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# Whitman's Sexual Themes During a Decade of Revision: 1866-1876

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## **Abstract**

Examines Whitman's "double attitude" toward his "poems dealing with sexuality" ("a stubbornness about their importance coupled with a defensiveness bordering on apology or even regret"), focusing on "Calamus" poems (including number 16 ("Who is Now Reading This?") and "You Felons on Trial in Courts") and others (including "Song of Myself" and "A Woman Waits for Me"); critiques arguments by Arthur Golden and Oscar L. Triggs and argues that the "sexual ardor of Leaves of Grass continued to cool throughout the sixties, and the revisionary strategies of the decade beginning in 1866—the dilution of the poetry of the body and the new emphasis on spiritual matters—increased the distance between Whitman the man and the erotic personas of the early editions of Leaves of Grass."

# WHITMAN'S SEXUAL THEMES DURING A DECADE OF REVISION: 1866-1876

M. JIMMIE KILLINGSWORTH

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By 1888 the elderly Walt Whitman had fallen to explaining and defending *Leaves of Grass* nearly as often as he was adding to it. In "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," I find him, though outwardly assertive, also noticeably defensive on the topic of sexuality:

From another point of view "Leaves of Grass" is avowedly the song of Sex and Amativeness, and even Animality—though meanings that do not usually go along with those words are behind all, and will duly emerge; and all are sought to be lifted into a different light and atmosphere. Of this feature, intentionally palpable in a few lines, I shall only say the espousing principle of those lines so gives breath of life to my whole scheme that the bulk of the pieces might as well have been left unwritten were those lines omitted.<sup>1</sup>

The tendencies to rationalize and to qualify his meanings subtly dominate this passage. Whitman suggests that his writings on sexuality have not been properly understood, but that the true meanings will "duly emerge"; they will be "lifted" into a "different light and atmosphere," presumably by perceptive critics. He implies that his contemporaries have placed too great an emphasis on the sexual, amative, or animalistic "feature" of the *Leaves*, which he claims is "intentionally palpable" only in a "few lines." He nevertheless asserts that these lines are so important that to remove them would be to destroy the effect of the whole book. There is a note of apology even in this statement, implying that even if he had wanted to, he could not have taken the sex out.

A double attitude toward the poems dealing with sexuality—a stubbornness about their importance coupled with a defensiveness bordering on apology and even regret—dates from the Civil War when Whitman was preparing the 1867 edition of the poems (actually copyrighted in 1866). His war experiences considerably influenced his views on physicality. Writing to John Burroughs during the war years, the poet's friend E. M. Allen reported: "He [Whitman] tells me he likes Emerson better than he did; he thought he was too refined, but now he does not think so; his experience in the hospitals with poor suffering humanity, he says, has refined him some."<sup>2</sup> His new refinement was to show not only in the new poems of 1865-1866, but also in revisions of old poems. In an 1865 letter to William Douglas O'Connor, Whitman had said, "there are a few things I shall carefully eliminate in the next issue [of the *Leaves*] and a few more I shall change considerably."<sup>3</sup>

Thus began what Roger Asselineau has called "the quiet work of self-

censorship.”<sup>4</sup> If the first decade of *Leaves of Grass* (1855–1865) defines the period in which the “poetry of the body” was written, the second decade (1866–1876) marks the period of its revision, the first results of which were evident in the 1867 edition.

The conditions, causes, and results of Whitman’s revisions have aroused some scholarly controversy. Arthur Golden has argued that the textual evidence for Whitman’s self-censorship is weak. “The belief that Whitman had suppressed sexual passages in the 1867 edition,” he writes, “stems from an entirely inaccurate statement by Oscar L. Triggs. . . .” Commenting on the 1867 *Leaves*, Triggs had written, “Certain rough terms and many references to sexuality disappear.” Golden deems this “a rather puzzling statement, considering that Whitman had retained in 1867 and thereafter what was substantially the 1860 text of the ‘Enfans d’Adam’ and ‘Calamus’ poems, and, further, had elsewhere . . . retained the bulk of the sexual passages as well.”<sup>5</sup>

There is some truth in each of these scholars’ arguments. Though Triggs’s chronology could be stronger, he is essentially right about the “rough terms” and “references to sexuality.” While they did begin to disappear in 1867, the omissions and revisions continued over three editions—including 1871 and 1876. They did not suddenly vanish in 1867 but were gradually excised. I will nevertheless argue that the few passages and poems dropped or revised in 1867 indicate definite trends that would continue to operate in 1871 and 1876.

