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The Subversive Seed:
The Aesthetics of Auto-Eroticism in Walt Whitman

Irene Karjala

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ABSTRACT

The Subversive Seed: The Aesthetics of Auto-Eroticism in Walt Whitman

Irene Karjala

The sexual element in Walt Whitman's poetry has, for the most part, been seen by mainstream critics as detracting from rather than enhancing his art. This thesis explores the relationship between Whitman's textual auto-eroticism and his overall aesthetic, focusing on "Song of Myself" and the "Calamus" poems in the light of recent literary theory.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Background

In its March 25, 1835 issue, the Boston Medical and Surgical Journal reported that, "no cause [was] more influential in producing Insanity, and, in a special manner, perpetuating the disease, than Masturbation."[1] This article was not unique. In the early 1830s, the American medical community began to publish many such articles, all warning of the physiological dangers of auto-eroticism. Referred to variously as "self-abuse," "self-pollution," or the "secret vice," masturbation came to be seen as sin and sickness by Jacksonian America.

The Jacksonian period, which witnessed this proliferation of anti-masturbation literature, was marked by economic and social change. No longer was the economic life of American citizens governed by individual buying and selling relationships. Improvements in large-scale manufacturing and in distribution served, on the one hand, to draw labour into the cities and, on the other, to deprive them of the personal contact previously enjoyed with the owner. The reality of impersonal economic relationships and the idealistic desire for economic individualism inspired by the Jeffersonian dream were irreconcilable. The issue

became a moral one. As Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. relates:

> 'Corporations have neither bodies to be kicked nor souls to be damned,' went a favorite aphorism. Beyond good and evil, insensible to argument or appeal, they symbolized the mounting independence of the new economy from the restraints and scruples of personal life.[2]

Government intervention in the form of anti-monopoly action occurred, firm in the belief that the "growing ineffectiveness of private conscience as a means of social control" had to be met by the public conscience.[3]

The individual as well as the corporation became the victim of restraint measures on the basis of morality. The pre-industrial phase witnessed several significant alterations to existing social relationships in which the "public conscience" eventually intervened. Sons, with radically improved job possibilities before them, did not necessarily follow their fathers' line of industry. Consequently, the familial farm or trade shop no longer dictated a young man's vocational path and, by extension, fathers could not determine their sons' futures, economic or otherwise. Inevitably, the hierarchical generational bond was weakened.

The autonomy of the young man was a source of fear, and ultimately came to represent a more generalized fear the Jacksonians held:

> ...this same period found these Americans engaged in an empassioned dialogue in which they pitted individualism against social stability, autonomy against continuity,

> personal freedom against social control... They were oppressed by a sense of formlessness and insecurity. Fear of losing control dominated their thought.[4]

It should not come as a surprise therefore to discover the social and medical concern that began to be placed on the young American male, whose power was latent and whose ascendency to the dominant social position was imminent. The need to enforce social controls on young men was thus simultaneously the expression of a need to ensure the future order of society.

In this light, it is interesting to observe that the response to the disruption of economic and social order came from two distinct yet like-minded communities: the medical community and the moral purity reformers. The target of their reform was the young urban male, and later, the adolescent male generally. The focus of their attention was the solitary sexual gratification of the unattached male and its eradication.

If the young man was representative of the potential for evil implicit in change, then the successful restraint of his body and bodily impulses became the symbol of the restoration of order. It is not accidental that auto-eroticism, at once a demonstration of autonomy (accountable to no one), pleasurable (hence, non-productive), and ruled by the body (not by morals or reason), would come to symbolically encapsulate the evils of the power shift created by social change.

Solitary orgasm had been practiced, and no doubt perfected, throughout human history. Why the sudden publicity? The anti-masturbation literature which surfaced in mass profusion in the 1830s and continued with like fervor well into the later nineteenth century, draws more attention to itself than to the practice it condemns. Significantly, the previous century had produced little literature dealing with private sexual acts.

The taboo placed on masturbation can be traced historically to Biblical interpretation (or, as many scholars have pointed out, misinterpretation, since the passage implies coitus interruptus, not masturbation) of Onan's sin:

> And Judah said unto Onan, Go in unto thy brother's wife, and marry her, and raise up the seed to thy brother. And Onan knew that the seed should not be his; and it came to pass, when he went unto his brother's wife, that he spilled it on the ground, lest he should give seed to his brother. And the thing which he did displeased the Lord; wherefore he slew him also.[5]

Therefore, the wrath of God was construed as the punishing force for the sin of onanism.

Integrating traditional Christian morality with medicine, Samuel Tissot, a Swiss physician, published a treatise on masturbation which would come to dominate Western thought on the subject. This highly influential treatise, L'Onanisme. Dissertation sur les maladies produites par la masturbation (1758), although it purported

to be a strict scientific study, was in fact founded upon conventional moral and cultural beliefs. It was this moral dimension which ultimately gave the work its widespread popularity.[6]

In tracing the evolution of Western thought on disease, it is possible to locate Tissot's work on masturbation within a context that would justify the inclusion of moral principles in what presents itself as a scientific enquiry. Prior to the eighteenth century, disease was seen to be the punishment of sins by God. Employing natural cures, doctors recognized that their remedies would only be effective "if God permitted."[7]

The late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century period, where Tissot's work is located, witnessed a shift in medical approaches to disease. Scientific advances contributed to the greater legitimacy of naturalistic treatments. The moral element in the understanding of disease, however, persisted. Disease was still misfortune: misfortune, a punishment from God.

In America, medicine in the Jacksonian period was split among domestic (women attending to their families' medical concerns), lay (practitioners using common sense as their guide), and professional (educated either in Europe or the newly founded medical schools in America) practices. The struggle between lay and professional practitioners for supremacy and exclusive legitimacy occurred against a

backdrop of democratic idealism. As Paul Starr points out, "...the seeming complexity of medicine was artificial; if properly understood, medicine could be brought within the reach of 'common sense'."[8]

Significantly, Tissot's dissertation on masturbation was introduced to the United States in the late eighteenth century but did not cause a stir until it was reprinted in 1832 during the power struggle for medical supremacy and the power shift in social structures. Ultimately, the need for bodily repression was directly proportionate to the need of the patriarchal order to establish (medicine) and re-establish (moral reform) traditional bases of power. Thus, moral and scientific discourse served to consolidate the attack on masturbation. No doubt Tissot's moral/medical argument against the 'secret vice' would have appealed to both sides.

Tissot argued that sexual activity, since it created a surge of blood to the head, starved the nerves. Nerve damage caused insanity. Onanism, by definition, implied the most dangerous manifestation of the erotic impulse since it could be indulged in from a very young age, alone, and frequently. The realization of the onanist that he was engaging in a sinful activity made him all the more susceptible to nerve damage.[9]

American medical discourse echoed Tissot's argument:

> A great number of evils which come upon the

> young at and after the age of puberty, arise from masturbation, persisted in, so as to waste the vital energies and enervate the physical and mental powers of man. Not less does it sap the foundation of moral principles, and blast the first budding of manly and honorable feelings which were exhibiting themselves in the opening character of the young.[10]

As can be seen, the transition from Onan's sin to masturbatory insanity was conspicuously smooth. Clearly, the method was less important than the objective. The advice books which treat masturbation themes were written by doctors, educators and clergymen alike. The differences which one would imagine to find between the perspectives of medicine, education and religion on masturbation were marginal.

The three-fold system of maintaining social order and control was therefore seen to be: government over corporation, the corporation over the economic life of the individual, and medical/moral authorities over the socio-sexual life of the individual. Thus, the public conscience asserted its dictates on the private consciences of individuals. To gain victory over masturbation was tantamount to instilling order in the most private of conscience's domains.

Advice manuals, perhaps because of the technological improvements in the printing industry, were more widely distributed after 1830. These writings address 'the secret vice' generally and male adolescent 'self-abuse'

specifically. Former school-teacher-turned-physician William Alcott wrote "The Young ought to know, briefly, to what formidable host of maladies secret vice is exposed," and proceeded to list insanity, St. Vitus' Dance, epilepsy, idiotism, paralysis, apoplexy, blindness, hypochondria and consumption as being attributable to onanism.[11] Further, Alcott's speculations about the relationship between social environment and auto-eroticism are revealing:

> Large cities and thinly settled places are the extremes of social life. Here, of course, vice will be found in its worst forms. It is more difficult to say which extreme is the worst, among an equal number of individuals; but probably the city; for in the country, vice is oftener solitary [masturbation], and less frequently social [prostitution]; while in the city it is not only social but also solitary.[12]

Clearly, in Alcott's view, which was probably representative of the perspective of the moral reformers, the incidence of masturbation was generalized.

In one report, appearing later in the century, Dr. Frederick Hollick went so far as to link career choice with the propensity for self-abuse:

> Many a youth of sanguine temperament, urgently requiring muscular and mental occupation of the most varied kind, is condemned to the monstrous inactivity of a counting-house desk, the distasteful plodding of an office or some merely intellectual profession, and in consequence becomes listless, dogged and self-debased. In such cases the abundant vital energy, that ought to have been expended in active exertion, is retained, and, by stimulating the sexual organs to an unnatural degree, leads to solitary vice both as a gratification and a relief.[13]

One feature is central to both Alcott's and Hollick's advice and observations on solitary sex: the condemnation of the by-products of industrial and economic change, the city and the white collar worker. The symbols of progress are thus linked to the horror of perverse sex and are themselves projected as perverse.

The 'vital energy' to which Hollick refers is a concept that predates Tissot's treatise employing the same reference. This anatomical concept can be traced back to Aristotle at least. Semen was thought to be the most important of bodily fluids, since "each part of the body was believed to contribute a fraction of itself by way of the blood."[14] Therefore, ejaculation was to occur with strict regulation in order to save man's vital energy since it was understood to be a non-regenerating endowment. Procreative sex as it signified production in the form of biological reproduction constituted 'expenditure' (hence, Whitman's "love-spendings"). Continence, by extension, was 'thrift.' Logically then, masturbation was construed as 'waste.'[15] Male sexuality was a simple matter of economics. In the vital energy view, the male body was a symbolic business enterprise: channelling resources from diverse locations, consolidating, and investing prudently in order to maximize returns and validate expenditures. The uncontrolled libido of the masturbator ultimately signified assured bankruptcy.

The mirroring relationship of economics and sexuality is not incidental. The human body ceased to be perceived within its carnal definition but rather became a symbol of capitalism through the deliberate manipulations of its social organizations. This constituted the necessary, initial component of the tightening of social controls. As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg records:

> If the body is symbol, then determination to control bodily functions, to legislate, and to punish indicates a desire to control or protect specific institutions and groups within that society.[16]

On a microcosmic level, then, masturbatory insanity was the symbolic result of anarchy: chaos. Thus, control was the objective of nineteenth century reform movements; propagandizing self-control was its occupation.

The importance placed on self-control was complemented by the need of parents to control, in fact police, their children's development. Parents were advised to be alert to the danger signals of self-pollution in their children. Love of solitude, bashfulness, confusion of ideas, acne, and nail-biting were just of few of the tell-tale signs of adolescent solitary sex. In the social sphere, the sexual restraints operated as follows: men dominated the household since they controlled its economic existence. They were to exercise self-control. While women were subservient to their husbands, they were seen as the protectors of morals whose social responsibility it was to control their

children. Ultimately, nineteenth-century women, socialized as being morally pure, were the keepers of the private conscience.

Women outnumbered men in the urbanized East, the seat of the established order. The West was almost exclusively populated by men. It was a land which in many ways could be seen as the embodiment of the worst fears of the moral reform movement. It was formless and unrestrained. As G. Barker-Benfield describes it: "The anarchic, homosexual West was 'pure democracy,' the natural wilderness a source of potency in contrast to the madnesses of heterosexual civilization"[17] of the time.

The Kinsey Report, Sexual Behavior in the Human Male(1948) speculates on the homosexual experiences of the Western pioneer, claiming that sex "among groups that are virile, physically active . . . who have faced the rigors of nature in the wild . . .[is based] on realities and on a minimum of theory."[18] Bearing this in mind, the fact that "onanism or masturbation was also a euphemism for homosexuality"[19] in some medical literature is significant. If the East represented order and control through heterosexual restraint, then the West signified chaos, the product of a sexual freedom from which homosexuality could spring. Masturbation, since it was believed to have the potential to lead to same-sex relations, conceivably had the latent power to "uncivilize" the Eastern cities.

The threat of the new dominant male order from which homo- and masturbation phobia sprang was paralleled by the threat implicit in women. Women were perceived as being subordinate to men, yet their maternal power was seen as a dark and mysterious force which men could not reproduce. This, coupled with Lamarck's theory of the economy of sperm, which was propagated by the advice author, the Reverend John Todd, led to the romantic over-compensation for woman's reproductive power: the phenomenon of man's sexualization of the non-sexual (the land). Thereby, man's semen was 'saved' and his vital energy redirected to an area where he could become a participant in maternity, in the opening up of the land. Thus, the threat of being 'swallowed up' by women, as Todd expressed it, was successfully avoided.[20] In Todd's optimum system, the land had the capacity to become lover, mother and self.

The emphasis, then, was clearly on redirection of power, linked as it was to generative potency, from women to men and from sons to fathers. If women consumed and young men wasted, how could the patriarchal order of things survive? What we hear in all the anti-masturbation discourse of the nineteenth century is the voice of the patriarchy asserting its fears and re-asserting its power. What this repression of sexual urges means for the individual, however, is an alienation from his body.

