mine in return. He speaks it over and over, manipulating my body unconsciously, as it were, with bountiful and unconstrained love. I go to his grass house, eat with him his simple food, sleep with him upon his mats, and at night sometimes waken to find
him watching me with earnest, patient looks, his arm over my breast and around me. In the morning he hates to have me go. I hate as much to leave him. Over and over I think of him as I travel: he doubtless recalls me sometimes, perhaps wishes me back with him. We were known to one another perhaps twelve hours. Yet I cannot forget him. Everything that pertains to him now interests me.4

In his letter, Stoddard writes that, for the first time, “I act as my nature prompts me,” and complains that he cannot do so in America, “not even in California, where men are tolerably bold,” adding that “[t]his is my mode of life.” He concludes by saying that he now understands Whitman’s poems “[a]s few may be able to.” Whitman had responded to him with a brief letter of warm approval. But it is his comment to Traubel, many years later, that I find relevant for our present discussion, as it is clearly indicative of Whitman’s full awareness of the social rejection of same-sex love: “[Stoddard] is right: occidental people, for the most part, would not only not understand but would likewise condemn the sort of thing about which Stoddard centers his letter.”5

Quite paradoxically, consciously or semiconsciously, Whitman took advantage of the unspeakable character that surrounded anything to do with same-sex attraction and sexuality precisely in order to speak of it in amazingly bold terms. Because it was unspeakable it could be spoken of without anyone daring to speak about it—that is, to publicly state that (the unspeakable). In other words, the matter was unspeakable but not necessarily unthinkable. Many a reader knew what Whitman was talking about. Carpenter, Symonds and Oscar Wilde certainly did, as did Traubel and others less vocal about the matter. The latter, and others like him, in complicity with the poet, chose to subscribe to his messianic project of mystical camaraderie rather than becoming pioneers of the new liberation movement that Carpenter and Symonds represented. Whitman had in mind a liberation movement of his own.

Whitman’s activities in the Washington hospitals were not free from suspicion. Nurses, priests, doctors, and anyone around must have intuited that Whitman’s affectionate behavior towards the soldiers, which included kissing on the lips, revealed far more than simple friendship or camaraderie. Indeed, those behaviors raised concerns in some quarters,6 but again those concerns could not get too far, as they dealt with the unspeakable. Those who might have brought the charge against Whitman simply did not dare to speak about it—and when, exceptionally, someone did, he did so in ritualistic terms.

Early in Whitman’s career, in 1855, we find an anonymous review (written by Rufus Griswold) published in The Criterion, in which Leaves of Grass is condemned for its sexual immorality, with the author referring to the “peccatum illud horrible, inter Christianos non nominandum.”7 But was Whitman describing sodomy in his poetry? If that had been the case, nineteenth-century America certainly had a word for it. Indeed, occasionally charges of sodomy
were brought up against certain individuals, as shown by police records of the
time and in newspaper reports. But sodomy was understood (or rather mis-
understood) from a strictly heterosexual perspective as just a sinful act and a
mechanical one, certainly not the result of the genuine desire and attraction
a man feels, which was understood to be always directed towards a woman.
But love... romantic love, between men? People had an intuition for it, but no
words yet. This made Whitman's project even bolder and more daring.

Far from seeing those feelings of attraction to other men as a marginal
and stigmatized phenomenon, Whitman conceived of homoerotic impulses
as a sublime aspect of a man's character, something that deserved to be cul-
tivated, particularly in young men. It was just a matter of re-conceptualizing
that reality, and presenting it in a whole different light, as something alien to
the old, unspeakable notion of sodomy or, for that matter, to the new idea of
homosexuality. In the last analysis, one could say that Whitman attempted to
dignify what we understand today as the homosexual condition. In order to
implement on a large scale the kind of behaviors that accompany the feeling of
adhesiveness, he chose a messianic and mystical language.

By presenting himself as a new prophet and a mystic, he could claim for
his message of moral reform the kind of unquestionable authority that no
other source could provide, as it had been received through inspiration or
revelation. He was the new messiah, the one to preach the good news, the
new gospel of male camaraderie. It is highly improbable that Whitman had
a fully conscious plan, or a well-calculated scheme, to carry out his project.
Rather, he intuited that only from the grand moral standpoint of a messiah
he could claim the necessary authority to propose what otherwise would have
been considered by society outright perversion, with a sure defeat precisely on
moral grounds. Also, the extreme devotion, verging on fanaticism, of his clos-
est followers, the religious overtones of their veneration and of their language
when referring to Leaves of Grass, did contribute decisively to shape Whit-
man's religious enterprise and its accompanying project of moral reform.

Whitman's attempt to implement his new morality, a morality of homo-
sexual connotations, involved at least in principle an important compromise:
the renunciation of the genital aspects of homosexuality in exchange for a
wider pool of potential partners. As a matter of fact, the kind of compromise
Whitman was implicitly proposing is something that has developed sponta-
neously in all traditional cultures. In societies of the Far East and in the Arab
world, for example, even today physical contact between males of a kind that
in the West would suggest homosexuality is common and public, but in those
socio-cultural contexts they are not thought of in any way as a sign of homo-
sexuality—or, if they are thought of as such by some, they are not spoken of
as such. Men, for example, may walk hand in hand in the streets or dance
together on certain occasions the way women sometimes do in the West. This
is what I have called the marginality of friendship. Germanic and Anglo-Saxon
societies, the most heavily industrialized and capitalist societies, have become
in modern times the most restrictive ones as far as the continuum of permissiveness concerning male contact. During Whitman’s life, the marginality of friendship enjoyed a broad definition (which he expanded even further in the Washington hospitals). In Reynolds’s words “[p]assionate intimacy between people of the same sex was commonplace in pre–Civil War America” to which he adds that the lack of clear sexual categories (homosexual, heterosexual), that were to emerge later in the nineteenth century made same-sex affection unselfconscious and widespread. And he is right in describing Whitman in his historical and cultural context as “mainly a romantic comrade who had a series of intense relationships with young men,” many of whom went on to get married and have children. And, given the cultural atmosphere that allowed for such a broad definition of the marginality of friendship, Reynolds is again correct in stating that “[w]hatever the nature of [Whitman’s] physical relationship with them [the young men], most of the passages of same-sex love in his poems were not out of keeping with then-current theories and practices that underscored the healthiness of such love.”

Whitman was not just trying to turn back the clock by rescuing the by then progressively narrowing marginality of friendship. His project was more ambitious. He wanted to broaden it and demarginalize it by turning it into a habitual pattern of male behavior. The name he chose for the emotion underlying those behaviors was “adhesiveness,” a term borrowed from the language of phrenology for which the aptest category he could find in the common language was “comradeship.”

Not that Whitman simply tried to achieve for American society the type of physical contact between males that is habitual in some non-Western societies. His was a bold experiment that went beyond that. Whitman’s ideal resembles more the concept of Greek love in ancient Greece, as expounded by Symonds in A Problem in Greek Ethics. In his time, the educated middle-class found in ancient Greece a model of virility and male bonding in which, as E. K. Sedgwick writes, “male homosocial institutions (education, political mentorship, brotherhood in arms) and the homosexual seemed to be fully continuous, and fully exclude the world of women.”

With this in mind, Whitman should not be considered a predecessor of the gay rights movement—if anything, the opposite. He did not believe in homosexuality as a separate sexual and social phenomenon, excluded from mainstream culture and society. For him, holding hands and kissing on the lips between males were to be the signs of a more elevated kind of friendship than known hitherto, the outward sign of a spiritually superior race of men. Whitman was neither a gay liberation prophet nor a sexual liberation prophet. While some of his writings may have been a source of inspiration to some gay activists and intellectuals, one could not be more in agreement with Sedgwick’s insight that “Whitman’s influence on the crystallization, in the latter nineteenth century, of what was to prove a durable and broadly-based Anglo-American definition of male homosexuality, was profound and
decisive, but almost certainly not—in its final effect—at all what he would have desired."

Such an ambitious project—what I have referred to as “Whitman’s messianic project”—could not possibly be carried out by rational persuasion (indeed, Whitman used to say that logic and argument never convince). It required the kind of authority that only mystical revelation could provide, thus the role of Whitman’s religion and the mystical aura in which the initiates surrounded their prophet.

Whitman’s aestheticism had a profound influence in shaping his ideal of the adhesive American male and of the new society he dreamed about. His identification of the beautiful with the good places him broadly within the Platonic tradition, markedly opposed in its valuation of physical beauty to the Christian and Neoplatonic philosophies. Symonds, an expert on classical Greek culture, said that Whitman “is more truly Greek than any other man of modern times.” This “Greek” identification of the good and the beautiful is an important affinity Whitman had with his contemporaries Nietzsche and Wilde. While Whitman was familiar with the aestheticist theories of Ruskin, he most likely came in contact with an aestheticist interpretation of Plato through the writings of Ralph W. Emerson, whom he called “dear Master,” who agreed with the ancient Greeks that beauty is the flowering of virtue, and who in Nature states that beauty is the mark God sets upon virtue.