I must agree with Golden, however, that the great bulk of the poems on sexuality were left intact, though many were tampered with. Golden dismisses Triggs and the critical tradition that springs from his statement as biographically biased. The arguments of the Triggs school depend on the fact that the 1867 edition was the first to appear after the much discussed “Harlan Incident” when Whitman was fired from a government clerkship allegedly because he had written an indecent book. The near coincidence of the Harlan affair and the 1867 edition has, in Golden’s thinking, led scholars to overlook the textual evidence or at least to overemphasize the effect of the revisions on the whole of *Leaves of Grass*. In addition, Jerome Loving furnishes ample evidence to confirm that scholars have indeed attributed too much importance to the poet’s “summary dismissal” by Secretary of the Interior Harlan.<sup>6</sup>

The most important effect of the Harlan incident was to spur William Douglas O’Connor to write *The Good Gray Poet* in defense of Whitman’s book and his character, especially the latter. Significantly O’Connor was “the first to speak in print of the poet’s religious nature.”<sup>7</sup> If he did not actually influence the direction of the poet’s thinking (and I think he did), he at least detected an emerging trend in Whitman’s development as a poet of the soul—a trend that would be fully realized in the domination of the 1871 edition by new religious poems like “Passage to India.”

O’Connor’s defense of Whitman’s writings on sexuality also anticipates the tone of the poet’s own later explanations. By claiming that Whitman res-

cued sexuality “from the keeping of blackguards and debauchees,” O’Connor places him on a safe middle ground between lower-class vulgarity (blackguards) and upper-class libertinism (debauchees). Despite this bourgeois refinement, O’Connor’s Whitman somehow managed a “bolder treatment than any other poet has yet permitted himself, especially in its prominently extolling the body and all its attributes and organs.”<sup>8</sup>

O’Connor’s implicit argument, which Whitman himself would use later, was that the heroic poet *had* to write about sexuality to be true to human nature. His greatest virtue was honesty, a trait valued as highly by the business-minded bourgeoisie as by the revolutionary Romantic with his prophesy of the naked truth. But, in this thinking, sexual writing becomes almost an end in itself. One writes about sex because sex needs to be written about; a “healthy” view of human nature requires it. Any political motive, except perhaps a concern with free speech, is thus defused.

Here is a perfect argument for a poet in transition from strongly physical to strongly spiritual writing: now that he has done what he had to do, he can get on with the business of the soul. Whitman’s fame, or infamy, had been secured by his poetry of the body. But in the 1860s, having achieved notoriety by whatever means, Whitman now longed for a new role—the benevolent, soulful, national poet: O’Connor’s Good Gray Poet.

And yet, as the great champion of self-reliance and Yankee pride, he could not simply abandon his former ideals or admit he had been wrong. He had to be true to the stubborn streak that had sealed his resolution to keep the “*Enfans d’Adam*” poems in 1860 even when Emerson urged him to drop them. When in 1882 he finally relented to the Boston District Attorney’s demands by dropping a few lines of his own choice, he demanded that his publisher maintain complete secrecy about his backsliding.<sup>9</sup> He had a reputation for free and brave thought to protect.

Wholesale changes in the *Leaves* would thus have been too obvious for his pride to allow. But subtle alterations and omissions of lines could oil the machinery of his defensive arguments, especially his suggestion that sexual references are “intentionally palpable” in fewer lines than most people imagine. Moreover, the large additions of religious and nationalistic poems would dilute the poetry of the body even further, until sexuality, once the very foundation of the book, would come to seem only one balanced element among many in the heroic personality projected by the whole of *Leaves of Grass*. I therefore cannot follow Golden in dismissing the revisions of 1867, however minor they may seem in the context of the book as it finally evolved.