One of the few testimonials of personal sexual

experiences from the period is the anonymous My Secret Life. Although it is British rather than American, this book of sexual memoirs does demonstrate the socio-sexual commonality of the two cultures at this time and thus warrants mention. The author, in a particularly revealing passage, describes an episode involving adolescent masturbation:

> My two intimate school-friends left off frigging . . . having come to the conclusion that frigging made people mad, and, worse, prevented them afterwards from fucking and having a family. Fred . . .arrived at the same conclusion--by what mental process we all arrived at it, I don't know.[21]

Stephen Marcus in The Other Victorians, from which this excerpt is quoted, observes that this "demonstrates how the process of repression works in the service of culture"[22] since the author has clearly forgotten the source of the taboo. The mechanics of repression as Marcus suggests are the internalization of the restraint and the sublimation of the memory of its origin.[23] The chain of repression during the Jacksonian period in the United States can therefore be seen as: scientific writings informing popular advice literature which in turn was directly aimed at the mechanisms of the family's internal power structure where it found tangible expression.

Charles E. Rosenberg notes the development of synthetic roles in American society during the moral reform era, the most noteworthy of which was the Christian gentleman: "The Christian gentleman was an athlete of continence, not

coitus, continuously testing his manliness in the fire of self-denial. This paradigmatic figure eshewed excess in all things and, most important, allowed his wife to dictate the nature of their sexual interaction."[24] Clearly, in its advocacy of certain moral postures, the dominant discourse of the time had the power to inspire a denial of the body.

Whitman

It is for this reason that Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass in its treatment of overtly sexual themes warrants further study. In other words, Leaves of Grass does not reflect dominant discourse. If nineteenth century discourse had the power to conceptually distance the individual from his body, what did Whitman's insistent affirmation of the body really mean? When masturbation phobia permeated all levels of society, what was Whitman's intent in graphically portraying the pleasures of auto-eroticism?

These were some of the questions which prompted this study. As in most undertakings of this nature, questions lead not to conclusive answers but to deeper questions. In consulting the commentaries on Whitman's erotic poetry, I was left with the uneasy feeling that more was avoided than addressed. In the light of Michel Foucault's confessional hypothesis and the Western tradition of scientia sexualis, the critics seemed to form part of a discursive chain which,

by its very premises, could not approach non-dominant discourse. A re-evaluation of Whitman's auto-eroticism clearly required an approach better suited to the terms dictated by the text. Whitman's radicalism did not have to be reconciled; it was a given. I was in the presence of alternative discourse which could not begin to be addressed through conventional means.

The results were not what I expected to find. My understanding of masturbation was that of male masturbation as we have come to accept it: genital-centred eroticism. While this understanding seemed to be a workable one in the examination of "Song of Myself," it was completely overturned in the evaluation of the "Calamus" poems.

Masturbation in Whitman, contrary to my expectations, involves the entire erotic body. In other words, the possibilities for pleasure are generalized. If the genital/body split is useful to society insofar as genital-centering frees the rest of the body for work, what is Whitman really advocating?

The association of the human body with the body of the text makes this question even more profound. Thus, the masturbatory process rather than the results of masturbation is a trope for the creative process in Whitman. The significance of this is perhaps best reflected in the existence of nine textually different editions of Leaves of Grass, which surely points to process rather than product.

As I investigated Whitman's other writings, I came to realize that the auto-erotic element in the Leaves is crucial to Whitman's larger aesthetic. I also saw that the poet's calling into question the very foundation of culture has made a perception of the auto-erotic in his writing a source of negative commentary.

Given that his critics are so firmly rooted in the patriarchal ideology, it is no wonder that Whitman's auto-eroticism has been misconstrued for so long. His masturbatory process threatens the very foundations of the anti-love ethos which informs all that we have been led to believe is progress. The patriarchal value system is an other-alienating world order. In affirming the love of self and the love of "his lover and perfect equal," Whitman subverts this order. As Hélène Cixous asserts: "there is no invention of other I's, no poetry, no fiction without a certain homosexuality."[25] Like Jean Genet's writing, which Cixous describes as being inscribed with "an abundant, maternal, pederastic femininity,"[26] Whitman's polymorphous sexual textuality moves beyond the other-differentiating hetero-text.

Underlying the threat implicit in homosexuality and in the feminine-as-nurturing is the non-assertion of power over another since self-loves-other-as-self. This abnegation of power over other is a force much stronger than hierarchical and divisive power. Unity through identification, rather

than power through division and categorization, forms the basis of Whitman's position. Thus, the combination of the auto-erotic as body/text with the maternal, organic style is perhaps his most potent contribution to American (and world) aesthetics. The fact that it has been relegated to the periphery of Whitman study attests not to its unimportance, but to the degree of threat it poses to an aesthetic and political order.

The tightening of social controls that occurred in the United States in the 1830s was accomplished through a campaign against masturbation. Masturbation was not, however, the real issue. Instead, the fear of the patriarchal order that they were losing power over their sons, and by implication the future, was invested symbolically in auto-eroticism. The restrained body of the young male, therefore, ensured the continuity of the power of the Father.

What we encounter in Whitman is the liberation of the male body from definitions imposed on it by social forces. Nature, and not culture, provides the poet with a sexual role model. This identification with the unlimited, renewable energy of nature results in the body affirmation of auto-erotic activity. The journey of the poet in "Song of Myself" is a healing of the mind/body alienation which society engenders. Significantly, this split is unified through masturbatory ecstasy which allows the poet to touch

his essence. The authentic voice of the poet ~~is~~ the voice of the body de-appropriated. And that, for the patriarchy which objectifies in order to maintain power, is very threatening.

Whitman escapes the confessional power relationship as outlined by Michel Foucault by articulating the desire not of objects (which necessarily involves the assertion of power over) but of equality (the elimination of power over). One might even speculate that rather than constituting a regression to the narcissism of childhood, as many Whitman commentaries put forth, his auto-erotic body/text represents a progression.[27] Beyond the world of conquest and domination over other, the urges which we are taught to understand as inherent, there is Whitman's vision which exposes the lie of masculine history. Instead of depicting a child's prelingual universe of non-separateness, Whitman verbalizes a view which transcends all psychoanalytic theories: love can only exist in a world of subjects.

The intersubjectivity that we find in the "Calamus" poems thus reflects a heightened awareness rather than the regressive hypothesis which runs through Whitman criticism. Significantly, it is here that we begin to understand the subversive import of textual auto-eroticism. Homosexual love, which was linked to masturbatory practices by nineteenth-century Americans, is a love based on sameness, on receptivity as well as activity. The union of male-male

love and Whitman's organic style exposes the aesthetics of pleasure and the masturbatory creative process unlike any of the poet's other work.

Whitman, in rejecting the masculine model, engages in the articulation of the erotic body. Because his masturbation is not genital-centred, it translates into the eroticizing of various points in the text. This is the importance of the subject who allows for other subjects. The speaking subject flows in and out of bodies that we may inhabit. The points of ambiguous subjectivity within the body of the text are the sites of erotic gratification. The loss of identity through the inhabiting of various forms inspires the feeling that we are not separate from the text. It is no accident that our surrender to the organic continuity of the "Calamus" leaves comes from the surrendering of the poet to himself. Further, it is this giving up of power that presents itself as the absence of subject/object relations which marks the difference between Whitman and his masculine literary counterparts.

Writing, according to Cixous, has

> . . .been run by a libidinal and cultural--hence political, typically masculine--economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that's frightening since it's often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction; that this locus has grossly exaggerated all the signs of sexual opposition (and not sexual difference), where woman has never had her turn to speak--this

> being all the more serious and unpardonable in that writing is the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as the springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures.[28]

If it is true that writing is "the very possibility of change," then how can we continue to treat Whitman's auto-erotic aesthetic as a psychological aberration visited upon art? Over a century ago, Whitman challenged the very structure of society through the structures in his poetry. The need to suppress the masturbatory writing process as we experience it in Whitman is simultaneously then a need to perpetuate patriarchal values in writing. To see beyond the repeated claims that Whitman's eroticism reflects the flaw in his work, is to begin to understand the ramifications of his subversive vision. If we continue to evaluate Whitman through the eyes of the patriarchy, we are no better than the fear-inspired moral reformers of the previous century.

Chapter II

WHITMAN AND THE CRITICAL TRADITION

With the twentieth century and Freud, came what appeared to be a movement away from the moral-medical model of sexuality witnessed in nineteenth-century medical literature. The Freudian system of thought, while providing insights into unconscious, universal human urges, can be seen on one level to exchange the vocabulary of "sexual morality" for that of "sexual normality." In the Freudian perspective, infantile and adolescent masturbation came to be construed as developmental stages of the healthy adult libido. Freud identified the three phases of infantile masturbation as follows: "the first phase belongs to the nursing period; the second to the short flourishing period of sexual activity at about the fourth year, only the third corresponds to the one which is often considered exclusively as the onanism of puberty."[1]

No longer was auto-eroticism the secret sin. Instead, it was understood to be normal up to a certain age if it followed a particular prescribed pattern. However, masturbation was seen to be abnormal if it persisted into adulthood since it embodied the regressive urge to return to the narcissism of infantile sexuality. Although Freudian theories of sexuality accomplished the feat of 'normalizing' the young masturbator, the same could not be said for their

effect on his adult counterpart. Adult self-stimulation was simply a psychological abnormality which required treatment. Thus, in spite of the apparent progress made in the realm of understanding human sexuality, Freudianism served not to eradicate the notion of masturbation as sin and sickness but rather added the stigma of psychological abnormality to it.

To discover then that the most important Whitman critics to address the auto-erotic content of his poetry employ Freudian analysis comes as no great surprise. Indeed, this psychoanalytic approach to Whitman's poems has a distinct appeal in the context of the twentieth-century attitude. It is a systematic, hence an ostensibly scientific, enquiry which focuses on sexuality in all its manifestations. Importantly, this form of analysis embodies a system of sexual causality, from which the perceived sexual behavior can be traced to a psychological source.

The 1950's and 1960's saw the rise in popularity of psychoanalytic literary criticism to the extent that psychoanalytic journals such as The American Imago and the Psychoanalytic Quarterly often published more articles on literature than on other subjects.[2] The post-war period provided fertile ground for psychological exploration. The atomic bomb, McCarthyism and the Cold War all contributed to general feelings of powerlessness and repression. The degree to which the socio-political climate prompted alienation is perhaps best expressed in Allen Ginsberg's

"America," in which the speaker complains:

> America I've given you all and now I'm nothing.
> America two dollars and twentyseven cents
> January 17, 1956.
> I can't stand my own mind.
> America when will we end the human war?
> Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb.
> I don't feel good don't bother bother me.
> I won't write my poem till I'm in my right mind.[3]

Further, it is to the psychoanalyst that the speaker ascribes the power to validate experience: "You should have seen me reading Marx/ My psychoanalyst thinks I'm perfectly right."[4] Although Ginsberg's tone is clearly sardonic, his message captures the atmosphere of the 1950's and the "disintegrated self" of this period. The proliferation of psychoanalytically-oriented criticisms at this particular time can be seen as an attempt to order a world which seemed disordered and to assert individual control in the midst of powerlessness. Thus, Freudian theory offered a system of interpretation, an understanding of inward and outward human impulses, which could be applied as a countermeasure to chaos.

Whitman criticism during this period, most often taking the form of biography/literary analysis, illustrates the extent to which textual concerns are obscured when the text is used as a vehicle for viewing the life of the poet and not as the primary focus of critical attention. The result is that the poet is psychoanalyzed, his life and his poetry co-substantiating tenuous psychological assertions. This is

not to say, however, that the post-war period marked the beginning of the process of 'normalization' in Whitman criticism. That process had operated since the early years of Freud's influence. Emory Holloway's Walt Whitman: An Interpretation in Narrative (1926) describes Whitman as possessing "the undisciplined emotionalism of the child rather than the complex cerebration of the normal adult,"[5] after he has stated that "here is no subject to be simplified by a theory. . . ."[6] Laden with value judgment (undisciplined vs. complex and the overused 'normal' of Whitman criticism), Holloway's treatment of the poet, rather than being atypical, is standard.

Frederick Schyberg's Walt Whitman, originally published in 1951, reveals the extent to which Freudian interpretation of Whitman's poetry led critics further away from any direct confrontation with its homo- and auto-erotic content. One senses that Freudian analysis provided a convenient mask for the critic's embarrassment. He could thus address Whitman's eroticism without treating it with any amount of immediacy. When Schyberg states: "The first edition of Leaves of Grass betrays the strange adolescence of Whitman's whole attitude, which of course showed itself primarily in the erotic descriptions,"[7] he betrays his not-so-veiled clinical biases. Rather than presenting a treatment of the erotic poetry, Schyberg, like so many Whitman critics, chooses to treat the poet. What does Schyberg mean when he uses the

word 'strange'? What does he intend in his insistent use of the expression 'peculiar erotic emotion'? Clearly, peculiar is not a synonym for auto- or homo-. Peculiar is, however, a euphemism for queer. Homophobia in sheep's clothing.

Two more recent Whitman critics, Edwin H. Miller and Stephen Black, rely almost exclusively on the tenets of Freudian psychoanalysis in their interpretation of Leaves of Grass. Their work may be considered to constitute a breakthrough in Whitman criticism insofar as they do deal to a large extent with the poet's overtly sexual material.

Edwin H. Miller in Walt Whitman's Poetry: A Psychological Journey (1968) refers to the masturbation sequence in section 11 of "Song of Myself" as "psychologically and artistically inevitable: sexuality must be played out on an infantile level."[8] Clearly for Miller, auto-eroticism signals regression:

> At fourteen, in puberty, Whitman left his family to make his way in the world. Undoubtedly at the time he thought that he was a completely emancipated youth. But his seeming freedom was illusory and was marked by a number of false starts as he wandered from job to job. It was illusory because it was an evasive act, an attempt to run away from the real self and accept the standards of the world...His psychosexual arrestment in this phase provided him with the core of many of his most successful poems, such as "The Sleepers" and "Calamus".[9]

In tracing the origins of Whitman's auto- and homo-erotic poetry to assumptions based on his biography, Miller takes the position of personal psychoanalyst as well as that of literary critic. Although embodying certain Freudian

concepts such as psychosexual arrestment, Miller's interpretation of Whitman's pubescent experiences makes assumptions about the poet's early life which would be difficult to prove. One senses that the details of the life are made to fit the prescribed formula of sexual development. Unlike the analyst who asks his patient to describe his past experiences, the psychoanalytic critic projects onto particular events in the artist's life the effects he presumes they might have had. In this respect, Miller's omnipotent stance, rather than inspiring credibility, raises some serious doubts.