Whitman (though not Traubel) also shared in the racist ideology that infected European and American intellectual life from the time Whitman was writing Leaves of Grass to the mid-twentieth century, culminating in Nazism. As Reynolds points out, a consensus among scientists and phrenologists was emerging in the second half of the nineteenth century that there was a hierarchy of races. Just one year before the first edition of Leaves of Grass, Count Arthur de Gobineau published The Inequality of Human Races (1854), an extremely influential work that soon made its way into America. The very title of its final chapter is enough to give us an idea of the contents of the book: “Recapitulation: The respective characteristics of the three great races; the superiority of the white type, and within this type, of the Aryan family.” At the heart of this phenomenon was the extreme influence that evolutionary theories (pre-Darwinian and, later, in a more intense and decisive manner, Darwinian) had on all levels of culture and society, and the all-pervasive belief that it was our scientific and political duty to cooperate with the inexorable law of evolution in order to accelerate the process of racial amelioration, all of which gave rise to eugenic thought and theories.

Like Comte, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and other grand theorists of the nineteenth century, Whitman was convinced that the rise of Christianity had been part of the process of evolution and that the Christian religion, with its unpalatable opposition between the Beautiful and the Good was finally coming to an end. Exactly the same as Comte, Marx, Freud, Nietzsche and, decades later,
Hitler, Whitman believed Christianity was destined to die a natural death within a very short time. Also like Nietzsche and Hitler (Nietzsche’s admirer), he had a fervent admiration for the ancient Greeks, with their identification of physical beauty and goodness. This strange anti-Christian–Greek-Evolutionary ideological compound that took shape between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries gave rise in the case of Whitman to poetry of mystical overtones and to a unique and genial project of moral reform, with only some marginal racist aspects, later erased by those disciples who defined the orthodoxy of the movement, Traubel in particular. On the other hand, that same ideological compound, when associated to a nationalistic, fanatic ideology, became a crucial ingredient in the attempt to justify the madness of a murderous regime.

Turning to the question of Emerson’s influence on Whitman, a common ideological ground is obvious in many instances, despite the poet’s ambivalence (which Jerome Loving finds utterly insincere) in old age towards acknowledging the influence of him whom he called “Master” after the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman seems to incarnate some of Emerson’s main ideas, as expressed in essays such as “Self-Reliance” (think of the very title of “Song of Myself”19) and “The Poet.” Still, Whitman’s central concern with comradeship and adhesiveness is not present in any of Emerson’s writings. It constitutes Whitman’s most genuine contribution.

Of the theories reviewed that attempt to explain the reasons for Whitman’s moralizing intent in his poetry, none of them offers a balanced analysis. Briggs’s eulogy of Whitman offers virtually no criticism of any value. His belief that Whitman’s ideas coincide with the best of every major philosophical movement reveals the heart of a faithful follower rather than the mind of an objective critic. Martin is also selective in his use of textual evidence, though in this case his selections, and the implausible interpretations he makes of some of them, reveal the mind of the radical gay activist. Contrasting with Martin’s interpretation, Kuebrich’s is equally selective and equally improbable in some instances, although this time with the purpose of proving that Whitman was a mystic and a religious reformer in quite a conventional way. Reynolds, for his part, makes Whitman so dependent on socio-cultural variables that in the end he seems to reduce the poet’s ideas to a fashionable rhetoric for his time.

In reality, Whitman rebelled against ritualistic religious practices of his time, which he found cold and empty. But he rebelled especially against a code of social ethics that progressively dictated more distant and competitive relationships between males. He rationalized his homosexual impulses and experienced them on an elevated emotional level rather than on the level of pure sexual desire. Whitman had, indeed, a project of moral reform for male-to-male relationships. But it was limited to his attempt to rescue and mainstream the then-narrowing code of behavior that allowed intense expressions of physical affection between men. As stated earlier, Whitman was not a precursor
of the modern gay liberation movement, and he would not have wanted to be seen in that light. As a matter of fact, in matters other than the goal of his project of moral reform, his moral views were what we would generally label as conservative. Whitman did not support the women's rights movement. He opposed the Free Love movement, and strongly condemned pornography, abortion, and masturbation. And, despite the fact that he never married, he viewed marriage as the basis of civilization, and was firmly opposed to any kind of sexual experimentation that threatened the marital institution.

Whitman, in brief, was in many aspects unique but, again, he was also a man of his times. He was not divine or even above human weaknesses and contradictions, not even above common social prejudice. His genius consisted in his ability to absorb the ideological currents of his time and produce a unique and quite original synthesis of his own. It is in this unique synthesis, in the way in which his grand theory of human nature combines evolution, revolution, religion, and poetry, and in his ultimate goal of moral reform—a projection perhaps of his own sexual makeup—that Whitman's true genius lies.

AN AFTERTHOUGHT: TRAUBEL, HOMOSEXUALITY, AND THE WHITMAN MYTH

Out of the sea of biographical, apologetic, critical, and defensive literature of the early Whitman movement one picture emerges with clarity: Whitman was a great poet and a man with a dream, a dream which in his mind acquired mystical proportions, a dream he felt as sublime. But that sublime vision was limited to the love of comrades and to its philosophical, social, and political derivations. In that dream, and in the way he framed his dream against his particular synthesis of the ideological currents of his time, he showed his genius. But when it came to most other social issues (war, women's rights, race, etc.) he was an average man, whose opinions evolved over time. Some of his opinions (particularly in his younger years) have what we would consider today rather unacceptable racist connotations. However, in 1884 he declared to Carpenter to be satisfied with admission of all foreigners, adding that “the future of the world is one of open communication and solidarity of all races; and if that problem cannot be solved in America it cannot be solved anywhere.”

It seems to me those fluctuating, sometimes even contradictory, opinions on issues such as immigration and racial amalgamation show that in such matters Whitman was not a visionary. Horace Traubel was. And, through his intense personal relationship with the poet, he was responsible in a subtle way for helping him bring some of his opinions to a more palatable centrist position.

To a large extent, Traubel was responsible for building Whitman’s reputation after his death. True, in his colossal With Walt Whitman in Camden there is no attempt to hide the ugly or the mediocre in him. But after the death of
Walt Whitman’s Mystical Ethics of Comradeship

the poet, in the pages of *The Conservator*, throughout its thirty years of existence, it was Traubel who defined the orthodoxy of the Whitman movement, with his socially and politically progressive editorial line. For this progressive thought, Traubel and others in the pages of *The Conservator* thanked Whitman, which had the effect of crediting Whitman with principles and beliefs some of which he was unlikely to have held, at least in a consistent manner throughout his life.25

As revealed in his personal correspondence, Traubel had romantic affairs with men. Concerning such liaisons, other than the fact that they occasionally travelled together, however, I have not found any documentary evidence that Traubel was romantically involved with Percival Wikes (a member of the Whitman circle), as Schmidgall suggests.26 Joan Krieg, for her part, has unveiled at least one relationship Traubel had with Philip Dalmas, a young and extremely seductive composer from Philadelphia. That Traubel had a romantic relationship of some intensity with this young man seems beyond doubt from the correspondence made public in 1996 by Joan Krieg. We read, for example, in one of Dalmas’s letters to Traubel:

“How I love this slave, this coward slave [. . .]. At thought of him there wells up in my soul that which vainly strives to pour into the world to show how great a thing lies in his bosom. I will go to that slave and say be my master for you have shown me the liberty.”27

Faithful to Whitman’s dream, however, Traubel did not conceptualize his romantic attachments to men as homosexuality. In a letter dated January 1893, addressed to J. C. Wallace, a British Whitmanite with whom Traubel also had an intense relationship, he discusses Symonds’s insistence on reading homosexuality in Whitman’s poems. He writes:

I am not sure but that homosexual stuff he talks of argues bad for his comprehension not only of L. Of G. [*Leaves of Grass*] but of the time in which we live. It is not anywhere near any truth that such phenomena plays a considerable part in our history, and it certainly would not appear in L. Of G. where there exists the most solid and substantial avowal of sex. Homosexuality is disease—it is muck and rot—it is decay and muck—and Walt uttered master-cries of health, of salvation, . . . of growth and beauty [. . .]. It is strange that Symonds should have [. . .] sickly and ridiculous speculations such as these.28

Traubel must have felt some uncertainty, though, as to what the meaning of this new word was, and whether it applied to the beloved master, or to himself, for that matter. In February 1893, just one month after having written the above letter, he wrote to Wallace Daniel Brinton, a professor of archaeology and linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania who had had long talks alone
with Whitman in Camden. Whitman, said Brinton, was “what I like (in the best sense) to call adhesive: a good comrade, a ripe intellect.” Traubel raised with him the question of Whitman’s homosexuality. Brinton first declared to be staggered by the strange Latin-Greek hybrid “homosexuality,” adding that “if it refers to something abnormal—as it sounds—for heaven’s sake let us keep away from it. It would be meat and drink for the decriers of W.W. to learn that this too is suspected to be one of his inspirations.”