One aspect of Whitman’s self-censorship that Golden particularly denies is the suppression of the homosexuality in “*Calamus*.” He argues that the poet “retained through extensive revisions passages as revealing as anything he rejected.”<sup>10</sup> The evidence does not work in favor of this argument. In the 1867 *Leaves*, Whitman dropped two of the most “revealing” of the 1860 “*Calamus*” poems, numbers 8 (“*Long I Thought that Knowledge Alone*

Would Suffice”) and 9 (“Hours Continuing Long”).<sup>11</sup> These companion pieces dramatize the speaker’s falling in love, withdrawing from “all but love,” losing his lover, and falling into a deep, alienated depression. The elegiac tone and overstated grief are precisely the same as in *Drum-Taps* in poems like “Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night,” which first became part of *Leaves of Grass* in 1867. The discarded “Calamus” poems must have seemed too revealing by comparison.<sup>12</sup> Certainly few, if any, of the poems on “manly attachment” that Whitman did retain match “Calamus” 8 and 9 in the intensity of their dark passion and in their apparent undermining of distance.

He may have feared that the darkness of “Calamus” would “puzzle” readers, as he suggests in another poem dropped from “Calamus” in 1867—number 16 (“Who Is Now Reading This?”). The poet directly confronts the audience’s likely puzzlement and admits he shares it:

As if I were not puzzled at myself!  
Or as if I never deride myself! (O conscience-  
struck! O self-convicted!)  
Or as if I do not secretly love strangers! (O  
tenderly, a long time, and never avow it;)  
Or as if I did not see, perfectly well, interior in  
myself, the stuff of wrong-doing,  
Or as if it could cease transpiring from me  
until it must cease.<sup>13</sup>

This is perhaps the clearest confession of homosexual guilt ever to appear in the *Leaves*, though no doubt it is awkward and may have been dropped for “artistic reasons.”

Whitman had originally intended to omit a large number of “Calamus” poems, as many as thirteen,<sup>14</sup> but he settled on the three that must have been most irksome to him. All have dark overtones of alienation, guilt, or rejection. In number 16, he is puzzled about his own nature; in number 8, he says his new lover has alienated him from his former ideals and writing; and in number 9, he wonders, “Is there even one other like me—distracted—his friend, his lover, lost to him?”

Lines dropped from other poems betray similar self-doubts and are also marked by the dark tone. “You Felons on Trial in Courts,” one of the 1860 “Messenger Leaves,” was missing these confessional lines in 1867: “What foul thought but I think it—or have in me the stuff out of which it is thought? / What in darkness in bed at night, alone or with a companion?” And “Calamus” 12 (“Are You the New Person Drawn toward Me?”) lost its last two lines in 1867: “O let some past deceived one hiss in your ears, how many have prest on the same as you are pressing now, / How many have fondly supposed what you are supposing now—only to be disappointed.” These lines are in many ways merely redundant, since they echo the warning

of the preceding lines that the speaker's heroic appearance may be "maya, illusion." But, like many of the "Calamus" poems, this one can be read as a poem about the relation of either lover to lover or poet to reader.<sup>15</sup> Once the reference to "some past deceived one," a cynical former lover, is deleted, the poem loses much of its force as a psychological drama and drifts toward an exercise in aesthetics. Moreover, the darkness of the tone diminishes significantly.

The omission of these poems and lines had a definite effect on the sexual politics of "Calamus." The speaker's admissions of homoerotic emotions and his struggles with the consequent guilt represent early stages in the formation of homosexual consciousness, on which the vision of the new political order depends. By removing poems that reflect various stages of this burgeoning consciousness, Whitman effectively divides the love poems like "When I Heard at the Close of the Day" and the overtly political poems envisioning the "City of Friends." In its final condition "Calamus" seems a loose collection of mildly homoerotic love poems shuffled together with enthusiastic celebrations of political brotherhood.

Trends that appear in the revision of "Calamus" arise again in the extensive rewriting of the introductory poem now known as "Starting from Pausanias." Whitman came more and more to think of his book as a unified whole, not the loose collection it appears to most readers. Thus *Drum-Taps* could substitute for parts of "Calamus" since the unity of the whole seems to have mattered more than the unity of individual "clusters" like "Calamus" and "Children of Adam" which had been first established in 1860. The responsibility of the introductory poem, in this way of thinking, must be to establish major themes—much like an overture. The decade of revision would end with the castration of that poem as part of the general de-emphasis of the sexual "feature" of *Leaves of Grass*.