Whitman is perceived by Miller, as well as by Stephen Black, as avoiding sexual involvement. Miller expresses the poet's fear as displacement: "It is . . . easier to make love to an unknown audience, except that to do so is scarcely to make love at all."[10] Moreover, Black asserts that in "Song of Myself" the poet "wards off the threat of actual sexual relations and reverts to masturbation."[11] Significantly, both views signal the absence of a specific love-object. The sexuality Whitman depicts involves the many or the self, not apparently the mature other constituted as the aim of sex as described by Freud and particularly emphasized in the developmental psychology of Erik Erikson.

The absence of the love-object in Whitman is central to the critical concerns of Miller and Black. In their view,

this absence serves as evidence that the poet's presentation of sexuality (and ultimately his own sexuality since the poetry is taken as evidence of the biography, replacing the analysand's dreams) is invalid within itself. The explanation for this emphasis on the love object and consequently the importance of its absence can be derived from a significant footnote Freud includes in Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex:

> The most pronounced difference between the sexual life (Liebesleben) of antiquity and ours lies in the fact that the ancients placed the emphasis on the impulse itself, while we put it on its object. The ancients extolled the impulse and were ready to ennoble through it even an inferior object, while we disparage the activity of the impulse as such and only countenance it on account of the merits of the object.[12]

According to this psychoanalytic view, auto-eroticism can only be construed as an impulse without an acceptable direction. The existence of this infantile urge in the adult male speaker of Leaves of Grass, according to the Freudian-inspired critics, simply attests to a thwarted sexuality. Conceivably, this judgment would be reversed if the erotic impulse were given more credence than its object.

Like the nineteenth-century concept of sexual economy, sex in the Freudian system implies a purpose. Pleasureable sex without a 'mature' object is perceived as abnormal. Just as the nineteenth-century masturbator wasted his procreative semen, his twentieth-century counterpart was fated to an unending puberty; his desires, abnormal and

infantile.

Since masturbation does not receive the legitimacy accorded to heterosexual intercourse in this system of thought, the Freudian Whitman critics do not concern themselves with the act itself. If the act of solitary sexual gratification always means something other than what it is, then why does it not follow that all possible physical actions in Leaves of Grass are insufficient within themselves? Miller, in interpreting the closing lines of Whitman's "Spontaneous Me," states that, "the infertility of the masturbatory dream is transformed into the fertility of art."[13] Clearly, he is echoing the Freudian notion that:

> Only in art does it still happen that a man who is consumed by desires performs something resembling the accomplishment of those desires and that which he does in play produces emotional effects--thanks to artistic allusion--just as though it were something real.[14]

Whitman's depiction of masturbatory ecstasy is thus seen as legitimate only because it represents a transformation from the 'immature' act of narcissistic gratification to the mature act of the productive, creative imagination.

The result of this sort of minimalism is an overview of Whitman's poetry which gives one the sense that a child prodigy wrote it. Miller observes that:

> One of Whitman's most original contributions to our (and world) literature is the depiction of the narcissistic universe of the child and adolescent, not in the irrelevant terms of angelic youth with or without

> "intimations of immortality," but in the terms of the dynamics of relationships (or their absence) and sexual maturation.[15]

The irony of Miller's statement is that by perceiving auto-eroticism and homosexuality as infantile, he in fact makes the decidedly adult desires and actions of the Leaves an irrelevance.

Clearly, the heterosexual norm promoted by psychoanalytic criticism can only result in a reductionist interpretation of Whitman's sexual textuality which, for the most part, does not exhibit this 'norm'. In order to gain a better understanding of Whitman's textual auto-eroticism--in other words, for what it is rather than for what it is not--we, as his readers must abandon this notion of a pre-established sexual standard. We must, as Robert K. Martin prescribes,

> . . . be vigilant. We must refuse to accept terminology that is loaded, normative, or biased. We must become better readers if we are to respond to the critics with determination. And it must be our business, as critics, to create a new criticism, one which does not prejudge, one which does not argue by innuendo, and one which does not rely upon pseudo-scientific assumption of absolute truth.[16]

One of the ways in which we can "respond to the critics with determination" is to examine the larger context in which Freud's theories of sexuality (and ultimately the the criticisms of textual sexuality which adhere

to these theories) present themselves. According to Michel Foucault the modern discourse on sex has existed since the seventeenth century, at which time the nature of the Catholic pastoral was altered with respect to the sacrament of penance.[17] Parishioners were encouraged to confess everything concerning their sexual desires and actions in intricate detail. This period marks the beginning of the development of the sex/discourse network which Foucault summarizes as:

> ..,the essential thing: that Western man has been drawn for three centuries to the task of telling everything concerning his sex; that since the classical age there has been a constant optimization and an increasing valorization of the discourse on sex; and that this carefully analytical discourse was meant to yield multiple effects of displacement, intensification, reorientation, and modification of desire itself.[18]

Until the end of the eighteenth century, the codification of sexual behavior took place through civil law and the Church. As Foucault records, the central concerns revolved around "matrimonial relations: the marital obligation, the ability to fulfill it, the manner in which one complied with it, the requirements and violences that accompanied it."[19] Heterosexual monogamy was the standard against which all other forms of sexuality were measured. The need to explore and uncover the secrets of sex which were deviations of this norm assumed an unprecedented importance. Adultery, rape, incest and sodomy, once treated by the courts with the same severity as breaking the rules

of matrimony, began to be qualified as perverse.

In the nineteenth century, the discourse on sex was pursued with the fervor with which the 'normal' majority always judges that which is different from itself. In Whitman's era, "the sexuality of children, mad men and women, and criminals; the sensuality of those who did not like the opposite sex; reveries, obsessions, petty manias, or great transports of rage" came under strict observation and interestingly enough, these individuals were "scarcely noticed in the past".[20] Now, they

> were. . . forced to step forward and speak, to make the difficult confession of what they were. No doubt they were condemned all the same; but they were listened to; and if regular sexuality happened to be questioned again, it was through a reflux movement, originating in these peripheral sexualities.[21]

Although the link between power and sexuality is not novel, Foucault's argument is. The proliferation of discourses on sex, in his view, attests not to the silencing of sexuality but rather to the encouragement of an openness of expression which in turn may be manipulated by social and political authorities.

With the introduction of medicine and science into the domain of sexuality, the power of sexual discursivity increased. Formerly priest and penitent, now doctor and patient completed the sexual confessor/power-figure relationship. Pathological sexuality became an item of particular interest whereas sins against God's heterosexual

ideal still occupied the confessional. The dominant discourse of the nineteenth century was heterosexual, monogamous, productive, and by definition, anti-pleasure. The redirection of desires was in fulfillment of an economic imperative: industrialization.

This concept is explored by Herbert Marcuse as well. In Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud (1955), he explains the re-direction of sexual impulses from pleasure to work as:

> ...the 'unification' of the various objects of the partial instincts into one libidinal object of the opposite sex, and in the establishment of genital supremacy. In both cases, the unifying process is repressive--that is to say, the partial objects do not develop freely into a 'higher' stage of gratification which preserves their objectives, but are cut off and reduced to subservient functions. This process achieves the socially necessary desexualization of the body: the libido becomes concentrated in one part of the body, leaving most of the rest free for use as the instrument of labor.[22]

Unlike Marcuse, Foucault is not satisfied with the repressive hypothesis. Instead, he formulates that the discourses on sex are substitutes for the enjoyment of the physical pleasures of the body. In tracing the history of sexuality in the Western world, Foucault concludes that since the eighteenth-century pleasure has come through the knowledge of sex.

In extracting this precious knowledge of sex throughout the centuries, authority figures have probed the soul, the

body and, with the advent of Freudian psychoanalysis, the mind. For all the novelty of the Freudian system, which "rigorously opposed the political and institutional effects of the perversion-heredity-degenerescence system,"[23] it is nonetheless a mystification, a confessional power relationship. Moreover, Freudianism represents the integration of the Catholic confessional practice with the scientific discursivity of the late nineteenth century. To accept the Freudian-based interpretations of Whitman's descriptions and explorations of sex in Leaves of Grass is to place his work on the level of the confessional. Foucault's definition of the sexual confession, its purpose, and the implicit relationship between confessor and listener serves as an uncannily accurate description of psychologically-oriented Whitman criticism:

> The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds in a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile . . . a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation.[24]

One cannot help but notice the power that the Whitman critics have assumed in placing themselves in the position

of interlocutor. The Freudian approach to erotic literature by definition implies a relationship based on the powerlessness of the artist and the omnipotence of the analyst. Moreover, it is painfully clear that this 'scientific' analysis presupposes the confessional nature of its studied erotic subject, whether or not the work itself suggests confession.

If there exists a consistent strand in mainstream Whitman criticism, it is that the erotic content of his poetry is seen to detract from, rather than enhance his art. One senses with the Freudian-inspired critics in particular that the presence of the sexual element in Whitman is the flaw in his work, a flaw which makes otherwise great poetry into poetry of lesser magnitude. When Newton Arvin asks in Whitman (1938):

> Does all this mean, however, that Whitman's whole prophecy as a democratic poet--and especially as the poet of 'universal democratic comradeship'--is invalidated by its psychological basis in a sexual aberration?[25]

he indicates just how much importance is placed on Whitman's sexuality and its capacity to diminish the power of his poetry. While Arvin's strategy is to re-prioritize and remind the literary community of Whitman's contribution, the fact that he is compelled to do so is more than telling.

Even when the critic attempts not to speak disparagingly of Whitman's sex life and erotic writings, as

does Henry Seidel Canby in Walt Whitman, An American: A Study in Biography (1943), the result is the minimalization of the poet's work. Canby tries to establish a series of qualifiers, one more, the other less, socially acceptable than the other. For example, he states that "with Walt, auto-eroticism was apparently not physical. It was psychological"[26] and "It is the physiological expression of his egoism--narcisstic (sic). . . but not onanistic."[27] This, as with many other critical observations of Whitman's sexuality, tends to reveal more about the sensibilities of the critic than about Whitman.

As we have seen, relying on the life of the poet as a means of treating Whitman's text has serious drawbacks. A rejection of this sort of biographical/literary analysis in favour of textuality promises an approach to Whitman's text rather than Walt Whitman. In other words, if an understanding of the poetry is our objective, we must begin by discarding the notion that its author exists. As Toril Moi points out:

> . . .if we are truly to reject the model of the author as God the Father of the text, it is surely not enough to reject the patriarchal ideology implied in the paternal metaphor. It is equally necessary to reject the critical practice it leads to, a critical practice that relies on the author as the transcendental signified of his or her text. For the patriarchal critic, the author is the source, origin and meaning of the text. If we are to undo this patriarchal practice of authority, we must take one further step and proclaim with Roland Barthes the death of the author.[28]

Moreover, these very same patriarchal critical

practices result in an inability to deal with Whitman's auto-erotic text beyond its assumed confessional value. In this respect, the discourses on sex generated by Leaves of Grass and its author serve to validate Foucault's principle of the displacement of pleasure, from sexual pleasure to 'power-knowledge-pleasure'. The critics, with almost no exception,[29] reflect the dominant discourse of the anti-pleasure of the physical and the pleasure of the analytical-discursive sexuality. In Whitman, we find alternative discourse: pleasure in the erotic and overtly sexual. While it would be tempting to once again categorize Whitman with Foucault's ars erotica, associated with ancient and Eastern traditions--those in which:

> . . . truth is drawn from pleasure itself, understood as a practice and accumulated as experience; pleasure is not considered in relation to an absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden, nor by reference to a criterion of utility, but first and foremost in relation to itself; it is experienced as pleasure evaluated in terms of its intensity, its specific quality, its duration, its reverberations in the body and soul[30]

--Whitman is never that simple to classify.

Perpetually eluding critics who wish to apply an either/or-analysis, Whitman is not typically Eastern or Western in his depiction of sex. The confessional as well as the initiatory discourses on sex both implicitly contain a power relationship between the written word and the reader. An examination of "Song of Myself," Whitman's epic

of self-discovery, reveals egalitarian rather than hierarchical principles of discourse in action.

The complicity that is encouraged between speaker and reader--"And what I assume, you shall assume/ For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you,"[31] --serves to discourage the notion that interlocution is in order on the part of the reader. Instead, the reader is compelled to join the speaker in his journey of self-revelation, thereby relinquishing the power to judge, condemn or absolve the speaker. Just when a confessional hypothesis would seem to be unworkable, the poet presents what appears to be the traditional signal of confession in the Western science of telling: "This hour I tell things in confidence/ I might not tell everybody but I will tell you" (ll. 386-387). The speaker, however, quickly universalizes that which is to be told. The confession is directed outwards as well as inwards, demanding a reflective approach from the reader: "What is a man anyhow? What am I? and what are you?" (l. 390). It is then that the poet proceeds to equalize the relationship between speaker and audience: "All I mark as my own you shall offset with your own/ Else it were time lost listening to me" (ll. 391-392). Clearly, Whitman's "Song of Myself" demands a participatory approach. His is a poetry of pleasure based on equal relationships.

If Whitman approximates a democratic distribution of pleasure, it is through the anti-cultural ideology his

erotic poetry embraces. American sensibilities concurrent with Whitman's Leaves of Grass, dominated as they were by the seemingly contradictory urges of exalting individual advancement in the pursuit of fortune and the need to suppress male 'spending', are sharply contested in the insistent auto-eroticism of "Song of Myself." The body in the poem is not the fear-controlled social body of the era, the polymorphously perverse body of Freudianism, or the confessing body of Foucault's scientia sexualis; but rather the anarchical, anti-patriarchal body of sexual pleasure. The speaker, desirous of all of life's experiences, explores the mystery of his own body. Casually breaking the masturbation taboo, the poet speaks a word too modern, moi-même, and insists on the natural freedom of his body, "spending [as he does] for vast returns" (l. 260). In fact, "Song of Myself" is a hymn to masturbation and a celebration of all that is unrepressed in man.