Ironically, one year later, after a pilgrimage to West Hills, where Whitman had lived as a young man, in his report for The Conservator he was to write:

“[W]e inquired whether Walt was a gay lad among the lassies of the village—a beau in the rustic society of his day—and both returned the same reply: ‘Not in the least.’ ‘He seemed to hate women,’ said one of them—a hard, and, I am sure, quite too strong expression, but one which forcibly shows how alien even to his hot blood of twenty summers were all effeminate longings.”

In 1895, the question of homosexuality made itself more present through the trial of Oscar Wilde. Traubel was informed that Carpenter encouraged sodomitic practices, and that he was spreading the idea that Whitman should be construed in the same way. Once again, he turned to Brinton for an opinion. This time, the latter told him of his suspicion of Whitman to the same effect. In May of that year, Brinton refused to stand for re-election as president of the Walt Whitman Fellowship, citing as his main reason the change that had taken place in the interpretation of Whitman’s life and work. Homo-sexuality was winning over comradeship.
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A Queer (Theory) Postscript

The publisher has asked me to add some Queer Theory reflections to my Whitman book. When it was still a proposal for publication, virtually everyone who reviewed my manuscript made the point that it was lacking in Queer Theory. For the benefit of the author, who might be unaware of the intricacies of such a field, some of the reviewers summarized in their reports the main tenets of Queer Theory. The publisher felt that uneasiness over the lack of Queer Theory in my book, a book that deals with the question of Walt Whitman’s (homo)sexuality, might come up again among readers. Rather than turning my book into a (queer) exercise in Queer Theory (since that is not what my book was intended to be in the first place), I suggested dealing with it in a separate appendix.

Not that in my work I had violated the fundamental postulates of Queer Theory. With the exception of certain contexts where it is customary to use the term “homo-sexuality,” such as when referring to homosexuality in ancient Greece, I had, indeed, been careful not to apply that word, or the word “gay” for that matter, to Whitman or any of his contemporaries, at least not in a substantive manner. My concern was not rooted in a solid conviction that it is wholly anachronistic and wrong to use those words with reference to individuals who lived at a time when such terms had not even been coined or had not yet penetrated their cultural milieu. Rather, my careful wording was done mostly out of fear, an obscure fear of Queer Theorists and Queer Theory-conscious readers pointing their finger at my presumed ignorance. Queer Theory, in its most radical version, has assumed such a prominent role in the field of gay and lesbian studies that any attempt to ignore its postulates in a work that deals with homosexuality and history is automatically assumed to be the result of pitiful incompetence on the part of its author, while an open critique of those dogmas will automatically bring about the accusation of essentialism.

This is not at all to deny the usefulness that a Queer Theory perspective has for my work on Whitman. Such a perspective is indeed implicit in my thesis and conclusions: Whitman did not identify himself as part of a stigmatized minority, as a homosexual, and when the question was posed to him whether he was one, he angrily denied it. Thus, it would be wrong to categorize him as such, since he never assumed that label or even the idea it stands for. Having said this, and because my thesis is stated in unambiguous terms—i.e., that Whitman resisted the emergence of a self-identified homosexual
minority—I still felt legitimized to apply the term “homosexual” in certain contexts for the sake of expediency, and with the basic meaning of “someone who feels same-sex attraction.” That occasional use of the word in my book is also justified by the fact that the meaning of the word “homosexual” has evolved from being a medical label for mentally diseased people (who, having been informed that they were sick, became anguished and behaved like sick persons, and sought treatment) to today’s homosexual, a far cry from the homosexual of the past. In other words, the very existence of the word “homosexual” in a multiplicity of historical and cultural contexts is no guarantee that we are facing the same reality in each case. By the same token, the careful application of that term to historical contexts where it was not yet in use does not necessarily imply anachronism or misunderstanding. Even Byrne R. S. Fone, a most orthodox Queer Theorist, feels himself compelled to make the same concession. In his Introduction to *Masculine Landscapes* (1992), after acknowledging that “[w]hat homosexual has come to represent for us [. . .] may well not be at all what ‘manly love’ meant for Whitman,” he still refers to Whitman as “a homosexual man” because “homosexual is the most available word we have,” and so, like Havelock Ellis, whom he quotes as saying that such a dislikable word is simply “convenient,” Fone concludes that it is “for convenience” also that he uses it “despite its heavy historical freight.” I suspect many, if not all, of those accused of essentialism would happily subscribe to Fone’s argument.

In any case, by the end of Whitman’s life the word “homosexual” had been in existence for almost three decades, initially in the German-speaking medical milieu, where it originated, but soon also in the English speaking world, at least in England. As we saw in Chapter 4, Symonds, one of Whitman’s most fervent disciples, had used the word “homosexual” in print years before Whitman’s death in 1892, and within two years of the poet’s death we have documentary evidence that Traubel was using that word in his private correspondence. It is hard to think that an avid reader like Whitman was completely unaware of the new coinage. It seems more plausible that he did not use the word out of a conscious rejection of the concept, because of its implicit attempt to medicalize same-sex love and its establishing it as a separate category, something which the poet must have found extremely threatening to his own project of moral reform.

**A Queer (Theory) Twist: No New Species**

Whitman chose to conceptualize his erotic attraction to men as comradeship, as an exalted expression of masculine camaraderie, something present in every man’s heart (particularly in young men) waiting to be liberated, as he himself put it. In that sense, Whitman assumed the role of liberator. He was not the sexual liberator that the popular late-twentieth-century misunderstanding had him to be, but a moral liberator, and, insofar as he had a political dream derived from his theory of comradeship, also a political one. Was he a homosexual man? In Fone’s general use of the word, he was indeed and, despite the “good-willed” attempts on the part of some of his biographers and early followers to show that he had some occasional liaisons with women in his youth, I am convinced that there was no such fluidity in his romantic and sexual interests. If he ever had a sexual affair with a woman, something that appears to still be the subject of some speculation among current biographers, it was not due to genuine desire but only the result of internalized social pressure.

As I said, Whitman chose to conceptualize his intense feelings of attraction to other men as comradeship. It may have been initially a semiconscious choice, due to the simple
need to place his feelings within some known category. But over time Whitman became aware that the kind of romantic and sexual impulses he experienced clearly overflowed the chosen category. This realization is made clear by the fact that in his personal annotations and diaries, as well as in some poems, he changed the original masculine pronouns to the feminine precisely in those contexts most expressive of erotic attraction or romantic passion. It is at that moment that we can safely assume that Whitman was acting upon a fully conscious plan to establish a new conceptualization of same-sex attraction as an exalted feeling of comradeship.

While his contemporaries in the medical profession and in the police were busy generating new sexual knowledge by applying power techniques such as confession, Whitman, for his part, was mounting a monumental challenge to the medical and psychiatric appropriation of truth in the deepest waters of the human soul. If the medical profession was determined to turn the occasional sinner—the sodomite—into a new species—the homosexual—Whitman had a more ambitious project: to liberate the capacity that lies deep in every man’s heart for same-sex love and attraction. As stated in the conclusion, he was not just trying to turn back the clock by reviving a more ample definition of the marginality of friendship, as in the good old days. Rather, he set himself to a colossal task—that of redefining the marginality of friendship to such an extent that it would no longer be characteristic of “marginal” situations but that it would be the natural, spontaneous behavior of men in everyday life. That, if taken to the limits Whitman wished, would have erased the hetero/homo dichotomy, which hadn’t yet been clearly defined by the time Whitman died (the word “heterosexual” was a later coinage, and was originally used to refer to a libertine), but which was to become so acutely divisive throughout the twentieth century.

WHITMAN’S DISAPPOINTMENT AND THE NEW SEXUAL ECONOMY

Had Whitman succeeded with his project of moral reform, there would have been no room whatsoever for the gay liberation movement. Had he truly and completely succeeded at mainstreaming the marginality of friendship, the gay liberation movement would have never emerged, as there would not have been a need for it. Moreover, had a gay liberation movement come into existence, Whitman followers would have done everything in their power to suppress it. Gay liberation and Whitman’s comradeship are two incompatible concepts.

If, by some magic means, we were able to bring Whitman to our days and show him the accomplishments of the gay liberation movement, we can speculate (or rather fantasize) that he might suddenly convert to gay liberation if, by a generalized misunderstanding, he were received as a leader and acclaimed as such by the gay and lesbian crowds of our day. Gay liberation lovers of Whitman may avoid frustration by fantasizing about it, and it would be good stuff for a movie or a novel. But if the poet were consistent with his own ideas, he would certainly reject the gay liberation movement. The obsessive emphasis on sex and genitalia that has become so pervasive in the gay world, and the omnipresence of pornography, would have disgusted the idealistic (and conservative) poet of camaraderie.

Of course Whitman liked sex, and he possibly had sexual liaisons with men throughout his life. We have at least what appears to be one solid testimony of it in Gavin Arthur’s written account of Carpenter’s disclosure that he had a sexual
encounter with the poet. And when we think of a passionately-in-love man sharing his bed with his eighteen-year-old comrade, as Whitman and Harry Stafford did, it is certainly hard to think they did not have sexual contact of some sort. However, contrary to what a number of activist-authors seem to assume, proving, if documentary proof is found one day, that Whitman had sex with men does not make him a gay liberationist in any sense. Whitman may have had sex with men but, if he did, he chose to frame those experiences in a radically different manner, by ascribing a wholly different meaning to them from that of the gay liberationist of our day. Nor was Whitman a queer activist or prophet in any meaningful sense of the expression. Sure, his rejection of a new and fixed sexual identity will ring familiar among Queer Theorists. And true enough, his thought was the exact opposite from the politics of identity that have characterized gay liberation to our day. But his project was one of moral reform, with religion and mystical revelation at its center, as the source of authority—a far cry from the queer perspective. He did not seek to destabilize the nuclei of power; rather, when it came to social morality he was on the conservative side.

