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not happy in the capitol:

## homosexuality and the *calamus* poems

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When Whitman's homosexuality is discussed frankly and positively, the *Calamus* poems assume a new and double significance: they serve as a beginning point for a study of modern homosexual literature, helping to identify a radical imagination implicit in homosexual experience under oppression; and they revise the usual critical picture of Whitman as persistently a poet of Emersonian unity and correspondence and as the representative American bard, the microcosmic figure championing the wisdom of the common vision.<sup>1</sup> Whitman's notebooks show the private pain and deprivation that society's persecution of the homosexual caused him. They reveal the degree to which he had introjected, inevitably, his culture's entirely negative conceptions of homosexuality—as in his attempted resolution “TO GIVE UP ABSOLUTELY & *for good, from this present hour, this FEVERISH, FLUCTUATING, useless undignified pursuit of 164*” (his code for the name of his lover, Peter Doyle) and in his command to himself to “Depress the adhesive nature/ It is in excess—making life a torment/ All this diseased, feverish disproportionate *adhesiveness*” (the term from phrenology that Whitman used to refer to

male homosexuality).<sup>2</sup> Though Whitman later denied to John Addington Symonds that *Calamus* could have a homosexual meaning, I believe that the collection is Whitman's most concerted attempt, if perhaps only a partly conscious one, to respond to his oppression as a homosexual by finding a voice and situations that express his positive sense of his homosexual experience. Though *Calamus* may at moments show signs of the introjected homophobia that marks the notebook entries above and that may have underlain Whitman's reply to Symonds, the tensions in the collection are primarily the expression of Whitman's struggle to free himself from his culture's oppressive views and are a record of the primal creative effort he faced, in which he had to invent a positive understanding and representation of his experience without public models and support.

The *Calamus* poems, which in "Here the Frailest Leaves of Me" Whitman declared "expose me more than all my other poems," were first published in 1860 in the third edition of *Leaves of Grass* as a group of forty-five pieces (later thirty-nine in Whitman's final arrangement) and grew out of a number of separate poems first drafted between 1857 and 1859. The homosexual concern that became the dominating theme of the group is also present in Whitman's other manuscript work of this period, suggesting how preoccupied he was with the subject (e.g., later drafts for the long poem that became "Starting from Paumanok," then called "Premonition," include the theme of male lovers).<sup>3</sup> As is well-known, the collection takes its name from the calamus plant, also called "sweet flag," that grows around valley ponds in the North and Middle Atlantic states; with spears about three-feet high and having a phallus-shaped bloom and stiff slender leaves, the plant serves as the symbol of the "manly attachment" that is one of the recurring motifs in the group. The companion series to *Calamus* in the 1860 and later editions is the *Children of Adam* collection, celebrating biological procreation and "amativeness" (another term from phrenology, which Whitman used to refer to heterosexuality). Manuscript evidence suggests that *Children of Adam* was an afterthought intended to balance the disturbing subject of *Calamus*, and it contains at least one poem, "Once I Pass'd through a Populous City," that was originally homosexual in content but that Whitman revised to represent a heterosexual encounter (the "woman" who "passionately clung" to the speaker in the final version was a "man" in Whitman's manuscript).<sup>4</sup>

Whitman's chief problem in *Calamus* is to invent a way of speaking affirmatively about a subject that his popular audience considered literally unspeakable and that his general culture gave him no positive way of understanding, a problem gay people continue to face even under today's changing conditions. There is as yet no satisfactory analytical study of the history of attitudes toward and conceptions about homosexuality, and as of this writing published information about the situation of homosexuals in America before the late nineteenth century is especially scarce. But the anguished terms of Whitman's notebook entries

quoted above and the tensions in *Calamus* itself clearly imply that Whitman's culture was at least as homophobic as ours and in all likelihood more so, a probability supported by the most available data about the topic, which show what most persons who develop homosexually learn quickly through experience—that there has been a persistence of homosexual oppression throughout history on a worldwide scale, with no influential society or culture yet approving primary, sustained and open same-sex relationships, most establishing instead a range of penalties or punishments (from verbal ridicule, to physical violence, to imprisonment, and to murder) for such preferences.<sup>5</sup> This context left the Whitman of *Calamus* in an isolated situation that would be especially difficult for a self-ordained popular poet and gave him no publicly shared tradition and language for the affirmation he wanted to make. Thus unaided, Whitman faced the challenge of a primal kind of invention, having little at the start to rely on but the validity of his intuitions and of his concrete sense experiences. One of his few outer supports for the degree of self-trust he felt in this enterprise may have been the tradition of Emersonian self-reliance, an irony for the reasons I shall outline below.