What is masturbation after all but the sexual stimulation by the self, for the sexual gratification of the self, for self-pleasure? Power and control rest with the individual. The knowledge of one's own body determines the pleasure. As Jean-Paul Sartre once said of Jean Genet, "[he] prefers his own caresses, since the enjoyment received coincides with the enjoyment given."[32] If one discards the premise held by many Whitman critics that masturbation is aberrant, then perhaps his erotic poetry can be seen to

assume a quality of universal pleasure and freedom.

If one approaches the sexual element as integral to Whitman's art, then all notions of socially acceptable, morally promoted sexual norms must be abandoned. Essentially, "Song of Myself" is a response to the social and sexual propriety of Whitman's age. When the poet writes: "I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked" (l. 19), it must be remembered that his was a time when piano stool legs were covered for the sake of decency.

Therefore, to ignore the context from which Whitman's frank treatment of sexual themes sprang, as many of his twentieth-century commentators seem to do, is to obscure his authenticity with contemporary concerns. This is largely the result of the intersection of the original with tradition, meeting at a point where the latter is ill-equipped to interpret the former. As James E. Miller, Jr. records in The American Quest for a Supreme Fiction, all American poets after Whitman have had to come to terms with the tradition he began.[33] Whitman's critics, however, find themselves without an adequate basis for evaluating that which is contextually vital: the meaning and necessary repercussions of a philosophy of sexual pleasure. One cannot, on any level, begin to understand or appreciate the freedom of Whitman's body (both literal and poetic) through the scientia sexualis tradition in which many of his critics

are located.

Auto-eroticism is thus invalidated as a central force in the shaping of personal consciousness in "Song of Myself" and collective, political consciousness in the Calamus poems by a series of imposed scientific assertions. In the realm of this sort of systematic inquiry into sex, Whitman can only emerge as underdeveloped, the corollary of which is that his poetry's strengths are diminished. His critics comment freely on the "peculiarity" of his sexual vision, yet do not acknowledge that the voice of authority which they have borrowed is that of the confessional patriarchy, the very sound of which prompted Whitman's subversion in "Song of Myself."

In order to render justice to Whitman's treatment of sex and the powerful role it plays in his poems, one must be conscious of the Western tradition of sexual-scientific discursivity and, ultimately, of the confessional network of discourses on sex by which we are all bound. This means approaching Whitman on his terms. Sex, in all its manifestations, is pleasure in Leaves of Grass. Self-love embodies the energy of renewal and is the affirmation of the union of the self with the cyclicality of life. Without self-love and its physical representation, masturbation, the movement to love of another is not possible. Founded on cooperation and not competition, homosexual love is seen to be profound, the precursor to universal comradeship. Male

sexuality is celebrated both in actions and in future ideals. Whitman asks simply that we enjoy with him and experience the body as pleasure.

Roland Barthes speculates:

> Imagine an aesthetic (if the word has not become too depreciated) based entirely (completely, radically, in every sense of the word) on the pleasure of the consumer, whoever he may be, to whatever class, whatever group he may belong, without respect to cultures or languages: the consequences would be huge, perhaps even harrowing...[34]

This is precisely what we encounter in Whitman. In contradicting the nineteenth-century fear of consumerism, Whitman invites his readers to 'consume' his aesthetics of pleasure.

Therefore, any criticism of his work which does not take this novel pleasure principle into account is a distortion. What makes psychoanalytic criticism of Whitman's erotic poetry so offensive is not that it attempts to explain the poet's sexuality, but that it does so using a false premise of consumerism. It purports to 'buy' Whitman's ground rules of sexuality only on the condition that they may be re-distributed into the world of the forbidden. Whitman's psychoanalytic critics make window-shoppers of us all, denying that pleasure exists in the act of consumption alone.

It is the critic's duty to explore what is implicit in the poetry, not to demand an acceptability based on norms. There exists in Whitman's poetry no invitation to deem any

part of it normal or abnormal and no pretext that the reader has the power to judge. The equality of text and reader, in fact, the shared identity Whitman encourages is the given of the poetry. The critic needs an objective distance, but does this mean that he or she necessarily negates the premise of equality? It is possible both to inhabit the poetry and to move away from it, a process which is crucial in dealing adequately with Whitman. The problem with most Whitman critics is that they do not allow for the former function, the proximity to sexual pleasure proving to be an embarrassing identification. Black and Miller, for example, distance themselves from the sexual through clinical analysis and re-enter a proximity to the text at the point at which sex has been transformed from the personal to the universal. To treat a poem which has as its subject the self, as "Song of Myself" does, without touching its most personal aspect (the poet touching himself, in fact) is evasive criticism at its best.

Significantly, Whitman in altering his earlier poetry, as the documented pronoun changes indicate,[35] did not edit out the masturbatory sequences in the Leaves. If this self-consciousness did not arouse any sense of shame or apology in the poet, what does this imply about the importance of these passages? Clearly, masturbation is central to the poetic vision expressed in Whitman's "Song of Myself" and to the poetic form in which it is embodied.

Unfortunately, as has been witnessed, the attempts to directly address the implications of auto-eroticism in the Leaves have for the most part ignored the historical and political realities which gave Whitman's treatment of the theme impetus. The advantage of bearing in mind Foucault's system of thought on the history of sexuality is that this contextual reality is crucial to any interpretation of sexual discursivity. The relationship of the individual's sex to the social network of sexual redirection forms the basis of Whitman's affirmation of nature and the denial of social constraints. Capturing this succinctly in the image of man alone with his sexual energy, Whitman achieves orgasm: the act of complete release.

In a sense, Whitman's masturbatory freedom is a vital component of his visionary status. Nature provides him with the metaphor of sexual energy, but it is the poet's transformation through orgasm which enables him to see beyond the moment. Ecstasy, therefore, is both a completion and a regeneration. Masturbation, however, embodies an implicit threat to the dominant social order. As has been seen, this act of sexual autonomy serves as a symbolic assertion of the power of the son (individual) over the father (patriarchy).

This power shift is perhaps characteristic of American poetry in general. As Joseph Riddel records:

> The 'project' of 'American' poetry has always been anarchic rather than archeo-logical, or as one might say, archeo-clastic, a myth of origins that puts the myth of origins in question, that puts itself in question. It is a poetry of uprootedness, of radical innocence, of the radical origin, of the radical as origin. . .[36]

Nowhere is Whitman's radicalism more apparent than in his inclusion of masturbation as an integral part of the creative process. Both the form and the content of his most personal poems are informed by self-love and its natural physical expression. At once the act of the liberation of the self, masturbation is also the symbolic representation of Whitman's poetics: the aesthetics of pleasure. Thus, the auto-eroticism of the poet's epic "Song of Myself" serves as the paradigm of Whitman's most radical contribution to American poetry.

Chapter III

"SONG OF MYSELF"

The speaker of "Song of Myself" has often been perceived as being self-contradictory. Harold Bloom, for example insists there are three selves in the poem; "the my self, my soul, and the 'real Me' or the 'Me myself'," [1] identifying the 'real Me' as the true personality of Walt Whitman. While the self-pronouncements we encounter in the poem are decidedly different, the poet is simultaneously rather than alternately "turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding" as well as observant and complacent. As the poet informs us; "I resist anything better than my own diversity" (l. 347) That Whitman depicts a mercurial sensibility is not an invitation to divide the 'I' of "Song of Myself" into static, seemingly diverse characters. The world order of the poet is an expansive one, allowing for the acceptance of paradoxes, including those within the self.

If the stance of the poet is to be considered as variable, this changeability being the only real constant of his identity, then one must rethink any attempts to locate an organizational principle which does not take this into account. The critical position that "Song of Myself" is nothing more than a disunified, rambling work or the perspective of James E. Miller, Jr., who organizes it into

seven tidy sections of "inverted mystical experience,"[2] thus both prove to be unworkable extremes.

"Song of Myself" has a fluid, rather than a set, readily visible structure. Like a Wagnerian opera, "Song of Myself" moves through musical crescendos and decrescendos, alternating between the full chorus of its sweeping catalogues and its soloist, the self. It is perhaps not accidental that the climax both sexual and structural is prefigured by an operatic performance:

> A tenor large and fresh as the creation fills me,
> The orbic flex of his mouth is pouring and filling me full.
>
> I hear the trained soprano . . . she convulses me like the climax of my love-grip;
> The orchestra whirls me wider than Uranus flies.
>
> (ll. 600-603)

Sex is presented as a cycle in a poem which itself is composed of many inter-related cycles. As the movement from life to death informs the larger fabric of "Song of Myself," the progression from sexual arousal to release exists as the creative microcosm of this cyclicality. It is for this reason that the much-maligned auto-eroticism must be treated as essential to the poem's structural unity.

The masturbation theme can be said to take several forms, all of which are necessary to move from the world of appearances (social man) to the world of essences (natural man). The poet, in moving from the social to the natural

self, firmly establishes the primacy of autonomy. This sexual autonomy, however, carries with it an implicit message of subversion. In breaking the masturbation taboo, Whitman writes the body's declaration of independence. Freedom of the body from social, moral, and political restraints which are both external and internalized is actualized through sexual pleasure. Masturbation, therefore, is the centre of the anarchic cycle from the rejection of societal expectations placed on the individual to the liberation of the body, and ultimately of the self. The natural expansive quality of the soul can only be realized after the body has been freed from the castrating forces of self-denial, moral obligation, and subservience to production rather than to pleasure, all of which society imposes.

This contrast between the social and the natural world is introduced very early in the poem. The poet notes the 'atmospheres' within the human environment: "Houses and rooms are full of perfumes . . . the shelves are crowded with perfumes/ I breathe the fragrance myself and know and like it" (11. 6-7). He then differentiates the "houses" from the natural environment: "The atmosphere is not a perfume . . . it has no taste of the distillation . . . it is odorless/ It is for my mouth forever . . . I am in love with it" (11. 9-10), making his preference clear. He chooses nature over society, not allowing the perfumes to

seduce him: "The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it" (l. 8). Instead, the speaker reaches out to the natural essence, the atmosphere, proposing to "become undiguised and naked [as he is] mad for it to be in contact with [him]" (ll. 11-12). Just as smell of perfume disguises the air, so too, clothing conceals the essence of human beings. Thus, the speaker's observation and subsequent rejection of social convention leads to a divesting of personal social definition. Stripping, therefore, represents the first act of liberation in the poet's movement towards total autonomy.

He identifies fear and guilt as the forces which prevent individuals from following the path that he travels. In section 7, he urges others: "Who need be afraid of the merge?/ Undrape . . . you are not guilty to me, not stale nor discarded" (ll. 136-137), claiming that he can see through their clothing. Clearly, his acceptance of his own body enables him to universalize nakedness without shame as the path to completion. In doing so, the poet reverses the interpretation of the Fall of Man traditionally used by the clergy to encourage a sense of shame about the body. Before the Fall, "They were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed."[3] It is to this state of nature that the poet hearkens us back, transforming the original sin into the eternal blessing. The body and sex are understood to be sacred by the poet. Moreover, the tenets of the church are

discredited. Defiantly, the poet asks: "Shall I pray? Shall I venerate and be ceremonious?" (l. 398), and affirms the supremacy of his body: "I have pried through the strata and analyzed to a hair/ And counselled with doctors and calculated close and found no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones" (ll. 399-400) over the institutions of religion and medicine. As we have seen, it was precisely these two fields that generated the anti-masturbation discourse in Whitman's era. Therefore, the poet's declamation of medical and religious authority serves to further assert the power of the body and, by extension, the individual over society.

In section 11, perhaps one of the most beautiful erotic passages in the Leaves, this dichotomy between the body and the nineteenth-century social body finds graphic expression. Cleverly, Whitman reverses the numbers. Society is represented by the lady and the unrepressed individual body by the twenty-eight bathers. The image of society is as in section 2, the house. Here, the woman "hides handsome and richly drest aft the blinds of the window" (l. 197). The bathers in the freedom of their sexual expression are unaware that they are being watched:

> The young men float on their backs, their
> white bellies swell to the sun . . .
> they do not ask who seizes fast to them,
> They do not know who puffs and declines with
> pendant arch,
> They do not think whom they souse with spray.
> (ll. 208-210)

The poet informs us that the voyeur, on the other hand,

experiences a split between physical urge and restraint: "You splash in the water, yet stay stock still in your room" (l. 201). Clearly, society is a lonely world of empty finery and the thwarted sexuality of repressed desires.

This passage invites speculation as to who is actually doing what to whom and who is watching. The most basic assumption is that Whitman is both voyeur and participator, 'both in and out of the game', as it were. What are the qualities of the 'I' who sees the woman? Is is simply the poet assuming an omnipotent stance?

It must remembered that this masturbation and fellatio/voyeurism sequence is immediately preceded by a passage describing the poet aiding a runaway slave to escape. Although certain sequences in Leaves of Grass seem to constitute angular rather than smooth transitions, as this one does, there is usually a discernible logic to the progression. The runaway slave embodies the same principle as the 'I' of section 11 insofar as he exists between freedom and bondage. The bathers and the woman, just as the poet and the slave, are the co-perpetrators of subversion. The first-person singular unifies the apparent division between what are essentially varying stages of the body's liberation.

One of the most consistent features of "Song of Myself" is the poet's confrontation with society. He acknowledges the separation of the self and the social body: "Knowing the

perfect fitness and equanimity of things, while they discuss I am silent, and go bathe and admire myself" (l. 48). Importantly, this admiration ("Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and clean;/ not an inch of me is vile, and none shall be less familiar than the rest" (ll. 49-50)) marks the poet's definitive exit from the body-denying culture he inhabits and his entrance into the sexual green world:

> I am satisfied . . . I see, dance, laugh, sing;
> As God comes a loving bedfellow and sleeps at
> my side all night and close on the peep
> of the day,
> And leaves for me baskets covered with white
> towels bulging the house with their plenty.
> (ll. 51-53)

Here, the perfumed house of society is transformed into a house filled with the genital cornucopia of sexual promise. From this perspective, the speaker can evaluate the world of appearances in which he includes "My dinner, dress, associates, looks, business, compliments, dues" (l. 61) and conclude that "they are not the Me myself" (l. 65).