Capitalism and technology have combined in our days to produce a new sexual economy. Eros—transactional love—has become more acutely transactional in our days than ever before. As opposed to agape—indiscriminate love—erotic relationships have always consisted of an economic transaction, mostly in kind but exceptionally also in monetary form (prostitution). Two partners trade access to the goods they possess (their sexually-appealing bodies) when they consider their respective goods to be of equal value. That is a transaction in kind. When one of the partners does not possess the required value for the transaction (a sufficiently sexually appealing body), some individuals will assign a monetary value to the good they possess and allow the transaction to take place by accepting money in exchange for their value.

Despite being so, nevertheless, erotic love cannot be reduced to a simple transaction. In spite of mass pornography, the ultimate form of capitalism, with its worship and overvaluation of fitness, beauty and youth, which accentuates, as an unavoidable counterpart, the undervaluation of old age and lack of standard beauty, erotic love, no matter in what form or shape, whether in a Platonic idealized manner or in a physical relationship, no matter how brief the sexual encounter may be, always gives rise to a spirituality of some sort. Even if the feeling is repressed, a sexual relationship, again, no matter how brief or how anonymous it may be, is always an appeal to the poetry in the human heart, it is the expression of a deep desire for intimacy and acceptance. It is that poetry of the heart, that spirituality that arises out of Eros and sexual desire, that becomes magnified to mystical levels in Whitman’s idealization of comradeship.

Whitman’s closest followers were convinced that Whitman was bringing a new order to the world that would overthrow the monstrous capitalism of their times. The poet followers in Bolton (England) interpreted Whitman’s revolutionary new order in straightforward political terms. Comradeship was for them the emblematic value of socialism. It was not through Marxist revolutionary ideas, but through the implementation of comradeship, that socialism would eventually triumph. The Conservator, the unofficial voice of the Whitman circle, reads throughout its thirty years of uninterrupted existence as a socially engaged, progressive, even radical publication, with numberless articles on socialism, anarchism, animal rights and vegetarianism, together with antiwar articles and articles against capital punishment, as well as strong rejections of racism and anti-Semitism. While Whitman never defined himself
as a socialist, he envisioned a socialistic society under the aegis of camaraderie. Inevitably, he and his disciples would be disappointed at the sexual economy that appears to dominate the gay world of today, so devoid of Greek virtue (as defined by Symonds), martial spirit, and poetry, so devoid of spirituality, in a word, and so radically capitalistic in its conception of love.

**QUEER (THEORY) CONFUSION AND ITS USES**

It should be by now a foregone conclusion that Whitman would reject the dichotomies heterosexual/homosexual and gay (or queer)/straight. But it seems to me that if forced to come up with some sort of distinction or label he would propose “ortho” versus “hetero,” and he might have been reluctant to add “sexual” to those words. For one thing, hetero and orthodox represent a true opposition, as in heterodox versus orthodox, while hetero/homo is nothing but an ad hoc and quite weird opposition. Whitman was above all a heterodox (that is, unorthodox) poet, both in the content and in the form of his poetry, and he had to put up with criticism and retaliation during his lifetime because of that. In his lifestyle as well, he was a heterodox person, who inspired many people’s heterodox lifestyle in the twentieth century.

I have no doubt that, if pressed, Whitman would have preferred to be remembered as a hetero rather than a homo, if only because of the connotations of the latter as something closed in itself and lacking in openness and diversity (as in “homogeneous,” a word, by the way that was occasionally used by Carpenter and others as synonymous with “homosexual”). The sound of a word, its connotations, the images it evokes were—how could it be otherwise?—matters of crucial importance to the greatest poet of nineteenth-century America. And he would have found himself unable to choose between “gay” and “straight.” He would have wanted to be remembered as both, due the primary images that both words convey.

Whitman was, if anything, a hetero-sexual (I hyphenate the word to dissociate it from its current meaning). If a Whitmanian revolution were to take place in our day, it might well start as a terminological revolution—Whitman loved to experiment with words, and his diaries abound in reflections on the origin, meaning and use of words. He might suggest calling those who disagree with officially sanctioned love and sexuality “heteros,” leaving the label “ortho” for those with a dogmatic, narrow sexuality and love. Of course, such a terminological revolution would generate confusion, but a confusion that in this case might have a tactical advantage for queer folks, since confusion has always been used against gays and lesbians as a debilitating weapon. Whitman was gay, straight, queer, and hetero, but not in the way we think of those categories today. While his poetry may have been instrumental to gay liberationists, he was not a gay liberation prophet or precursor. He had his own grandiose vision for male-to-male love liberation, which he called “comradeship.” Who knows if one day his dream will be revived in ways he would have never imagined?
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**Abbreviations and Special References**


**The Conservator.** Philadelphia. 30 vols., each corresponding to one year (March, 1890 to June, 1919). Monthly literary and philosophical publication, edited by Horace Traubel.


**Bon Echo.** *The Sunset of Bon Echo.* Newspaper published in Bon Echo (Canada) by the Whitman Club of Bon Echo. Six issues (March 1916 to May 1920). Edited by Flora MacDonald Edison.
Walt Whitman's Mystical Ethics of Comradeship


WWQR   Walt Whitman Quarterly Review.

WWR    Walt Whitman Review.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. Kuebrich 1989.ix. While a number of religious interpretations of Whitman’s work were published soon after his death, Kuebrich’s Minor Prophecy was indeed the first major published scholarly study on Whitman from the religious studies perspective. Dale C. Hesser’s 1957 unpublished dissertation “The Religion of Walt Whitman” should be considered in fact the first extensive scholarly study (although not a published one) that has been carried out on this topic.

2. LGO 650.
3. WWP II:371.
5. “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads,” LGO, 484.
12. Quoted in LGO 801.

CHAPTER ONE — LITERATURE AS RELIGION

1. WNU II 654–655.
2. See, for example, WWC VIII:420; Lozynsky 1977:11; Reynolds 1995:252, 257.
3. Manuscripts (92) 27.
4. WWC II: 368.
7. For a detailed introduction to the character and activities of Whitman’s inner circle disciples, see Michael Robertson, Worshipping Walt: The Whitman Disciples.
Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008. As for the language of his passionate disciples, the following, published in an Iowa newspaper in 1886 after a visit to the poet, offers a characteristic example: "Walt Whitman [], the poet par excellence of the nineteenth century, the exponent of the millennial splendors and harmonies which greeted the prophetic vision of Holy John in the Patmian Isle; the interpreter and expounder of that which is to be, when the latter day glories of modern civilization and development have been brought to perfection, and science and poetry and religion shall have been blended into an intellectual trinity for the enlightenment and elevation of mankind." Quoted in Myerson, 2000: 47. The paragraph expresses Whitman's ideals, as well as his own idealized role, with such refined precision that the words sound suspiciously Whitman's.

11. The Walt Whitman Birthplace Bulletin (1958), October, (2):11–12; White 1957:71. Other short-lived Whitman societies were formed in the 1920s, such as The Sunrise Club (a branch of it) and The Whitman Society. See The Walt Whitman Birthplace Bulletin (1958), October, (2):16.
13. For example, at the 1898 meeting, Traubel complained that of the 202 members in the organization 56 had refused to contribute, 100 had ignored his requests, and only 39 contributed. The following year the situation was even worse. White 1957:68.
14. For a compilation of journalistic articles by Whitman on the death penalty, see Rodgers 1920:97–120.
22. There is a solid consensus among recent scholars about this point. See, for example Kaplan (1980:146–156), Zweig (1984:88–100), and Reynolds (1995:236). Asselineau and others before him fail to see the full extent of the influence of the phrenological theories on Whitman's mind (see, for example, Asselineau 1960:51–52; 1962:31, 115, 356).
23. Zweig 1984:90
25. For a good summary of Whitman's massive self-advertising campaign, both in the form of anonymous contributions and under pseudonym, see Myerson, 2000: vii–xi. He even published, under pseudonym, an expanded account of a visit to himself.
27. See Bucke 1863:99.
30. See *Calamus* 17–18.
34. Kaplan 1980:34.
38. E. Carpenter 1906:37.
40. *In Re* 311.
41. *In Re 302.
42. See, for example, *WWC* I:75, 160, 202.
44. E. Carpenter 1906:142–143; *Correspondence*VI:553–554.
47. Zweig 1984:314. In support of this assertion Zweig quotes a woman named Juliette Beach who wrote in the Spring of that year in the *Saturday Press* magazine that “Walt Whitman on earth is immortal as well as beyond it, God bless him.”
49. *WWC*, 8:369. See also Blodgett 1934: 201.
51. See Johnston 1918. Also *In Re* 302.
53. It called itself The “Bolton College” (also the “Eagle Street College,” after the name of the street of J. W. Wallace’s home, where they used to meet). Its decidedly religious character was acknowledged by its members. See Johnston 1918:19.
57. James 1902:85.
58. Kaplan 1980:35
60. *In Re* 353–361.
64. Kaplan 1980:35.
65. Kennedy 1896:134–135
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68. WWW 13.