In 1867 two lines, "O Camerado close! / O you and me at last—and us two only," would substitute for an extensive political passage of 1860:

O my comrade!  
O you and me at last—and us two only;  
O power, liberty, eternity at last!  
O to be relieved of distinctions! to make as much  
of vices as virtues!  
O to level occupations and the sexes! O to bring  
all to common ground! O adhesiveness!  
O the pensive aching to be together—you know not  
why, and I know not why.

This is a good summary of Whitman's Romantic sexual politics: the identification of sexuality and power; the denial of boundaries, "distinctions," erected by society; the democratic leveling of classes and gender; and the view of love as ungovernable and inexplicable—"you know not why, and I

know not why." No doubt, it is redundant; everything it says appears in a more diffuse form in "Song of Myself" and "I Sing the Body Electric." In "Starting from Paumanok," however, the passage serves as a kind of "abstract" very suitable in an introductory overture which anticipates themes to follow. Its repetitiveness is part of its function.

Whitman continued to chip away at the sexual references in the poem. In 1871, from a passage on heroism in poetry, he removed this line: "And organs and acts! do you concentrate in me—For I am determined to tell you with courageous clear voice, to prove you illustrious." He would also attempt to tame his arrogance and withdraw from certain intimacies. The arrogant 1860 reference to "the Gods, my unknown lovers" became in 1867 "Gods, my lovers, faithful and true" (reflecting the new religious awareness) and disappeared altogether in 1876. The intimate lines of 1860—"Proceed, comrade, / It is painful to love a man or woman to excess—yet it satisfies"—took a paternalistic and nationalistic turn in 1867: "Listen, dear son—listen, America, daughter or son! / It is a painful thing to love. . . ." The 1860 advice to "proceed" withers to a cautionary note to "listen" in 1867.

Changes in other of the longer poems further abetted the de-emphasis of sexuality. In "I Sing the Body Electric," for example, the number of abstract references to the soul increased dramatically from 1856 on. In 1855, when the poem was untitled, and in 1856, when the title was simply "Poem of the Body," the poet could celebrate the body in its own physical glory, but in 1867 the poem's new title and opening lines made clear that the poet sang of not merely the body, but the "discorrupted" body "electrified" with "the charge of the soul." In "By Blue Ontario's Shore," the campaign against physicality was manifested in an attack on passages expressing faith in materialism and science. The following lines were dropped as early as 1860: "An American literat fills his own place, / He justifies science—did you think the demonstrable less divine than the mythical?" In 1867, as the trend gathered steam, the poet excised his claim that America's "inventions, science, schools, are you and me," along with the parallel inclusion of America's "roughs, beards, haughtiness, ruggedness." "Song of Myself" would remain a powerful presentation of sexually charged Romanticism, though even it would lose some of its "rough terms" and "references to sexuality." Notably absent in 1867 was the brutal description of what appears to be a homosexual encounter: "Thruster holding me tight and that I hold tight! / We hurt each other as the bridegroom and bride hurt each other."

As one of his big projects in the decade of revision, Whitman continued to desexualize and sentimentalize his female characters and his own response to them. The persona of the 1855 version of "Song of Myself" responded sexually to the opera singer: "I hear the trained soprano . . . she convulses me like the climax of my love-grip." By 1867 his reaction had been tamed, not to mention obscured: "I hear the train'd soprano—(what work with hers is this?)." Similarly, the boy-poet had longed incestuously for the boldly sex-

ualized mother figure of 1856 and 1860. In the 1856 "On the Beach at Night Alone," the poet's mind drifts from adult lovers back to the "pink nipple of a breast of my mother." This passage disappeared in 1867. And so did the explicitly physical phrase from the opening of the 1860 version of "Out of the Cradle"—"Out of the mother's womb, and from the nipples of her breast."

In preparing the 1867 *Leaves*, Whitman attempted to tackle the infamous "A Woman Waits for Me," a poem mentioned again and again by the would-be censors of the nineteenth century. Extensive revisions in his "Blue Book" copy of the 1860 edition show that he at least toyed with a total depersonalization of the troublesome poem, altering its first line to read "A woman America knows" and thus removing his first-person persona.<sup>16</sup> He must have had in mind some sort of generalized nationalistic celebration of womanhood and maternity. But, as Golden has demonstrated, the changes posed insurmountable logical problems and had to be abandoned.<sup>17</sup> In 1867 he retained the poem nearly as it was, dropping only a few offensive lines like "O I will fetch bully breeds of children yet!" Perhaps Whitman had this aborted revision in mind when he insisted later that the sexual "feature" could not be removed from the *Leaves* without irreparably damaging his whole scheme.