The 'Real Me' is natural man, and the public persona, its cultural counterpart. The identities are not antithetical, but rather are defined through the alternate circumstances of situation and response. The public self censors certain actions and consequently is restrictive. In order that self-discovery may take place, the authentic self which does not restrict pleasure and desire must overpower the socialized self.

We are introduced to nakedness as nature and the admiration of the body as an anti-cultural stand early in the poem. Further, Whitman makes no secret of the role sex will play, using the vehicle of memory to introduce the theme. The memory of "my own days where I sweated through fog with linguists and contenders" (l. 71) is in sharp contrast to the joyful recollection of a lover who "parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged [his] tongue to my barestript heart" (l.80), making the poet whole: "and reached till he felt my beard, and reached till he held my feet" (l. 81). Interestingly, the silent tongue of his lover has the capacity to convey more meaning to the poet than the highly verbal tongues of society, the linguists. Moreover, sexual completion is seen to transcend the 'civilized' world as the poet's lover after orgasm "swiftly arose and spread around [the poet] the peace and joy and knowledge that pass all the art and argument of the earth" (l. 82). Our introduction to the sexual cycle is homo- rather than auto-erotic, but the peace which ensues is a feature which remains undifferentiated throughout the poem. Completion within the self therefore can be seen to carry with it the same potentialities as union with another. Significantly, the first explicit description of orgasm is withheld from us until later in the poem. The recollected transparent morning, then, aptly marks the beginning of the poet's sexual foreplay with his audience, preparing his

readers for the auto-erotic complicity which occurs later in the day.

In Whitman, sexual repression makes way for unlimited sexual expression. The nineteenth century's spermatic economy is replaced by the spontaneous, liberal expenditure of semen. As the poet announces:

> What is commonest and cheapest and nearest is Me,
> Me going in for my chances, spending for vast returns,
> Adorning myself to bestow myself on the first that will take me,
> Not asking the sky to come down to my good will,
> Scattering it freely forever.
>
> (11. 252-256)

Like the unorthodox Adamic figure in "Enfans d'Adam" (5) who tosses his sperm "carelessly to fall where it may,"[4] the poet here is seen violating the accepted male sexuality of his times. As Myrth Jimmie Killingsworth points out, for Whitman the "loss of semen represents the gain of love and not the loss of life."[5] Therefore, his 'spending' does not diminish his vitality but rather increases his potential to continue 'spending'.

Whitman's use of Biblical allusion, in this instance, to "The Parable of the Sower," (see Mark 4: 13-20, Matthew 13: 3-8 and Luke 8: 5-18) serves to validate his exuberant seed scattering. The effect is threefold. First, the association of the word and the seed is established since the Biblical sower scatters the word of Christ. Thus, the link between masturbation and writing is introduced, an

association which the "Calamus" poems explore more fully. Secondly, the emphasis is clearly placed on the reader, who is the "ground" where the seed falls and therefore has the power to give the seed life (fertile ground) or to take its life away (barren ground). Thirdly, Whitman undercuts moral reform notions of the spilling of the seed as a sacrilegious act by supplanting a potent, positive Biblical image for a negative one.

In defining the ground rules of the world order of "Song of Myself," Whitman runs defiantly counter to the values of his culture. The fear of consumerism embraced by the emerging mercantile class of his era is reversed through art into the pleasure of spending. The poet has released himself from the definitions imposed on him by society, through his experiences. Not bound by the need to conform, the poet asserts with just a little bravado, perhaps even sexual bravado as his word choice reveals: ". . . conformity goes to the fourth-removed,/ I cock my hat as I please indoors or out" (l. 396). The poet, however, does more than just not conform. He subverts. The value system of "Song of Myself" affirms the body and its desires, promotes its supremacy over any institution that would prevent its free expression, and extolls the virtue of non-procreative sex. To the productive, perpetually thrifty, fortune-seeking nineteenth-century man, Whitman turns a far more daring cheek. His is a <u>laissez-faire</u> sexual socialism, founded on

pleasure, spending, and intellectual autonomy. The singer does not disconnect from society, but temporarily distances himself from its power in order that he may reclaim the power of his own body.

Whitman is not alone in this respect. Nineteenth century America produced many counterculture utopian colonies, perhaps the best known of which are New Harmony and Nashoba, founded in 1825 by Robert Owen and Frances Wright respectively. A response to the ruptures in the social structure created by industrialization, these early socialist experiments were not coordinated by native Americans, but rather by foreign-born idealists who perceived the new lands as a perfect laboratory setting which Europe could not provide.[6] Their importance, however, lies in the precedent which they set for challenging society.

The need to express sexual freedom was the basis of a later utopian colony at Brentwood, Long Island. Set up in 1850, Modern Times was described by one of its inhabitants in terms which echo the emphasis placed on the unrepressed body in "Song of Myself":

> Every one did what was right in his own eyes. The women wore bloomers or donned the entire male costume. As the sovereignty of the individual was opposed to all artificial, social, or legal restraints, marriage was abolished, and families arranged themselves according to the laws of attraction . . . The right of the law either to unite or separate was denied, and free love was placed in the same category with all other freedoms . . .[7]

Like Modern Times and its utopic vision, Whitman's description of what is possible serves to call into question what exists.

In this regard, Whitman's radicalism is nowhere more keenly felt than in sections 21 and 22. Here, the force of nature is coupled with the power of sexuality. The speaker calls to the earth and sea, completely enraptured with the night. He mirrors the opening of the natural strand in the poem, being mad for the elements to be in contact with him: "Press close barebosomed night! Press close magnetic nourishing night" (l. 436). Personifying nature, the poet recreates the amorphous quality of consciousness captured in section 11. The "mad naked summer night" is no doubt the precursor to the "transparent summer morning," the poet making nature the lover, which in turn is ultimately himself. The tone of this auto-erotic passage is excited and often insistent. It is paced like the breath during masturbation, the hand determining the rhythm and the speed at which orgasm is achieved. The exclamations of the poet addressed to the "far-sweeping elbowed earth" strikingly resemble the preliminary gasps of sexual pleasure.

Moreover, the "thruster holding me tight and that I hold tight" is the sexual force of nature acting upon the poet. In turn, the poet becomes one with nature and his body. The relationship between the energy of instinct, between hand and penis, results in the consummation that

the speaker likens to the loss of virginity. The pain of the loss of innocence is replaced by the pleasures of the body.

In discovering the potential for self-consummation through nature, the poet becomes pure sexual energy. Having had a turn with the earth, he allows himself to be seduced by the "crooked inviting fingers" of the sea. Interestingly, it is through this sea imagery that climax is captured. Urging the water to "dash [him] with amorous wet," claiming that he is able to repay, thus becomes Whitman's attestation of the unlimited nature of sex. The concept of the ocean as a boundless body of seminal fluid coupled with the poet's affirmation that he is integral with the sea, being "of one phase and all phases," signals Whitman's rejection of social forces in favour of natural processes. The sexual climax here is reminiscent of the bathers who do not care how much sperm they 'spend'. The sea, and by extension the poet, scatters semen freely, an action which implies the importance of sexual spontaneity. It is apparent that the poet's sexual instinct is the most powerful bond he has with nature, a world governed not by rules but by urges and flux. Thus, the most basic of human impulses is placed in an elevated position through its expression in nature. The reflexive implication of this ennoblement is that human sexuality is placed above the society which attempts to control it.

The poet, in exploring his sexuality using nature as his seduced and seducer, asserts the unifying principle of auto-eroticism. His pantheistic vision is a direct result of his masturbatory activities in nature. The universe opens up to the poet through the affirmation of completion inherent in his own body. His body becomes indistinguishable from the natural body.

In acknowledging his relationship to nature in sexual terms, the poet remains in a state of becoming, of constant renewal. The pastoral element in Whitman therefore assumes a deeply personal quality and a sensuality which we do not encounter in his European Romantic predecessors. Whitman, in experiencing nature, becomes one with all being whereas Wordsworth, by comparison, depicts the natural world as a force outside himself:

> With deep devotion, Nature did I feel,
> In that enormous City's turbulent world
> Of men and things, what benefit I owed
> To thee, and those domains of rural peace,
> Where to the sense of beauty first my heart
> Was opened.[8]

Whitman allows nature to lead him back to the primitive in himself. This self-sufficiency is analogous to the independence and completion of masturbation, the self-contained universe of the body. Thus, the poet does not intellectualize nature but rather contends that its inherent power resides in the anti-intellectual: "Oxen that rattle the yoke or halt in the shade, what is it that you express

in your eyes,/ It seems to me more than all the print I have read in all my life" (ll. 228-229).

The creed delivered by the poet in section 24 lends a valuable insight into Whitman's position. This affirmation of the physical has a distinct religious quality to it. Further, this blasphemous version of the Biblical creed provides us with a guide to Whitman's auto-eroticism:

> I believe in the flesh and the appetites,
> Seeing, hearing and feeling are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle.
>
> Divine I am inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touched from,
> The scent of these armpits is aroma finer than prayer,
> This head is more than churches or creeds.
> If I worship any particular thing it shall be some of the spread of my body.
> (ll. 524-529)

Significantly, what follows this locating of the body as the site of worship and its obvious body-as-temple Biblical connotation is the religious service itself. As a result, the sexual body is reclaimed from the church body which symbolically imprisons it, in a typically Whitmanian reversal. Thus, the concept of sexual energy as life force is elevated through the poet's body to its natural sacredness, which society attempts to strip.

Auto-eroticism is transformed from the secret sin to a virtue to be chanted. And the poet does just that, chanting the glory of his sexuality using natural images to extoll his genitals: "Root of washed sweet-flag, timorous pond-snipe, nest of guarded duplicate eggs, it shall be you"

(l. 536) and his semen: "You my rich blood, your milky stream pale strippings of my life" (l. 533). The insistent affirmation "it shall be you" which occurs eleven times in this passage indicates the extent to which the poet's nature and nature itself are seen as inseparable and beyond reproach. Therefore, when the poet claims: "I dote on myself . . . there is that lot of me, and all so luscious" (l. 545), the expression of masturbation's validity has already been established. The cultivation metaphor carries with it the creative process embodied in auto-eroticism. Effectively in both cases, natural cycles and not an imposed order are embraced. Energy is spent, renewed and re-spent in this unlimited economy shared by the poet and nature.

Importantly, Whitman does not choose to transcend the physical senses. Instead, he insists on the value of sensory perception, differentiating the sense of touch from the other senses because it can overpower them. The extreme vulnerability induced by touching the self: "I merely stir, press, feel with my fingers, and am happy,/ To touch my person to some one else's is about as much as I can stand" (ll. 616-617) is a precursor to the power shift which occurs during genital stimulation when the "fellow senses" slide away. The body becomes both giver and receiver through the sense of touch. Since this is comparable to embodying production and consumption simultaneously, Whitman's self-contained universe can be seen as one in which energy flows

cyclically, recycled rather than expended. The theory of vital energy is thereby supplanted by Whitman's principle of vitality: masturbation does not drain the body without renewing it at the same time.

Interestingly enough, this, the most graphic auto-erotic scene of "Song of Myself" occurs at the physical mid-point of the body of the poem. If the poem were to be anatomically divided, section 27 would be the penis, placed between the head and feet. Although this sort of comparison may seem far-fetched, it is not without basis. Just as Whitman's lover reaches from beard to foot, completing his knowledge of the poet's body after sex, the reader's relationship to the poem moves towards a centre of erotic encounter. Thus, the masturbatory climax of section 27 represents a structural climax as well. The penis rises and falls as the poetic body joins the poet's body. Running the risk of taking Whitman too much at his word when he invites the reader to view the Leaves not as a book but as a man, I propose that it is through this masturbation sequence in "Song of Myself" that the poetic body can be seen as united with the poet's body.

Therefore, section 27 is doubly important in the unfolding of "Song of Myself." First, it represents the poet's final struggle against repressive social forces. The internalized voice of anti-masturbation, carried over from society, causes the poet to experience doubt. He treats

sexual arousal as an enemy:

> On all sides prurient provokers stiffening
> my limbs,
> Straining the udder of my heart for its
> withheld drip,
> Behaving licentious toward me, taking
> no denial
> Depriving me of my best as for a purpose.
> (11. 622-625)

In nature, the poet was integrated through sex. Here, we find him struggling against his body, or rather the social body which still imposes itself on the natural body. Thus, we hear the poet echoing the nineteenth-century notion of masturbatory insanity--"I am given up by traitors;/ I talk wildly . . . I have lost my wits . . . ." (11. 636-637)-- and voicing guilt, "I and nobody else am the greatest traitor" (l. 637).

No doubt this constitutes the poet's inevitable ordeal by fire, the test of the discovered self over the social self. Victory comes through orgasm: "Unclench your floodgates! you are too much for me" (l. 640), followed by the negation of the socio-sexual ideal of 'saving':

> Parting tracked by arriving . . . .perpetual
> payment of the perpetual loan,
> Rich showering rain, and recompense
> richer afterward.
>
> Sprouts take and accumulate . . . . stand by
> the curb prolific and vital,
> Landscapes projected masculine full-sized
> and golden.
> (11. 642-646)

The poet, in juxtaposing the vocabulary of nineteenth-century sexual economy to the natural images of growth,

undercuts all notions of masturbation as depletion. Whitman's renewable spermatic "rain" here is therefore directly linked to the "amorous wet" of the sea in section 22 and signals the poet's fusion with nature. The separation of the body from the social body is complete. It is interesting to note that this separation occurs through self-love as the poetic body and the poet's body become unified.