70. In an anonymous self-review, Whitman wrote: “In respect of plain speaking, and in most respects, the *Leaves* more resemble the Hebrew Scriptures than do any other modern writings [. . . ] The commonest daily objects and the most exalted truths of the soul, this bard of nature touches with the ease of a great master.” Quoted in Miller 1959:xxv.

71. Kennedy 1896:46; Asselineau 1960:268

72. *In Re* 452.

73. Kennedy 1896:47.

74. *In Re* 315.


77. Quoted in Reynolds 1995:268.


80. *Bon Echo* (1920), April–May, 8–9; Greenland 1992:198–200. See also a reference to this event in Folsom 1998:739.


83. WWP 2:370 (250).


85. WNU VI:2061.

86. WNU VI:2086.


88. WWC I:371–372. See also Asselineau 1960:47.

89. WNU VI:2095; WWW 41.

90. Quoted by Hesser 1957:39.

91. WWP II:636–638

92. Catel 1929:222.

93. WWP II:487n.

94. WWP II:399 (1116)

95. WWP II:398 (1096).

96. WWP II:627 (16–19).
Notes to Chapters 1 and 2

98. WWP II:627 (20).
100. WWP II:381 (610–615).
102. Preface to the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass, LGO, 627.
111. This seems clear from the evidence Hesser offers. Hesser 1957:286
113. WNU VI:2105.
114. Miller, Jr.1959:xxxix.
120. WNU VI:2065.
123. Evolution as leading to re(unification) with God, or divinization of man, one could say.

126. Hesser 1957:140
128. WNU VI:2098.
129. DNB III:764.
130. WNU VI:2089.
131. WNU VI:2064.
133. WNU VI: 2084.
135. “Tom asked him: ‘Are you as firmly pantheistic as you were in the earlier poems?’ And he at once replied: ‘Yes indeed, Tom—if anything more and more so!’ ‘But how do you make that consistent with the immortality of identity?’ ‘You think it conflicts then? It don’t seem so to me. ‘But how can you prove it?’ Whitman laughed. ‘I cannot prove it—I only believe it—feel it’.” WWC 5:489.
138. 1855 Preface LG 721; “Song of Myself”; “Salut au Monde."
Bradley and Blodgett, however, are of the opinion that it is precisely in this poem that
Whitman ignores theological creed or doctrine. See LG 371n.

CHAPTER TWO — THE MYSTIC HYPOTHESIS
1. WNU IV:1502.
2. In Re 39.
3. LGO 637.
15. This same question was posed by C. Ackerman in her 1959 article “The Myst-
icism of Walt Whitman,” discussed later in this chapter.
16. In The Varieties of Religious Experience, James refers to Whitman’s “gospel,”
and asserts that the poet “is of the genuine linage of the prophets.” James 1902:87.
20. “The Oriental mystics have defined the various steps by which, in increasing
gradations of self-hypnotization, they reach the mood they deliberately seek [. . . ]. In
[Whitman’s] state of rapt contemplation the mind rather drawn out of itself than con-
centrated within itself, dwelt on rapid succession upon a multitude of outward objects,
until this swift and dionysiac sequence of parallel, unrelated percepts, there followed
the mystic experience.” G. Carpenter 1909:55.
22. Ibid.
27. WWP II:399.
41. Ibid.
42. My emphasis.
44. Kuebrich 1989:i.x.
46. My emphasis.
50. “Passive mortification” means denial of licit material, mental, or emotional pleasures or satisfactions, while “active mortification” refers to the self-infliction of physical punishment or deprivation.
56. Ibid.
61. Correspondence I:347. See also WNU 112n.
64. Kuebrich makes this remark with reference to the poem of the “Calamus” cluster entitled “These I Sing in Spring”:

(O here I last saw him that tenderly loves me, and returns again never to separate from me,
And this, O this shall henceforth be the token of comrades, this calamus-root shall,
Interchange it youths with each other! let none render it back!)

66. Zweig (1984) suggests the same idea (i.e., that Whitman’s language ought to be understood strictly on a mystical plane of meaning, as with the traditional mystics). He finds Whitman’s case to be analogous to that of “the ecstatic Sufi poet Rumi, or the Tantric hymns of India, or the erotic swoons of Saint Theresa.” In practice, Zweig suspects, Whitman was “fairly chaste” (p.190). Unfortunately, Zweig does not elaborate on the similarity he finds, and he barely touches upon the mystical question throughout his work. One wonders if the Tantric hymns of India can be placed in the
same category as the “erotic swoons” of Saint Theresa, or whether they rather express two radically different types of experience.


68. In his 1955 essay, Miller says that “Song of Myself” is the dramatization of a mystical experience, while in his 1959 Introduction he says that “Song of Myself” can be read as such dramatization. Because he does not offer any explanation for the change in expression, and judging by the content of his argument, one infers that Miller gives both expressions an equivalent meaning in his theory.

69. My emphasis.

70. Miller 1955:134.


73. Miller 1959:xlviii.

74. Schyberg 1951:249.

75. G. Carpenter had elaborated on those similarities years earlier. See my discussion of G. Carpenter.


78. Allen, a major authority in his time on Whitman studies, writes: “Before Dr. Chari the fault with all studies of Whitman’s relation to India has been that they were undertaken by occidentals who did not know enough about Vedantic literature. But that deficiency has now been remedied by a very well-informed and perceptive Indian scholar.” (Chari 1964:viii).


Notes to Chapters 2 and 3


82. Ibid.
84. Ackerman 1959:68.
86. Ackerman 1959:70.
87. Ackerman 1959:72.
89. Chase 1955:49.
90. See above discussion of Asselineau.
93. Kaplan 1980:190
96. Ibid.
97. Bucke 1901:3
100. Bucke 1901:16.
101. Ibid.
103. James 1902:399. My emphasis in the three quotes from James.
105. James 1902:396.
106. Ellwood affirms that just as imperfect performances and orgasms below the peak inflate personality and context, it is imperfect mysticism that is “ridden with personality, ideology and contextual symbols” (Ellwood 1980:20)
108. Asselineau 1962:6
110. Ackerman 1959:70.

Chapter Three — A Gospel of Beauty

1. WWC1:166–167.
2. Asselineau, for example, circumscribes Aestheticism to the narrowest interpretation of the known formula “art for art’s sake” (Asselineau 1962:104).
9. WNU VI:2103.
10. In Re 309.
11. In his discussion of the Platonic dialogues, G. M. A. Grube states that, for Plato, “the good is admittedly identical with the beautiful” (Grube 1980:94–95). See, for example, Lysis (GBWW VI:21b), and Symposium (GBWW VI:162–164).
12. The wise woman Diotima of Mantinea, a woman Socrates introduces as “wise in this and many other things of knowledge,” and as “his instructress in the art of love,” Symposium, GBWW VI:163.
14. Ibid. Interestingly, Freud’s conception of the beautiful, as derived from the realms of sexual sensation, is generally thought of as sharply opposed to the Platonic conception, or rather to a popular misconception of Platonic idealism. The words of the oracle, nevertheless, certainly present the love of the beautiful as a derivation of the sexual impulse.
15. Phaedrus, GBWW VII:126d.
17. First Ennead, GBWW XVII:24b.”Beauty is the Authentic Existence and Ugliness is the Principle contrary to Existence: and the Ugly is also the primal evil; therefore its contrary is at once good and beautiful, or is Good and Beauty: and hence the one method will discover to us the Beauty-Good and the Ugliness-Evil.”
24. According to W. S. Kennedy, one of Whitman’s early and most passionate disciples, by the term “Eidólon” Whitman means simply souls. Kennedy explains that Whitman gives the term a wide philosophical application: “he conceives of the great globes of space and all objects on them as being but emanations, or phantoms, projected by the Soul, the great eidólon. Eidólos are the real substratum underneath all objects. The whole living, working universe is forging but eternal eidólos, or souls, the real entities. The visible world is only appearance,—a picture, many-colored, staining the blackness of eternity [ . . . ] In ordinary parlance it is the eidólon that is the insubstantial thing, the immaterial spectre: with Whitman the Eidólon is the real, the substantial, thing. That is the difference.” Kennedy 1926:180–181. See also Allen 1975:146.
26. See I Cor. 6.19. Notice that for Christians only the resurrected body of Jesus would qualify as a divine body properly.
27. Fraser 1986:199.
30. “Calamus,” “The Base of All Metaphysics,” 7 (1871); By the Roadside, “Roaming in Thought (After reading Hegel)” (1881).
32. Allen 1975:260. Whitman rated Hegel as “Humanity’s chiefest teacher and the choicest love physician of my mind and soul,” and called him the one truly “American” thinker of the age (Binns 1905:297). He also declared that Hegelian philosophy was the undercurrent which fructified his views of life (Traubel 1973:244).
36. Notice how unlikely Whitman would be to express the opposite statement, i.e., the beautiful face of an ugly soul (which would correspond to the Lucifer paradigm in Christianity).
37. 1876 Preface to *Leaves of Grass* (two volume centennial edition of *Leaves of Grass* and Two Rivulets), LGO, p. 653 (in footnote “Passage to India”).
39. From a different point of view, nevertheless, in *De Profundis* Oscar Wilde claimed the most sublime beauty for the narrative of Christ’s Passion, as an artistic achievement that far exceeded the beauty of the Greek tragedies. Wilde’s perspective is compared to that of Whitman in the second part of this chapter.
40. The point is often made in articles published, or criticisms quoted, in *The Conservator*. For a more recent example see Zweig 1984:14.
42. Asselineau 1962:96.
43. This idea is clearly present in “Song of the Answerer,” 2: “The true poets are not followers of beauty, but true masters of beauty”
44. Aspiz 1980:3.
49. The word “eugenics” was first used in 1884 by Sir Francis Galton, the founder of the “science” of eugenics. See Walther 1954:24.
51. WWC V:208;see also Kuebrich 1989:186.
52. WWC V:208. See also E. Carpenter 1906:26.
58. "The capacity of the true man for turning upon his oppressor is one of the
glories of the race [. . .] And that is one reason why I never went fully on the nigger
question—the nigger would not turn—would not do anything for himself—he would
only act when prompted to act. No! No! I should not like to see the nigger in the
saddle—it seems unnatural; for he is only there when propped there, and propping
don’t civilize. I have always had a latent sympathy for the southerner—and even those
in Europe—the Cavalier-folk—hateful as they are to me abstractly—undemocratic—
from putting myself in a way in my shoes.” WWC 6:323.