Still, he continued to depersonalize and refine his persona's response to his lovers, especially when they were females. In "One Hour to Madness and Joy," the poet omitted in 1867 a reference to his intention of bringing forth the hidden reserves of female sexuality: "O rich and feminine! O to show you to realize the blood of life for yourself. . . ." The speaker of the 1860 "Native Moments" brashly defied social convention: "I take for my love some prostitute. . . ." By 1876, the year of the Centennial Edition of the *Leaves*, our national poet had apparently exchanged simple friendship for sexual love and had given up prostitutes: "I pick out some low person for my dearest friend," the rewritten line would read. Other passages suggesting personal relations with prostitutes were also dropped in 1876, including a reference to "the prostitute who detained me when I went to the city" in the 1860 poem "From Pent-up Aching Rivers." "Voices of prostitutes and deformed persons" would fall out of the list of voices that speak through the persona of "Song of Myself." And the poet's personal, homoerotic good will, occasioned by a visit of the Prince of Wales to New York in 1860 and chronicled in the 1865 *Drum-Taps* poem "Year of Meteors," must have seemed inappropriate in 1876 when this passage disappeared:

I know not why, but I loved you . . . (and so go  
forth little song,  
Far over the sea speed like an arrow, carrying my  
love all folded,  
And find in his palace the youth I love, and drop  
these lines at his feet . . .).

In 1855 the speaker of the original version of "Song of Myself" declared himself "one of the roughs." Slightly refined, more mellowly erotic, the speaker of the 1860 "Calamus" poems asked to be remembered as the "tenderest lover." The sexual ardor of *Leaves of Grass* continued to cool throughout the sixties, and the revisionary strategies of the decade beginning in 1866—the dilution of the poetry of the body and the new emphasis on spiritual matters—increased the distance between Whitman the man and the erotic personas of the early editions of *Leaves of Grass*. The revisions thereby reduced the impact of the poems' sexual radicalism in a subtle but definite way.

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## NOTES

- 1 Walt Whitman, "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," in *Leaves of Grass: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett (New York: Norton, 1973), 572.
- 2 Clara Barrus, *Whitman and Burroughs: Comrades* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1931), 5.
- 3 Walt Whitman, *Drum-Taps and Sequel, 1865-66: A Facsimile Reproduction*, intro. F. DeWolfe Miller (Gainesville, Florida: Scholars' Facsimilies and Reprints, 1959), xxix.
- 4 Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960), 1:282.
- 5 Arthur Golden, ed. *Walt Whitman's Blue Book* (New York: New York Public Library, 1968), 2:lvii-lviii.
- 6 Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman's Champion: William Douglas O'Connor* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1977), 56-65.
- 7 Loving, *Walt Whitman's Champion*, p. 145; see also F. DeWolfe Miller, "Before *The Good Gray Poet*," *Tennessee Studies in Literature*, 3 (1958), 89-98.
- 8 William D. O'Connor, *The Good Gray Poet*, in Richard Maurice Bucke, *Walt Whitman* (Philadelphia: McKay, 1883), 118-119; see also Miller, "Before *The Good Gray Poet*," 92-93.
- 9 *The Correspondence of Walt Whitman*, ed. E. H. Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1961-1977), 3:270-271.
- 10 Golden, *Blue Book*, 2:lv-lvii.
- 11 Reprinted in *Leaves of Grass: Norton Critical Edition*, 595-596.
- 12 See M. J. Killingsworth, "Sentimentality and Homosexuality in Whitman's 'Calamus,'" *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*, 29 (1983), 144-153.
- 13 All quotations from the poems come from the editions in which they first appeared or from *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum of the Printed Poems*, 3 vols., ed. Sculley Bradley, Harold W. Blodgett, Arthur Golden, and William White (New York: New York University Press, 1980).
- 14 See *Blue Book*, 2, Appendix B.

15 See Russel Hunt, "Whitman's Poetics and the Unity of 'Calamus,'" *American Literature*, 46 (1975), 482-494.

16 *Blue Book*, 1:302-304.

17 Arthur Golden, "New Light on *Leaves of Grass*: Whitman's Annotated Copy of the 1860 (Third) Edition," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 69 (1965), 300-301.