The union of the poetic body to the poet's body is effectuated through the poetic imagination which Ezra Pound describes as "seminal, suggesting that the brain consisted of seminal fluid from which images spurted like ejaculations."[9] In "Song of Myself," the speaker masturbates and the text climaxes in unison with the poet as the seeds of Whitman's imagination scatter freely over the page.

While this metaphor for the creative process seems to easily apply to "Song of Myself," it is the way in which it does not apply readily to the "Calamus" poems that sheds light on Whitman's creative/sexual evolution. "Song of Myself," while it is not entirely genital-centred, is far more so than the "Calamus" poems. Sexual energy is undirected and expressed through the penis (centralized sexuality) in Whitman's epic poem. In the "Calamus" poems, sexual energy is focused and expressed through the erotic body (decentralized sexuality). The liberation of the body

which takes place in "Song of Myself" can therefore be perceived as the necessary precursor to the writing of the body in "Calamus."

A hint of the ongoing process of sexual/textual liberation that the poet undergoes occurs in section 42 of "Song of Myself." The poet recognizes his voice--". . . .A call in the midst of the crowd,/ My own voice, orotund sweeping and final" (ll. 1050-1051)--and then appears to liken himself to the performer, who "Now . . . launches his nerve . . . .he has passed his prelude on the reeds within./ Easily written loosefingered chords! I feel the thrum of their climax and close" (ll. 1054-1055). The "reeds within" represent the poet's authentic voice gained through the liberation of the body and the "climax and close" of auto-eroticism. The chords or word-phrases are "easily written" because they emanate from a point of self-love rather than the self-alienation imposed by society.

As Whitman informs us:

> I find nothing in literature that is valuable for its professional quality: literature is only valuable in the measure of the passion--the blood and muscle--with which it is invested--which lies concealed and active in it.[10]

It is the passion of the self, the self-love, which is the generating force of "Song of Myself". Masturbation is therefore the physical equivalent of creative self-expression. What Whitman does is capture both at the same

time, as a process within a process.

This process, which involves the journey from culture to nature, is moreover the path from personal and collective silence to original individual articulation. The voice of the poet thus becomes the voice of:

> . . .many long dumb voices,
> Voices of the interminable generations of slaves,
> Voices of prostitutes and deformed persons,
> Voices of the diseased and despairing, and of thieves and dwarfs. . .
>
> (11. 509-512)

Thus, all of society's outcasts become articulate through the poet as well as the "voices of sexes and lusts . . . . voices veiled" (l. 519). Significantly, the poet claims, "I remove the veil,/ Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigured" (11. 519-520), an act which resembles his becoming "undisguised and naked." He will not be silenced: "I do not press my finger across my mouth" (l. 521).

The reader too is encompassed by the poet's voice: "It is you talking as much as myself. . . . I act as the tongue of you,/ It was tied in your mouth. . . .in mine it begins to be unloosened" (11. 1244-1245). In a figurative sense, the penis of masturbatory creativity becomes the tongue that the poet offers us. Thereby, the societal "house" is abandoned: "I swear I will never mention love or death inside a house" (l. 1246), insisting on translating (or exchanging one tongue for another) in the "open air" of nature.

In centering the image of the voice in the tongue/penis, Whitman challenges the voices of patriarchy

which seek to repress the expressive, authentic sexual self. The poet shatters the world of appearances by speaking the language of its most feared taboo. From the margins of silence, Whitman shouts the beauty of his body, with its organic and sexual processes, embodying his message in a style which itself is a body both organic and orgasmic. As Chantal Chawaf asks:

> Isn't the final goal of writing to articulate the body? For me the sensual juxtaposition of words has one function: to liberate a living paste, to liberate matter. Language through writing has moved away from its original sources: the body and the earth . . Linguistic flesh has been puritanically repressed.[11]

And it is thus that she provides us with an insight into Whitman's "language experiment" as he referred to the Leaves. In subverting dominant discourse through the sexual freedom of the body/text, the poet excites our ties to linguistic flesh. Chawaf's prescription for writing--

> The word has its own organic life and to conserve that life is of the utmost importance. In order to reconnect the book with the body and with pleasure, we must disintellectualize writing. The corporality of language stirs up our sensuality, wakes it up, pulls it away from indifferent inertia[12]--

was filled by Whitman over a century ago. His subversive seed was clearly planted in fertile ground.

Chapter IV

THE "CALAMUS" POEMS

If "Song of Myself" represents the revolution of the individual body (alternative discourse) against the social body (dominant discourse), then the "Calamus" poems are by implication the subversive body textualized: the permanent site of alternative discourse.

There is every indication that Whitman has undergone a change of significant proportion between the time his personal epic first appeared (1855) and the publication of the 1860 edition of Leaves of Grass in the which the "Calamus" poems are introduced. The awareness voiced by the poet that "he and another, wandering hand in hand they twain, apart from other men" (Cal. 10) differs radically from the solitary, anarchic consciousness which informs "Song of Myself." The movement from culture to nature of "Song of Myself" through which the poet re-discovers the freedom of his body is a given in the "Calamus" leaves. Confronting culture and its phallic imperatives, the "Calamus" poet insists on a counter-culture based on sexual separatism. Whitman becomes the voice (or tongue, as he would have it) of a defined sexual and political consciousness. He uncloset a revolutionary social body through which an abundant male-male love moves, declaring:

> Come, I am determined to unbare this broad
> breast of mine--I have long enough
> stifled and choked:
> Emblematic and capricious blades, I leave you--
> now you serve me not,
> Away! I will say what I have to say, by itself,
> I will escape from the sham that was proposed
> to me,
> I will sound myself and comrades only--
> I will never again utter a call, only their call.
> (Cal. 2)

In so doing, he frees the body of the text from the binary oppositions inherent in heterosexual texts. Masculine/feminine, masculine/homosexual and heterosexual/homosexual are the hierarchical relations which determine meaning and order reality in the masculine tradition. The tradition. Aristotle, supremacy of the male over the female. Descartes, supremacy of the mind over the body. Freud, supremacy of the male genitals over the erotic body. To this, add the church, the state and its laws and medicine and you have an aerial view of the land of the Father. Affirm the feminine, the body and the erotic body and you effectively subvert the Father. Enter Whitman.

Having rejected the privilege/power/burden of the phallus,[1] Whitman is free to explore without conquering, to inhabit without dominating. Self-loving-other-as-self can only result in a fluid subjectivity, or intersubjectivity if you will. This intersubjectivity is in direct contrast to masculine writing, in which the poet is subject and other is always object. Inherent in this subject/object writing is a set of power relations which reflect and reinforce

patriarchal values. Conquest, competition, possession, domination, production and exploitation exist only in a world of objects, a world in which self is alienated from another. Thus, Whitman's intersubjectivity implies an equality which for his readers means the rare privilege of touching the subject(s) rather than objectifying the text.

Thus, the fact that Whitman's mainstream critics approach his erotic poetry through the use of traditional, patriarchal critical tools makes the imposition of values rather than the interpretation of value an inevitability. As seen earlier, Freudian-based Whitman criticism presupposes a power relation (subject/object) with the text which allows them to 'patronize' both text and poet. By extension, any critical method that does not call into question the very phallocracy that Whitman overturns in his erotic text is a distortion. Moreover, this defining through lack, re-forming the non-conformist and perverting the perversion-defying erotic body/text cannot, in truth, be seen as a critical approach. It is a critical escape. Harold Beaver supplies us with a valuable clue as to why criticism of gay literature such as the "Calamus" poems would necessarily involve an alternate critical process. In "Homosexual Signs," he states:

> The reinvention of systems begins with demolition, like the inner wall of a house which becomes the outer wall after wars and devastation. Since the very language of homosexuality is incorporated in heterosexual discourse, its very principles have already

> been anticipated and categorized by the dominant side. It is not enough to work against ideology by pointing it out. Far more effective is subversion from within, sabotaging the machinery (like Soviet dissidents) by 'making it grind so that it can be heard, so that it will not be innocent, so that it will lose in fact that beautiful mask of innocence and being natural'.[2]

Moving between highly personal glimpses of male-male love and the fervent aspiration of universal cooperation replacing competition amongst men, Whitman clearly rejects the patriarchal 'virtues' of fortune-seeking, saving money (and sperm) and conquest/possession/domination of woman (and land). But it is not here that his sabotage of dominant discourse finds its greatest strengths. Whitman's patently anti-patriarchal message is embodied in language relationships which have been termed feminine. According to Hélène Cixous,

> . . .masculine sexuality gravitates around the penis, engendering that centralized body (in political anatomy) under the dictatorship of its parts, woman does not bring about the same regionalization which serves the couple head/genitals and which are inscribed only within boundaries. Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide.[3]

Through his writing, Whitman reclaims the homosexual/homo-erotic body from the margins of silence imposed by the dominant discourse of head/genital repression. In this way, his orality can be likened to

> Her writing [which] can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours, daring to make these vertiginous crossings of the other(s) ephemeral and passionate sojourns in him, her, them, whom she inhabits

> long enough to look at from the point closest to their unconscious from the moment they awaken, to love them at the point closest to their drives; and then further, impregnated through and through with these brief, identificatory embraces, she goes and passes into infinity.[4]

"Calamus (2)," which later came to be entitled "Scented Herbage of My Breast," establishes the erotic body thus described as the site of writing. The relationship between the body and organic growth, and by extension Whitman's organic writing style, is one of intersubjectivity here. Any attempt to pursue a linear investigation is ultimately confounded by the intricate series of cycles Whitman sets up. Symbolic associations through organ/organic part such as heart/root, leaves/"blossoms of my blood" cannot therefore be isolated but rather point to circulatory system/sap movement cycles. Whitman's signs are those of processes rather than products.

Early in the poem we are alerted to the fact that writing the body involves both activity and passivity traditionally seen as traits of gender polarity. Whitman erases the opposition: "Scented herbage of my breast,/Leaves from you I yield, I write . . . " (Cal. 2). By placing the word "yield"--meaning both give and give up or surrender--in a sentence position of activity, Whitman creates a rift in the reader's sensibilities. Masculine activity is thereby devalued in favour of organic processes. When alternative discourse subverts dominant discourse at the textual level,

as in this instance, the subversive sign acts as the agent of a well-executed coup-d'état. As a result, power structures and the value systems which inform them must be re-examined. The reader can but experience culture as an uneasy interstice. Roland Barthes describes this type of text as:

> . . .the text that imposes a sense of loss, the text that discomforts . . . unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to crisis his relation with language.[5]

The crisis that we experience in "Calamus (2)" is one which re-occurs in every "Calamus" poem: we are forced to de-intellectualize our reading process. The linear masculine model of classification, categorization and hierarchization as a means of interpretation does not work. We must instead read with our bodies because that is the implicit relationship with the text that Whitman's feminized language structures require.

"Calamus (3)," a poem which deals specifically with the relationship between the poet's body, the textual body and the reader's body, confirms the poet's refusal to objectify or to be objectified. Poet, text and reader are all presented as subjects which in itself constitutes a radical departure from the masculine tradition. It is the point at which the identifiable subject slips into deliberate ambiguity, however, which marks both our sexual pleasure and Whitman's textual subversion.

The first line of the poem: "Whoever you are holding me now in hand" (Cal. 3) invites us to assume a physical proximity to the poet and to imagine that we are in fact holding the poet's hand. Until section 3 of the poem, we are secure with this perception of the subject. The first hint of confusion as to who/what the true subject is comes when the 'poet' asks us to: "Let go your hand from my shoulders,/ Put me down, and depart on your way" (Cal. 3). Since one hand cannot rest on both of the poet's shoulders simultaneously and since the act of removing that hand cannot in any way constitute putting him down, we are alerted to the fact that the "me" which we have so readily identified as the poet is perhaps the book we are holding. Having established that, the recognition that the poet does not use the third person impersonal pronoun "it" can only mean one thing: his book is not an object.

The intersubjectivity of self and book is clearly indicated in section 4 of the poem: "And in libraries I lie as one dumb, a gawk, or unborn, or dead,/ But just possibly with you on a high hill--first watching lest any person, for miles around, approach unawares" (Cal. 3). The poet's body, his book, offers us his lips or the contours of his mouth. The gift is of orality and ultimately of the speaking subject, the erotic body.

Section 5 of "Calamus (3)" is filled with secret signs. Having established the self/book twin subjectivity allows

Whitman to move into homosexual countercode. While "thrusting me beneath your clothing" can clearly be seen as referring to the book, the sexual connotation of the verb is not accidental. Surely one could place a book beneath one's clothing without necessarily thrusting it. This is further supported by the delightfully ambiguous "rest upon your hip," which, while it is a very comfortable position to hold a book in, is also an expression denoting fellatio. What is best, however, is proximity: "For thus, merely touching you, is enough--is best,/ And thus, touching you would I silently sleep and be carried eternally." What is being undercut here is the notion of possession which underlies all subject/object relationships. As the erotic body/text is not alienated from other bodies as is the head/genital text, nearness rather than domination of other is emphasized.

For the reader, this means identifying with a subject who inhabits other subjects and then disappears: "Already you see I have escaped from you" (Cal. 3). Importantly, both reader and poet escape being appropriated. In de-appropriating the Leaves, Whitman transcends the death which is the fate of authors who leave behind an object. As the poet writes in "Calamus (2)," his leaves are "to be perused best afterwards." In other words, his meaning extends beyond death. Undercutting the value placed on objects in the masculine economy through deliberate understatement of his creative contribution, Whitman underlines the longevity

of his intersubjectivities:

> No labor-saving machine,
> Nor discovery have I made. . .
>
> Nor literary success, nor intellect--nor
> book for the book-shelf;
> Only these carols, vibrating through the air,
> I leave,
> For comrades and lovers.
>
> (Cal. 33).