60. Quoted by Kaplan 1980:291.

61. Correspondence II, 35 (June 6, 1868). Charles Eldridge, one of the initiates,
wrote in a letter: "For the abolitionists he [Whitman] had no sympathy. While opposed
to slavery always, he thought that they considered the subject too all-important [. . .]. Of
the Negro as a race he had a poor opinion. [. . .] I never knew him to have a friend among
the negroes while he was in Washington, and he never seemed to care for them, or they
for him, although he never manifested any particular aversion to them.” Barrus 335.

62. WWP 2:588.

63. E. Carpenter 1906:40. Reynolds believes that Whitman struggled to free himself
from these almost universal racist assumptions of his times, and finds evidence of this in
the fact that his poetry reached blacks. For example, Sojourner Truth was rapturous in her
praise of Leaves of Grass ("it was God who wrote it"). Reynolds 1995: 147–148.


66. He was in his early thirties, the first edition of Leaves of Grass lying still sev-
eral years ahead.


69. Stavrou 1964:76.

70. Ibid.

71. The word “kosmos” had been popularized by the Prussian naturalist Alexan-
der Humboldt, whose first volume of his work Kosmos appeared in 1845. To Whitman
that word epitomized science and scientific progress. Reynolds makes the observation
that to both Humboldt and Whitman, the word “kosmos” includes a sense of the mysti-
cal and the aesthetic (Reynolds 1995:245). In the margin of an article, Whitman wrote:
“Humboldt, in his Kosmos [. . .] has observed of the Greeks: ‘With them the landscape
is always the mere background, of a picture, in the foreground of which humans are
always moving.’” Ibid.

72. I am using the term “existential” in the traditional scholastic sense, i.e. that
which is opposed to the essential. In the context of our discussion, the existential
refers to the objective as it affects the individual in his particularity, rather than to
some immutable and superior reality beyond the immediate perception of the indi-
vidual, which we have characterized as the “kosmic” reality.

73. LGO 649. Compare this with his statement from the 1855 Preface that the poet
“is no arguer . . . he is judgement. He judges not as the judge judges but as the sun falling
around a helpless thing” [my emphasis]. This clearly expresses the scientific point of view
underlying his kosmic statements. It is unclear whether in Whitman’s mind the kosmic
vision applies also to moral evil or only to natural evil. If to the latter only, we find that
idea already in Augustine’s analogy of God as the cosmic painter, with humans being
too close to the picture to see or understand its overall beauty and meaning. In any case,
the idea of apparent evil contributing to overall perfection is not new. We find it, among
others, in St. Augustine (350–430) and in the philosopher G. Leibniz (1646–1716). However,
Whitman most likely took the idea from Hegel.

74. *LGO* 659–660.
75. *LGO* 626–627.
79. Aspiz 1980: 190
Socrates"), Nietzsche goes as far as recriminating Socrates for his ugliness, which he
takes to be an expression of the fact that the latter belonged "to the lowest of the low
[. . . ] the mob." To this he adds that being ugly amounted almost to a refutation
among the Greeks (i.e., that arguments by an ugly person were deemed less valid). He
even states that the typical criminal is ugly, and wonders if Socrates was really Greek.
82. Bertz 1906:30, in Asselineau,1960:183. A few years earlier, Thomas Went-
worth Higginson had advanced the hypothesis that the stroke Whitman suffered in
1873 was probably not caused by his heroic conduct in the hospitals during the Civil
War (as the poet proudly claimed in the preface to the second Annex of *Leaves of Grass*
in 1891), but by the irregularities of his sexual life (Asselineau 1960:183).
84. Schyberg 1951:271.
85. The first translation of *Leaves of Grass* into German came out years after
*Zarathustra* was written (Schyberg 1950:271).
86. Schyberg 1950:271.
87. Nietzsche wrote it during a long tramp through the Alps and on the Riviera.
88. Schyberg 1950: 272. For Whitman's identification with Christ see Loving
89. Ibid.
90. Ibid.
91. Schyberg 1950:274.
95. Stavrou also contrasts Nietzsche's overmen and Whitman's supermen to
Carlyle's hero (Stavrou,1964:21–22).
98. Ibid.
100. Ibid.
103. Allen 1964:76.
104. Tanner 1965:85. One is inclined to think that Whitman's Superman is *fundamen-
tally* an extension, rather than "a fundamental" extension of the evolutionary doctrine.
105. As Tanner informs the reader, the first one to talk about the Superman in
*Leaves of Grass* was Isaac Hull Platt, in an article in *The Conservator*, in which he
attempted to show that Whitman’s Superman anticipated Nietzsche’s theory. Out of Platt’s article Tanner quotes the following lines:

“Where we are going to find this Superman I do not know; but I know that where the city stands which has the noblest men and women, there the great city stands, and that I learned from Whitman [. . .] I believe the Superman will be ground out of the mills of the gods in due time and will attend to his own breeding, and I think that is what Walt thought.” (Quoted by Tanner from The Conservator XVI, February 1906:182).

106. Carl F. Strauch, whom Tanner quotes, was the first one to ascribe the definition of Whitman’s Superman to these sections of “Song of Myself” in his 1938 article “The Structure of Walt Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself,’” English Journal (College Edition) XXVII: 599 (September 1938). Nevertheless, Whitman’s Superman is an abstraction and its features can be found all throughout the poet’s writings, poetry and prose.
109. Tanner 1965:90
112. Ibid.
119. Ibid.
120. Schyberg 1951:10.
121. Schyberg 1951: 318.
122. WWC II: 288.
123. WWC II:279. While Whitman appeared in principle not to care for manmade beauty but only for natural, unaffected beauty, he still qualifies as a genuine aesthetic thinker. For an introduction to the centuries-old debate over the aesthetic appreciation of natural versus manmade beauty see “Beauty” GBWW, II:113b.
124. “[Whitman] really identified himself in imagination with the man he wanted to be. To a certain extent he became the ideal being of whom he dreamed and thus lived the part he had written for himself [. . .]. Let us say, then, quite simply that Whitman wanted to create a book and in so doing he has created himself. His whole life was changed by his decision, thus illustrating Oscar Wilde’s paradox that nature imitates art.” (Asselineau 1960:16)
127. See Fraser 1986:197.
Notes to Chapter 4