Clearly, death for Whitman is subject, "you hide in these shifting forms of life, for reasons--and that they are mainly for you,/ That you, beyond them, come forth, to remain, the real reality. . . " (Cal. 2). His stand is in direct opposition to that of the hero: the masculine ideal. Annie Leclerc informs us that:

> Once you understand what the hero wants, you also understand why he can never be happy. He knows he will die one day and for him the idea is intolerable. Because after his death the world will go on turning. A world rich and pregnant with all the things the hero was unable to possess but also, o cruel fate! with all the things he had succeeded in possessing. Death will relentlessly steal from him all that he considers his own, real or potential, and death is his greatest torment.
>
> It is death that raises the hero's temperature. Not life; that leaves him cold.[6]

In "Calamus (28)," Whitman overturns the value system which promotes the hero. Here, the poet compares heroes, or those men who distinguish themselves from other men through their deaths, and male-male lovers, or those men who identify with other men in life. For him, the "dangers, odium, unchanging, long and long," faced by the lovers is

far more significant than military victories. The fame of heroes is, for the poet, a "conquered" fame. The sign "conquered" indicates the ultimate victory of death and the emptiness of victory over another. Whitman's democratic principle is one of love of another, which he presents here as an affirmation of the life force. This value system implies the transcendence of the multiple subject, "the brotherhood of lovers," beyond death, beyond the book in which their lives were recounted. The poet's thoughts of them and the fact that he is "filled with the bitterest envy" point to the confirmation of homosexual potentialities. Clearly, life, not death, raises Whitman's temperature.

Whitman's presentation of anti-heroic, hence anti-phallic concerns calls into question the relationship between the "Calamus" poems and the "Enfans d'Adam" poems in which the poet speaks through the persona of a sexual hero, the new Adam. Appearing for the first time in the 1860 edition of the Leaves, the "Enfans d'Adam" poems were conceptualized by Whitman to be to heterosexual love what the "Calamus" poems to manly love. Lending voice to the vulgar Lamarckian theory of eugenics, the poet drains the "pent-up aching rivers" of himself, insisting on creating "perfect men and women out of [his] love-spendings" (EA. 4). Procreative duty and not sexual pleasure governs the Adamic figure's actions. Hence, the body of the "Enfans d'Adam"

poems is a strictly functional one.[7] The text prattles. The anatomical body does not produce pleasure:

> Ribs, belly, back-bone, joints of the back-bone,
> Hips, hip-sockets, hip-strength, inward and outward round, man-balls, man root,
> Strong set of thighs, well carrying the trunk above,
> Leg-fibres, knee, knee-pan, upper-leg, under leg.
>
> (EA. 3)

Moreover, when the text attempts to portray sexual pleasure the effect is almost pornographic:

> Mad filaments, ungovernable shoots play out of it, the response likewise ungovernable,
> Hair, bosom, hips, bend of legs, negligent falling hands, all diffused--mine too diffused,
> Ebb stung by the flow, flow stung by the ebb--love-flesh swelling and deliciously aching,
> Limitless limpid jets of love hot and enormous, quivering jelly of love, white blow and delirious juice,
> Bridegroom-night of love, working surely and softly into the prostrate dawn. . .
>
> (EA. 3)

Here, the clinical precision of the act leaves no room for the reader to be teased, to be courted into pleasure. Sex is work in the "Enfans d'Adam" poems and its payment is "bully breeds of children." Et voilà, the nineteenth-century masculine economy.

Whether or not it is true that Whitman intended the "Enfans d'Adam" series as the heterosexual camouflage of the intimate homosexual revelations of the "Calamus" poems is [illegible]ly academic. What does reveal itself here is that Whitman, in echoing dominant discourse, is at His worst.

This is not to imply that all writing which reflects the concerns of the dominant social order and is produced under its protection is devoid of merit. It does mean, however, that the text which emerges from a particular socio-political framework and does not move beyond the language of its sustaining institutions (sociolect)[8] is a closed text. The reader is forced to acknowledge and accept, to objectify the text, rather than to participate in the textual process.

Published in 1855, the same year as the original edition of Leaves of Grass, Alfred Lord Tennyson's "In Memoriam" provides an example of a closed text or subject/object writing. Interestingly, the text like the "Calamus" poems deals with male love sentiments and therefore provides a good basis for comparison. The patriarchal order exhibits itself through the constrictions of formal rhyme and metre unlike Whitman's organic lines based on breath patterns.

Tennyson's exploration of the relationship between body and blood does not indicate the cyclicality we encounter in Whitman but rather a linearity. Specifically, what we find in Tennyson is the importance of maintaining hierarchical male relations (father/son) through patrilineal blood:

> I see thee sitting crown'd with good,
> A central warmth diffusing bliss
> In glance and smile, and clasp and kiss,
> On all the branches of thy blood.

> Thy blood my friend, and partly mine;
> For now the day was drawing on,
> When thou shouldst link thy life with one
> Of mine own house, and boys of thine
>
> Had babbled 'Uncle' on my knee;
> But that remorseless iron hour
> Made cypress of her orange flower,
> Despair of hope, and earth of thee.
>
> I seem to meet their least desire,
> To clap their cheeks, to call them mine.
> I see their unborn faces shine
> Beside the never-lighted fire.[9]

The passage speaks of loss and yet we do not feel it. Our response is an intellectual one. The emotive potential of "Thy blood and, and partly mine," is completely removed by the formal pronoun which, though it serves to eulogize the dead Hallam, pushes us away from the text. The possession implicit in this passage places us directly in what Helene Cixous terms the "masculine-conjugal subjective economy."[10] In fact, the masculine line which Tennyson valorizes here directs our attention to the power relations that this blood line signifies. Michel Foucault describes the importance of blood and its associations with power as follows:

> It [blood] owed its high value to its instrumental role (the ability to shed blood), to the way it functioned in the order of signs (to have a certain blood, to be prepared to risk one's blood), and also to its precariousness (easily spilled, subject to drying up, too readily mixed, capable of being quickly corrupted). A society of blood--. . . .of 'sanguinity'--where power spoke through blood.[11]

By contrast, Whitman's "Calamus (15)" which was later entitled "Trickle Drops" depicts blood as liberation:

"bleeding drops/ From wounds made to free you whence you were prisoned," and as the vital element in the creative process: "Glow upon all that I have written or shall write, bleeding drops/ Let it all be seen in your light, blushing drops" (Cal. 15). The association of blood and semen: "Saturate them with yourself, all ashamed and wet," reveals a violation of economy since sperm was understood to be non-regenerative. As has been seen, free expenditure or masturbation represents the creative force in Whitman. The "drops of me" that Whitman allows to trickle onto paper (the act of unburdening his breast) serve to liberate him as well as his reader.

Thus, the renewal of energy which follows masturbation witnessed in "Song of Myself" is duplicated in the relationship between the poet and the reader in the "Calamus" poems. Significantly, the textualization of the auto-erotic (Whitman's flesh-made-word) accentuates his reader's complicity. For example, in searching out that which constitutes the prison from which the poet frees him,[12] he must examine the type of liberation he is being offered. Since it is a freedom based on the sacrifice of blood and the spilling of the seed, the reader might assume that it is a redemption of a religious nature (or, if one recalls "Song of Myself", a spirituality based on the ennoblement of sex). Since blood symbolizes power, perhaps the poet's sharing of it with the reader represents a violation of traditional,

male hierarchical structures. The reader has no choice but to move along an interstice of recognition, doubt and re-interpretation only to realize that the text is as fluid as his own body. The reader cannot simply observe as does the lady watching the twenty-eight bathers in "Song of Myself". He must participate in the auto-erotic text.

Some clue as to how this process occurs is captured in the symbolism of the live-oak in "Calamus (20)." The "live-oak growing" hearkens us back to the poet's body in "Scented Herbage of My Breast" as it too is seen to be "uttering joyous leaves." The personification of the live-oak is therefore complementary to the organ(ic)izing of the poet witnessed in the prior poem. In fact, the Louisiana tree reminds the poet of himself ("And its look, rude unbending, lusty, made me think of myself") and he wonders why it is not lonely: "But I wondered how it could utter joyous leaves, standing alone there without its friend, its lover near--for I knew I could not" (Cal. 20). Clearly, the live-oak is more than just a natural phallic symbol for the poet. The image of the tongue/penis fusing with solitude and organic growth provides a powerful symbol of the poetic process.

The tree is both the poet's body and the poetic body. Therefore, when the poet breaks off a twig from the live-oak with "a certain amount of leaves" which serves as a reminder of "manly love" we know that this act forms a representative part of the whole organic process. It is interesting to

note that the poet takes the trouble of wrapping the moss around the twig, making it a miniature version of the live-oak. In Whitman, the relationship between the whole and its parts is one of organic continuity. His parts are whole. Whitman, in writing the body--the male body liberated from masculine imperatives--fits into Cixous' description of the feminine economy:

> If there is a 'propriety of woman,' it is paradoxically her capacity to depropriate unselfishly, body without end, without appendage, without principal 'parts'. If she's whole, it's a whole composed of parts that are wholes, not simple partial objects. . . [13]

Although the part (twig) is removed from the whole (tree), the organic unity is maintained. The symbols of the poet (tree) and manly love (twig) are what I will call intersymbols, or symbols which point to intersubjectivities. When the poet claims that he could not live without his lover near, he affirms the proximity of the subject in the creative process. His body touches other bodies even in solitude. The "live-oak glistens." The poet's semen flows in abundance. His auto-erotic process is our jouissance.

As Roland Barthes rhetorically asks: "Is not the most erotic portion of the body where the garment gapes?" [14] So it is with Whitman's text. Nowhere, for example, in Leaves of Grass does the poet use the word "silent" or withhold detail as frequently as he does in "Calamus." In what purport to be confessional poems, the 'true' confession is never expressed. Instead, it occurs between the lines: in

the silences, in the secrets we are alerted to but not told, and in the private looks between men. Harold Beaver explains that

> to be homosexual in Western society entails a state of mind in which all the credentials, however petty are under unceasing scrutiny. The homosexual is beset by signs, by the urge to interpret whatever transpires or fails to transpire, between himself and every chance acquaintance. He is a prodigious consumer of signs--of hidden meanings, hidden systems, hidden potentiality. Exclusion from the common code impels the frenzied quest: in the momentary glimpse, the scrambled figure, the sporadic gesture, the chance encounter, the reverse image, the sudden slippage, the lowered guard. In a flash meanings may be disclosed; mysteries wrenched out and betrayed.[15]

As the creator of these signs, Whitman recognizes and notes the importance of his non-discursive spaces:

> Here the frailest leaves of me, and yet
> my strongest lasting,
> Here I shade down and hide my thoughts--
> I do not expose them,
> And yet they expose me more than all
> my other poems.
>
> (Cal. 44)

Certainly, "Calamus" does not have the self-revealing quality of "Song of Myself" or the painstaking pornographic detail of "Enfans d'Adam." What these poems exhibit is the poet's ability to flow between silence and the word, alternately concealing and revealing meaning. In this manner, the reader is seduced and excited where the text gapes. Whitman does not colonize space. His text is polymorphous and transcendent:

> To you, yet unborn, these seeking you.
> When you read these, I, that was visible, am
> become invisible;
> Now it is you, compact, visible, realizing
> my poems, seeking me,
> Fancying how happy you were, if I could be
> with you, and become your lover;
> Be it as if I were with you. Be not too
> certain but I am now with you.
> (Cal. 45)

The subject disappears and then re-appears. The intersubject, the reader, makes the invisible visible. Clearly, Whitman does not fear the void. Claudine Hermann describes this empty space as being antithetical to "man's space [which] is a space of domination, hierarachy and conquest, a sprawling, showy space, a full space."[16]

In defining the unseen as proximate to the seen rather than a site of conquest, Whitman re-defines space itself. Nowhere is this more readily experienced than in "Calamus (18)," in which the poet combines the element of an invisible space with that of renewal. The qualifying of the city--"whom that I have lived and sung there will one day make you illustrious"--merges past and future. The point in time and space "there," which should serve as some point of reference, does not. Instead it draws attention to itself through its awkward placement in the line. We expect some form of elaboration which does not come in the lines that follow. Contrary to our expectations, the poet qualifies the invisible space through a negation of the 'full space' of the city:

> Not the pageants of you--not your shifting
> tableaux, your spectacles, repay me,
> Not the interminable rows of your houses--
> nor the ships at the wharves,
> Nor the processions in the streets, nor the
> bright windows, with goods in them. . .
> (Cal. 18)

It is only in the last three lines of the poem that we discover the intricate series of signs that Whitman has established to create an alternate value system. The hidden Manhattan is not a site but the "frequent and swift flash of eyes offering [the poet] love." This non-verbal emotional/sexual space is not only more important to the poet than the material aspects of the city; it has the power to give him what nature has given him in the past: the expression of sexual freedom and the cycle of spending and renewal, of activity and receptivity.

As well as undercutting the nineteenth-century notion of space, Whitman overturns conventional definitions of time. Fluctuating between memory and desire, past and present, the "Calamus" poems place the reader in the position of having to centre time. We must abandon all notion of physical time. Time, which for the industrializing United States was equated with productivity, is in Whitman the time which distances him from his lover:

> 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
> have the like, out of like feelings?
> (Cal. 9)

Significantly, time is qualified not by what is done but by what is felt. Our time relation with the text is not, therefore, with the tangible productive present. Instead, we are compelled to inhabit the amorphous body of 'counter-productive' time/space. We must feel the passage of time since we cannot quantify it in a linear fashion. Our proximity to the text is governed not by referential points in time or space but by the experience of the poet himself. In Barthesian terms, this represents "The pleasure of the text . . . that moment when my body pursues its own ideas--for my body does not have the same ideas I do."[17]

Whitman, in "Calamus (13)," makes apparent the relationship that the reader has with the body of his text:

> Love-buds, put before you and within you,
> whoever you are,
> Buds to be unfolded on the old terms,
> If you bring the warmth of the sun to them,
> they will open, and bring form, color,
> perfume, to you,
> If you become the aliment and the wet, they
> will become flowers, fruits, tall
> branches and trees,
> They are comprised in you just as much as in
> themselves--perhaps more than in themselves,
> They are not comprised in one season or
> succession, but many successions,
> They have come slowly up out of the earth and
> me, and are to come slowly up out of you.
> (Cal. 13)

The love the poet communicates through natural images is a love which has an unlimited potential for growth and renewal. What we contribute to the erotic body/text is an inhabiting subject. Ultimately, the reader "inhales [the]

faint odor" of the leaves or breathes in what has been breathed out by the poet. The respiratory system and the circulatory system of the poetic body, symbolized as they are by natural cycles, are brought to life by the reader.

What unites all the cycles of both the poetic body and the poet's body is the auto-erotic activity implicit in the process of writing the body. It is here that we begin to understand the importance of the tree/plant symbolism which occurs throughout the "Calamus" poems. The sap which nourishes organic life is the semen of the poet's body. Unlike masculine writing, in which the seeds are placed at an objective distance from the reader, Whitman's "love-spendings" are scattered freely. For Whitman, loving desire rather than desiring objects makes the process of writing itself valuable. It is the masturbatory process of writing which is captured in the "Calamus" leaves, not the product of the act of masturbation. The effects of this difference, as we have seen, are profound.

Moreover, the writing of the body or the auto-erotic body as creative principle is the underlying secret of Whitman's affective impact. Because his auto-eroticism is total and not divided along head/genital lines, we experience a fluidity, not the sporadic thrusts of meaning we have come to expect in masculine texts. Clearly, masturbation is a trope for the creative process in the "Calamus" poems, but it is in the way that the whole

body/text is eroticized that marks the poet's genius. Moreover, if an emphasis on textuality yields sexual-textual pleasure, or jouissance, then it would seem that this new way of approaching Whitman's auto-eroticism represents a significant reclaiming of the textual body by the reader.

Chapter V

CONCLUSION

It is generally acknowledged that with Whitman, American poetry finds its unique voice. One of the things I have tried to argue, however, is that certain tones in the voice have been systematically muted. This is, of course, one of the dangers inherent in the patriarchal ideology, or indeed in any dominant power system. Rebellion can be suppressed, or, if it is too threatening, incorporated somehow within the system. Clearly, this has been the fate of Whitman's aesthetics of auto-eroticism, absorbed as it has been as an aberration within dominant discourse.

The most obvious advantage of treating alternative discourse such as Whitman's auto-erotic body/text using Barthesian analysis and recent feminist theory is that these approaches take into consideration the role played by dominant discourse. Theoreticians like Roland Barthes and Helene Cixous question patriarchal values in writing, a feature of their critical process which results in the movement away from 'normalizing' writing to fit these values. Because they are conscious of the dominant ideology and its assumptions, their theories provide an appropriate basis for dealing with Whitman's subversive aesthetic.

This is, of course, not the only factor which makes the interpretive strategies advanced by Barthes and Cixous relevant to auto-eroticism in Whitman. The insistence on textuality shared by these contemporary thinkers results in a way of reading based on pleasure. That pleasure which resides in the text is an erotic pleasure: jouissance. For Barthes who coined the term, for Cixous who "feminized" it and for Whitman, whose text abounds with it, jouissance is an experience of the body.

In establishing the body as the site of writing as Whitman does in the "Calamus" poems, the masturbatory ecstasy witnessed in "Song of Myself" becomes a textual experience for his reader. He or she is no longer outside the poet's body but rather within the body of the text. It is here that the possibilities for the orgasmic loss of self are embodied. The reader, as the inhabiting subject, of Whitman's body/text is teased into erotic pleasure through language structures and 'comes' when this subjectivity becomes ambiguous.

For Cixous this articulation of the body is essential to women's writing, for she maintains that the body has been the site of women's repression. In other words, to write the body is to free it from the patriarchal prison wherein it can only exist as object. While Cixous' concerns reflect women's writing, it is precisely the way that they are reflected in Whitman--specifically in his

subversion of subject/object relations--that demonstrates that the applications of feminist criticism extend beyond their implicit intent. Clearly, Whitman's fluid intersubjective body/text displays a consciousness which runs counter to masculine values. Seemingly, feminist strategies coupled with textuality should not be restricted to texts written by women.

It should be noted, however, that not all feminist criticism can be so readily applied to Whitman's auto-erotic body/text as that of the French feminist thinkers consulted. Anglo-American feminist theory, for example, places much critical importance on the ability of the text to capture woman's authentic experience. No doubt this methodology would prove inappropriate for re-evaluating Whitman's text.

In summarizing Elaine Showalter's discussion of Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own, Toril Moi points out that Showalter--

> . . .[objects] to the impersonality of Room, an impersonality that springs from the fact Woolf's use of the many different personae to voice the narrative 'I' results in frequently recurring shifts and changes of subject position[1]

--consequently missing the playfulness and whimsy of Woolf's text. There is a valuable clue in this critical exchange which is relevant to Whitman's text. In assuming a serious textual strategy--one which imposes a rigid structure on the text rather than experiencing the fluid body/text suggested by Woolf's subjectivities--Showalter de-sensualizes the

body/text. If in Whitman the auto-erotic body is the text, then it follows that the act of reading his text involves sensual play. To apply a critical method which ignores this sexual-textual playfulness in Whitman's poetry would be to appropriate the body/text in the name of anatomical seriousness, to strip it of its unlimited sexual contours.

Whitman's text embodies pleasure. Therefore, if we are evaluate his auto-erotic body text, our evaluation must be based on experiential rather that normative values. As Roland Barthes writes:

> If I agree to judge a text according to pleasure, I cannot go on to say: this one is good, that bad. No awards, no "critique," for this always implies a tactical aim, a social usage, and frequently and extenuating image reservoir. I cannot apportion, imagine that the text is perfectible, ready to enter into a play of normative predicates: it is too much this, not enough that; the text (the same is true of the singing voice) can wring from me only this judgment: that's it![2]

It is this aesthetic based on pleasure with its promise of jouissance which we find in Whitman's masturbatory process: his aesthetics of auto-eroticism. Not only does Whitman's body/text illustrate the significance of these theoretical positions, it importantly demonstrates the need for critics to begin to address this creative/masturbatory process as integral to the poet's art rather than as the displacement of unfulfilled urges.

I have tried in this thesis to re-evaluate the writings

of Walt Whitman noting the poet's concentration on auto-eroticism and its central importance to his contribution to the literary world. My final opinion is that the textual masturbatory process in Whitman is the life blood of his poetry. This verbal/sexual seed which flows through his auto-erotic body/text and excites us is only possible through "the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning, of language."[3]

Roland Barthes describes this "vocal writing" as having the ability

> to succeed in shifting the signified a great distance and in throwing, so to speak, the body of the actor into my ear: it granulates, it crackles, it caresses, it grates, it cuts, it comes...[4]

Unlike the "linguists and contenders," Whitman's tongue plunges to our "barestript heart." His subversive seed is our. . . <u>jouissance</u>.

NOTES

Chapter I

[1] W., "Insanity, Produced by Masturbation", Boston Medical and Surgical Journal 25 Mar. 1835: 109.

[2] Arthur M. Schlesinger, The Age of Jackson (New York: Book Find, 1945) 335.

[3] Ibid., 336.

[4] Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Sex as Symbol in Victorian Purity," in Turning Points: Historical and Sociological Essays on the Family ed. John Demos and Sarane Spence Boocock (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978) S220.

[5] The Holy Bible, King James Edition, Genesis 38: 8-10.

[6] Vern L. Bullough, Sex, Society and History (New York: Science History, 1976) 115.

[7] Paul Starr, The Social Transformation of American Medicine (New York: Basic, 1982) 36.

[8] Ibid., 59.

[9] Bullough, 115.

[10] W., "Remarks on Masturbation," Boston Medical and Surgical Journal 18 Mar. 1835: 94-95.

[11] Ronald G. Walters, Primers for Prudery (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1974) 35.

[12] Ibid., 35.

[13] Ibid., 58.

[14] G. J. Barker-Benfield, The Horrors of the Half-Known Life (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) 180.

[15] Ibid., 179-180.

[16] Smith-Rosenberg, S229.

[17] Barker-Benfield, 49.

[18] Jonathan Katz, Gay American History (New York: Avon, 1976) 771.

[19] Vern L. Bullough, Sexual Variance in Society and History (New York: John Wiley, 1976) 547.

[20] Barker-Benfield, 220-222. See page 196 for a treatment of the direct link between women and the nineteenth-century fear of consumerism which 'swallowed up' refers to.

[21] Stephen Marcus, The Other Victorians (London: Corgi, 1971) 113.

[22] Ibid., 113.

[23] Ibid., 113.

[24] Charles Rosenberg, "Sexuality, Class and Role in 19th-Century America," American Quarterly 25.2 (1973): 139.

[25] Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds. New French Feminisms (New York: Schocken, 1981) 97.

[26] Ibid., 97.

[27] By masculine, I do not mean biological maleness. Instead, "masculine" in this text is used to refer to the social assumptions regarding gender identity. In this sense, "masculinity" is largely prescriptive rather than descriptive.

[28] Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 1.4 (1976): 879.

Chapter II

[1] Sigmund Freud, Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex, trans. A. A. Brill (New York: Putnam's, 1910) 50.

[2] Walter Sutton, Modern American Critics (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1963) 203.

[3] Allen Ginsberg, "America," Howl and other Poems (San Francisco: City Lights, 1956) 31.

[4] Ibid., 32.

[5] Emory Holloway, Walt Whitman: An Interpretation in Narrative (1926; New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1969) x.

[6] Ibid., x.

[7] Frederick Schyberg, Walt Whitman, trans. Evie Allison Allen (1951; New York: AMS, 1966) 118.

[8] Edwin H. Miller, Walt Whitman's Poetry: A Psychological Journey (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968) 101.

[9] Ibid., 13-14.

[10] Stephen A. Black, Whitman's Journeys into Chaos: A Psychoanalytic Study of the Poetic Process (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975) 36.

[11] Ibid., 109.

[12] Freud, 14.

[13] Miller, 128.

[14] Sigmund Freud, Totem and Taboo, trans. A. A. Brill (1918; New York: Vintage, 1946) 90.

[15] Miller, 71.

[16] Robert K. Martin, "Criticising the Critics: A Homosexual Perspective," Gai Saber 1.3 (1977): 206.

[17] Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction, trans. Richard Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980) 18-20.

[18] Ibid., 23.

[19] Ibid., 37.

[20] Ibid., 38-39.

[21] Ibid., 39.

[22] Herbert Marcuse, Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud (New York: Vintage, 1962) 44.

[23] Foucault, 119.

[24] Ibid., 61-62.

[25] Newton Arvin, Walt Whitman (New York: Russell & Russell, 1969) 275.

[26] Henry Seidel Canby, Walt Whitman, An American: A Study in Biography (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943) 204.

[27] Ibid., 203.

[28] Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics (London: Methuen, 1985) 62-63.

[29] Exceptions include Myrth Jimmie Killingsworth and Robert K. Martin, two Whitman scholars who address the erotic content of the Leaves from a point outside the scientia sexualis tradition.

[30] Foucault, 57.

[31] Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass(1855), ed., Malcolm Cowley (New York: Penguin, 1983). All subsequent references indicated by line references only will be to this edition.

[32] David Wallechinsky, Irving Wallace and Amy Wallace, eds. The Book of Lists (New York: Bantam, 1978) 333.

[33] James E. Miller, Jr., The American Quest for a Supreme Fiction (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1979) 13.

[34] Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975) 59.

[35] Robert K. Martin, The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry (Austin: U of Texas P, 1979) 4.

[36] Joseph Riddel, "Decentering the Image: The 'Project' of 'American Poetics'?," in Textual Strategies, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1979) 358.

Chapter III

[1] Harold Bloom, "The Real Me" New York Review of Books 26 Apr. 1984: 3.

[2] James E. Miller, Jr., A Critical Guide to 'Leaves of Grass' (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1957) 7.

[3] The Holy Bible, King James Edition, Genesis 2: 25.

[4] Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass(1860) ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (Ithaca: Great Seal Books, 1961). All subsequent references bearing the abbreviations EA. (Enfans d'Adam) or Cal. (Calamus) are to this edition.

[5] Myrth Jimmie Killingsworth, "Whitman's Love-Spendings" Walt Whitman Review 2.4 (December 1980): 152.

[6] See Alice Felt Tyler's Freedom's Ferment (New York: Harper, 1962) 196-211 for a more extensive discussion of early nineteenth century utopian settlements in the United States.

[7] Milton Rugoff, Prudery & Passion (New York: Putnam's, 1971) 216.

[8] William Wordsworth, "The Prelude: Book Eighth" in English Romantic Writers, ed. David Perkins (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967) 248: ll. 70-75.

[9] Quoted in Riddel, 25-26.

[10] Horace Traubel, With Walt Whitman in Camden (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1961) 466.

[11] Marks, 177.

[12] Ibid., 177.

Chapter IV

[1] Cixous, 884-885.

[2] Harold Beaver, "Homosexual Signs" Critical Inquiry (Autumn 1981): 115.

[3] Cixous, 889.

[4] Ibid., 889.

[5] Barthes, 14.

[6] Marks, 82.

[7] Barthes, 4-5.

[8] Ibid., 30.

[9] Alfred Lord Tennyson, "In Memoriam" in Tennyson's Poetry, ed. Robert W. Hill, Jr., (London: Norton, 1971) 160, 84: 11. 5-20.

[10] Cixous, 888.

[11] Foucault, 147.

[12] The pronoun "he," used to refer to Whitman's reader in this chapter, is not generic. Since it is textually clear that the implied reader of the "Calamus" poems is male, this has been respected.

[13] Cixous, 889.

[14] Barthes, 9.

[15] Beaver, 104-105.

[16] Marks, 169.

17 Barthes, 17.

Chapter V

1 Moi, 2.

2 Barthes, 13.

3 Barthes, 66-67.

4 Barthes, 67.

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