Chapter Four — The Love of Comrades

3. It is unclear why Whitman refers to the calamus grass as a “root.”
4. “Someone who shares a room, eats, and sleeps at the same inn.”
9. “Whitman’s great emotion, his ‘manly attachment,’ his erotic burden, with its peculiar characteristic, influenced and colored his whole interpretation of the world around him […] . For a long time it was certainly Whitman’s belief that it was a normal, healthy emotion which he nourished, although of abnormal warmth and strength; and in any case it was his dream to sanctify it in his poems.” Schyberg 1951:165.
10. Chase 1955:40. As to the physiological marks of Whitman’s abnormal sexuality, Chase says: “[Whitman] seemed in person oddly bisexual, his body being large and sturdy but without any apparent musculature beneath the soft feminine flesh. There seems no doubt that he had inclinations in both directions […] . Perhaps the best supposition about Whitman is that he was sexually versatile, that he was more strongly drawn to men than to women, but that probably his life was not overtly and actually sexual at all.” Chase 1955:40.
15. LGO 520 (Poems Excluded from *Leaves of Grass*).
24. My reasons for assuming this are first, that for the rest of his life we have no record or mention whatsoever of Whitman ever being sexually interested in children (i.e., true children, pre-adolescent). From what we know pedophilia is in itself a permanent orientation—those who show sexual interest in children (children properly, young children) are always interested in children, and that does not change throughout life. Again, there is absolutely no record or even the slightest suggestion in any Whitman-related document that Whitman ever had any interest in children. And second, throughout his life, Whitman was, indeed, strongly drawn to young men. Being in his early 20s when he taught at Southold, he may have been attracted to some of his adolescent students but only insofar as they were, or approached his ideal of the young men that would be the single focus of his romantic interest throughout his adult life.
34. The italicized words were crossed out by Whitman in his original annotation.
35. Daybooks III:765.
36. For my account of the Bertz affair, I rely on Walter Grünzweig’s Constructing the German Walt Whitman. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995).
40. Ibid.
41. Rivers 1913:1.
42. Rivers 1913:25.
46. Bertz 1906.
47. Quoted in Grünzweig 1995:192. See also 195.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
55. “One institution there is which [Whitman] confesses that he would inaugurate. Let men who love one another kiss when they meet, and walk hand in hand. It is no mere sentiment; he sees that love must have its witness.” (Binns 1905:165)
57. Ibid.
60. Quoted in Barrus 1931:17.
61. Interestingly, in his Sexual History of the World War (1934), Magnus Hirschfeld makes the following observations concerning comradeship and homosexuality during World War I: “The comradeship which developed between the soldiers who shared all the trials and dangers of war, this splendid fruit of the war [. . . ], must have been specially pleasing to the homosexuals for obvious reasons. All phases of the soldier's life favored the development of this comradeship concerning whose ethical value there circulated some excessively flattering notions. Very frequently, even among normal [i.e., heterosexual] people, it penetrated the outer limits of the homoerotic and
was thus, to speak the language of psychoanalysis, characterized by libidinous components. The reports of the Committee emphasized that, to a large extent, the friendships between homosexual soldiers were quite purely platonic ones. As in the times of heroic antiquity there were, during World War, pairs of friends who in the heat of battle retained their bond of friendship.” Hirschfeld goes on to say that while in antiquity such friendships would be boasted and would be indeed the source of honor “as in the holy band of Thebes, which consisted entirely of lovers, in our time the friends kept a secret of their friendship.” Hirschfeld 1934: 130–131. Hirschfeld’s observations offer a clear and independent illustration of the particular intensity of the marginality of friendship in the context of military life during wartime, as Whitman experienced it, and of its homoerotic components, even among “normal” men, and of its conceptualization as comradeship.

62. See, for example, Folsom 2005:85.

63. See “An Elegy of Whitman,” by Gabriel Sarrazin, The Conservator (1899), April, 1.

64. Asselineau 1960:172.

65. A quotation from the “Calamus” poem “Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand.”


67. Correspondence 1:162.

68. Ibid.


73. Correspondence I:92–93.

74. Correspondence I:90 (n. 86). Months later, in another letter, this time probably written by himself (he states it is his first letter to Whitman), Sawyer sounded more spontaneous: “Dear Brother, I hardly know what to say to you in this letter for it is my first one to you. [...] I hope you will forgive me and in the future I will do better and I hope we may meet again in this world” (Correspondence I:90–91 n.86). It had taken Whitman eight months of insistent letters to get this reply from Sawyer. In spite of his promise, the soldier did not do better in the future either.


81. “[The] love of comrades is a main factor in human life, a virtue upon which society will have to lay its firm foundations, and a passion equal in permanence, superior in spirituality, to the sexual affection.” (Symonds 1893:68).

82. Symonds 1892:79.

83. WWP II:414 (1645).

84. Democratic Vistas. WWP II:415 (135n).


86. Binns 1905:162.

88. Binns 1905:162–163
94. Ibid.
99. Ibid.
100. Ibid.
102. “Has not the time come, indeed, in the development of the New World, when its Politics should ascend into atmospheres and regions hitherto unknown—(far, far different from the miserable business that of late and current years passes under that name) —and take rank with Science, Philosophy and Art? [. . .] That the true growth-characteristics of the Democracy of the New World are henceforth to radiate in superior literary, Artistic and Religious Expressions, far more than in its Republican forms.” (WNU 749–750)
107. Ibid.
109. Ibid.
111. Symonds 1893:72.
112. Symonds 1893:72–75.
113. Symonds 1901:1.
114. Symonds 1901:3.
115. In a footnote, Symonds cites “Max. Tyr., [Maximus Tyrrus] 'Dissert.', ix.” In his work, Symonds offers no key for abbreviations.
116. Symonds 1901:7
117. Symonds 1901:8.
118. The story of the Sacred Band is found in Plutarch’s Pelopidas.
120. The Conservator (1907), Feb., p. 184.
122. Symonds 1901:18.
123. Symonds 1901:19.
125. Symonds 1901:40–44.
126. Symonds 1901:32.
129. Symonds 1901:54, 68.

**Chapter Five — Whitman, the Moral Reformer**

1. WWC 1:375 (June 24, 1888).
3. Emphasis in the original.
9. WNU 4:2073.
10. WNU VI:2075.
11. Bucke met Whitman in 1875 for the first time, while in a letter of November 27, 1878 Bucke declares that his book is based on a vision he had one night in the Spring of 1871. On the other hand, the book is dedicated to Walt Whitman “the man who inspired it.” For the commentary that follows on Bucke's book, I have followed Lozynsky's summary and interpretation of it (Lozynsky 1977:31–41).
12. “The moral nature of all men [. . .] possesses this quality—that it can be acted upon, moved, elevated, and there is a mysterious relation, a sympathy, existing among men by which we are all compelled, in spite of ourselves, to seek to impress our influence, whether for good or evil, upon one another. Under the operation of this law, the men of superior moral natures have sought for and found various means by which they might convey to others their moral attitude towards themselves and their surroundings. These means we call by the generic name of art.” Quoted by Lozynsky 1977:37.
17. Binns 1905:293.
18. WNU716–717.
20. Burroughs 1896:170. This is how Burroughs expresses it: “all is good, all is as it should be, to abase the body is to abase the soul. Man is divine inside and out, and is no more divine about the head than about the loins. It is from this point of view that [Whitman] has launched his work. He believed the time had come for an utterance out of radical uncompromising human nature; let conventions and refinements stand back, let nature, let the soul, let the elemental forces speak; let the body, the passions, sex, be exalted; *the stone rejected by the builders shall be the chief stone in the corner* [my emphasis]. Evil shall be shown to be part of the good, and death shall be welcomed as joyously as life.” Ibid.
27. WWP 2:372 (35–340, and 50n).
28. WWP 2:414 (1645).
29. WWP 2:377.
33. Ibid.
34. “His life and his works had to be one,” writes Zweig, who adds that such had always been expected of saints and demanded of the clergy. (Zweig 1984:13)
35. Briggs begins his book with the title-like statement “I Became a Whitmanite” (Briggs 1952:1)
40. Briggs 1952:125.
42. Folsom 2005:77. Folsom suggests that Whitman’s reason for not enlisting was his age (he was in his early 40s). That may well be a 20th-century reason for not enlisting, but it is unclear whether that same reasoning applied in the mid-19th century. In fact, Folsom himself quotes Thomas Wentworth who, after the war accused Whitman of evading “his manly duty of military service.” See Folsom 2005:85.
44. Ibid.
47. Quoted in Briggs 1952:126.
49. For a compilation of Whitman’s articles on the Mexican war, see Rodgers and Black (eds.) 1920:240–266.
50. In a harshly critical study of Whitman entitled Walt Whitman: Racista, Imperialista, Antimexicano (1971) Mauricio González de la Garza, a professor at the Universidad Autónoma de México City, presents a collection of extensive quotations from Whitman (the English originals with Spanish translations), most of them from the poet’s articles in the New York Aurora and the Brooklyn Eagle, in which he expresses his opinions about war and slavery. Whitman was the object of accusations of imperialism and expansionism from early on. See, for example, The Conservator (1899), Sept., pp. 105–107.
52. Martin 1979:xvi.
53. Ibid.
57. Martin 1979:xviii.
58. Martin 1979:3.
59. Concerning Symonds’s persistent questioning about the underlying meaning of the “Calamus” poems, Whitman said to Traubel: “[Symonds] has a few doubts yet to be quieted [. . . ] One of these doubts is about Calamus. What does Calamus mean? [. . . ] their involvement, as he suspects, is the passional relations of men with men—the thing he reads so much of in the literatures of southern Europe and sees something of in his own experience. He is always driving at me about that: is that what Calamus means? [. . . ] I have said no [my emphasis], but no does not satisfy him [. . . ]. Calamus needs clear ideas: it may be easily, innocently distorted from its natural, its motive, body of doctrine.” WWC, I:73–74. For a further denial on the part of Whitman of any homosexual meaning in Calamus, see WWC, 6:342–343.
60. Martin 1979:3–5.
61. Martin 1979:5.
63. “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 . . . .”
64. Martin 1979:19.
67. After the 1860 edition, these lines were eliminated from “Song of Myself,” 21.
69. Ibid.
70. Martin 1979: 28.
73. Martin 1979:42.
74. Martin 1979: 55.
76. Martin 1979: 70.
77. Martin 1979:83.
78. Ibid.
82. Ibid.
83. Ibid.
89. This is how Kuebrich interprets it: “In his 1846 Eagle editorials on the Mexican War, Whitman invoked this notion of America’s divinely appointed role to justify U.S. expansionism. An increase of United States territory was an ‘increase of human happiness and liberty.’ Mexico with ‘her superstition, her burlesque upon freedom,”
her actual tyranny by the few over the many’ did not provide a political environment in which citizens could become more free and perfect. In short, what had Mexico to do ‘with the great mission of peopling the New World with a noble race? Be it ours, to achieve that mission!’ The military conflict was itself producing signs of an ‘ameliorated humanity’ and Whitman, drawing upon the millennial imagery of Isaiah 2:4 asks if it is not a step toward the end of times.” Kuebrich 1989:36.

92. For a discussion of Whitman’s changing attitude to Emerson and possible influences of the latter on the poet, see Asselineau 1960:52–62.
94. W. S. Kennedy carried out an exhaustive comparison of Emersonian ideas and expressions found in Whitman’s writings. The similarities are so strong that they almost suggest plagiarism. See “Identities of Thought in Emerson and Whitman,” W. S. Kennedy, The Conservator, August 1897, pp. 88–91.
98. “[Whitman] propounded a doctrine of ‘prudence suitable for immortality’ (given its first articulation in the 1855 Preface) by which he meant that virtuous actions developed the soul and prepared it for a higher existence in the afterlife.” Kuebrich 1989:92.
100. Reynolds believes that the religion of Walt Whitman owes much to those movements, as well as to Spiritualism, Swedenborgianism, and Phrenology and the like sciences. Reynolds 1995:236.
102. Ibid.
104. "Song of Myself," 3
108. While Kuebrich’s Minor Prophecy was published in 1989, one year after the publication of Reynolds’s book, there is no reference to the latter in Kuebrich’s book.
117. Ibid.
118. Rather than Whitman being influenced by Emerson, Reynolds’s claim appears to be that both Whitman and Emerson were simultaneously influenced by the same popular religious currents. His belief seems to be based on Whitman’s own statement that “I was simmering, simmering, simmering: Emerson brought me to a
boil,” a famous statement that Reynolds quotes from J. T. Trowbridge, *My Own Story: With Recollections of Noted Persons* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903), p. 367 (Reynolds 1988:27). As a matter of fact, Reynolds believes that Whitman first came into contact with Emerson’s writings in the early 1850s (Reynolds 1988:24), but, as Asselineau points out (and he offers plenty of evidence for it), Whitman was familiar with Emerson’s writings as early as 1847.

Whitman’s relationship with Emerson was a very problematic one. In the open letter Whitman published in the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass* in response to Emerson’s private congratulation to Whitman for the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (this was a letter that embarrassed Emerson), Whitman addressed Emerson as “Master” half a dozen times. Nevertheless, years later, Whitman, possibly embarrassed at his own ingenuousness, overreacted by openly lying in his attempt to downplay Emerson’s influence on him. Asselineau, who also quotes in extenso Whitman’s famous “simmering” statement to Trowbridge, believes that Emerson constituted probably Whitman’s most important intellectual encounter in the years before the publication of *Leaves of Grass*. He notes that in 1867, “through the medium of Burroughs’ *Notes on Walt Whitman as Poet and Person*, [Whitman] let it be known” that up to 1855 he had never read Emerson. In *Specimen Days* (1882), Whitman again pretends not to attach much importance to the reading which he might have done of Emerson during his youth, and in a 1887 letter to W. S. Kennedy he declares: “It is of no importance whether I had read Emerson before starting *L of G* or not. The fact happens to be positively I had not.”

Finally, in 1902 Trowbridge revealed that Whitman confessed to him in 1860 that he had indeed read Emerson before 1855 and that he brought him “to a boil” (See Asselineau 1960:52–55).

119. Reynolds makes the interesting remark that, despite the accent on the inspirational and the spontaneous in all preachers like Hicks, and in Whitman’s own ideology, *Leaves of Grass*, though breaking all poetic rules in its volcanically emotive stylelessness, is, in one sense, “the nineteenth century’s most stylized, least spontaneous poem, since it was constantly reshaped and amended through numerous editions in Whitman’s long lifetime” (Reynolds 1988:25).

127. Reynolds 1988:104. The comment, which appears in Burroughs’s notebooks, is taken by Reynolds in turn from a quotation in *WWW*, p. 223.
129. Ibid.
133. Reynolds refers specifically to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*.
135. Ibid.
137. These lines were removed from the poem after the 1860 edition.
139. Symonds 1907:10.
140. WWC vol. 2, p.283.
142. See Nietzsche’s Antichrist.

CONCLUSION

3. In his book The Circle of Sex, Gavin Arthur reports a conversation he had while visiting Edward Carpenter in his youth which has been interpreted as meaning that Whitman and Carpenter had sex. Here is the passage:
   “You did sleep with him, didn’t you, Eddie?” I could not help asking.
   “Of course I slept with him, on Mickle Street in Camden,” Eddie answered, and then growled at the absurdity of the question.”

   During the same conversation, Carpenter expresses his opinion that Whitman was bisexual and had had sexual relations with women during his youth, but then he got an infection during his work at the Washington hospitals and “knew he might not be potent enough to satisfy women [after which infection] I think he was more at ease, in bed at least, with his male friends.” G. Arthur 1966:136.

   Assuming the report by Arthur is reliable, I find the expression “sleep with” ambiguous as used by almost eighty-year-old Carpenter in the early 1920s, in a conversation that is being reported over forty years later. Let us not forget that Whitman also “slept” with Bucke, Harry Stafford and others. Sleeping with someone, that is, sharing your bed with another person, was a common practice in 19th-century America, and the expression “to sleep with” did not have the sexual implications it took on in the 20th century.

4. WWC IV:267.
5. WWC IV:267–269.
6. Folsom mentions how at least two female nurses expressed concerns about the poet’s attachments to soldiers. Folsom 2005:85.
8. Robert Scholnick quotes David Greenberg, who, in The Construction of Homosexuality (1988), mentions the existence in the 1830s of “male homosexual networks” along with “cruising grounds” and “all-male social clubs.” Despite that, Scholnick points out that the public showed no panic over this matter, and that “on the few occasions when New York City newspapers tried to sensationalize an arrest on homosexuality-related charges, their efforts fell flat,” as even talking about that matter for the purposes of criticism was risky. Scholnick (2004), Spring/Winter, WWQR 21:122.
9. Such restrictive definition of the marginality of friendship may account for the formation of well-defined, politically active, homosexual movements precisely in those societies where homosexual impulses are not allowed an attenuated public expression in marginal situations. As long as the marginality is broad enough in its definition, in its characteristic ambiguity it will suffice to satisfy, at least to a minimum, the erotic and affective (even though in most cases not sexual-genital) needs of homosexually-oriented
men. When that is the case, the price to pay for an alternative way of achieving male-to-male affective and erotic satisfaction (i.e., by publicly defining themselves as a distinct social and unavoidably stigmatized minority) will be considered too high. But when the marginality of friendship becomes too restrictive, allowing for those intense signs of affection between males only in the most extreme circumstances, then there is a need for homosexuals to identify themselves in order to come together and seek satisfaction of their emotional, romantic, and sexual needs. Such is the case in those societies where heavy industrialization and capitalist competitiveness gave rise to a new concept of masculinity that restricted the marginality of friendship to its minimal expression. When that is the case, one finds that a clearly-defined homosexual movement becomes the only alternative for homosexuals to achieve emotional and sexual satisfaction.

11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
15. The Conservator (1913), June, p. 56.
19. Whitman’s own spirit of self-reliance may have preceded his reading of Emerson. See Loving,1999:41.
23. Concerning the issue of race, it should be made clear once and for all that Whitman was not a racist in the modern sense. Sometimes he expressed opinions and used words that are shocking to our sensitivity. But neither those words nor those ideas had the same connotations in his time; they merely reflected a popular consensus of the time—simply put, concerning those matters Whitman was not above his time. Racism was never part of his messianic project or of his poetical dream, as shown in the fact that at multiple points in his poetry we find positive references to the different races of the world and the need for them to come together. In fact, Whitman’s poetry received rapturous praise from Sojourner Truth and other black activists. In “Whitman and Ethnicity,” Li cites black activist Langston Hughes, who, referring to Whitman, reasoned that “some personal failings of an individual should not destroy the integrity, the timeless values, of her or his work.” Li, on the other hand, fully misinterprets Whitman’s speech “The Spanish Element in Our Nationality,” (WWP, II:552–554), delivered in Camden in 1883. Li 1994:112–122.
25. As a young adult, Traubel had become increasingly involved with radical ideologies and “persistently urged a reluctant Whitman to admit that Leaves of Grass endorsed a socialist agenda.” Folsom 1998:740.
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