In seeking to proclaim the goodness of his homosexuality in *Calamus*, Whitman was led into a profound tension with the assumptions of the popular audience he most frequently assumed and addressed, the “common people” in whom, as he declared in the “Preface” to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, “the genius of the United States . . . best or most” resides, and with the idea of a harmonious and encompassing universe that he had accepted from Emerson. These conflicts express themselves in two opposing strains in the collection as a whole, sometimes juxtaposed within the same poem. In the first of these strains Whitman represses the implications of his persecution as a homosexual in favor of asserting a transcendentalist harmony and correspondence in experience, or he tries to understand and render his situation as a homosexual in popular terms he assumes will be approved by his “common” audience. In the second he takes a step consistent with what seem to me to be the subversive implications of homosexual experience under our traditional oppression, a step that disturbs the “painfully loving relation” with his readers which earlier critics mistakenly believed he carries to completion in *Calamus*.<sup>6</sup> By affirming his homosexuality here, Whitman necessarily rejects his culture's prevailing assumptions about sexual preference, gender identity and relationships, social institutions and nature (assumptions that he represents through the symbol of “the capitol” in the best poem in the collection), and in so doing, he implicitly challenges the idea that there is an inherent moral design and unity in experience. Now he relies instead on felt private truths to find a form for his positive intuition of his homosexual experience, without any suggestion that this vision will find a public “correspondence,” and with this change being expressed rhetorically in the text by Whitman's either dismissing his common reader or removing him to the periphery of his attention.

The experience of homosexual oppression constitutes the felt background of *Calamus* (I am assuming that, though in some particulars it may have differed, in its most general interests and strategies this process was the same in Whitman's time as it predominantly is today), and in order to appreciate fully Whitman's accomplishment in the collection one must have a knowledge of that experience and of the radical imagination it can inculcate.<sup>7</sup> Homosexuality has only one essential definition—a primary or exclusive sexual and affectional preference for persons of one's own sex—and in a non-oppressive culture would not otherwise connote anything outwardly distinctive about a person (e.g., no distinguishing “personality type,” appearance or manner). At the heart of gay oppression is a process of falsification designed to suppress awareness of the fundamental challenge that an acceptance of homosexuality as normal and good poses to the basic assumptions that culture has held up until now about gender identity, sexual relationships, social arrangement and nature. The most obvious aspect of this falsification is the catalogue of stereotypes familiar to anyone who has thought about the situation. But the cornerstone of this process is our unique stigma as fundamentally and quite literally degenerate, as “untouchable” and inherently lacking full human status. Though other minorities have in particular historical periods also been regarded in this way by particular societies or ruling groups (e.g., blacks in earlier American history, Jews in Nazi Germany), in the modern world only homosexuals are still stigmatized in this way as a group and across all influential cultures, in a widespread pattern subsuming nationality, ethnic group, race, religion and social and economic class. Unlike the other most noticeable oppressed groups seeking autonomy in America today (blacks, Indians and women), who have traditionally been used to symbolize traits that are considered to be universal and desirable (the black as a symbol of strength and endurance, the Indian as a symbol of affinity with nature, the woman as a symbol of life-giving and nurturing) at the same time that they continue to be deprived of certain freedoms, no gay person when identified as such nor any aspect of homosexual experience has yet been offered by a culture as an image of an admirable human quality or an approved human goal. This total exclusion from the rich body of symbols by which humankind represents itself and through which the human imagination develops is probably society's most devastating action against us and perhaps the most telling sign of the homosexual's unique stigma as inherently sub-human.

My argument, which depends upon the assumption that it is possible for a person to retain an inner integrity despite powerful social enforcement against his or her feelings, is that, in their positive understanding of their sexual and affectional preference for their own sex, homosexuals who have not been corrupted by the stigma society seeks to impose on them develop a radical vision of the limitations and arbitrariness of the prevailing cultural notions of sexuality, gender identity and relation-

ships, social organization and nature— notions that for convenience can be labeled “the heterosexual model” of experience and the world. Put in simple terms, what is felt by the uncorrupted homosexual is that this model is false as a statement about human nature and human possibilities: i.e., that sexual love and desire do not only occur between persons of different sexes; that the traditional dualistic categories of “male” and “female” are invalid as ways of conceiving of identity, which can actually be much more subtle and encompassing; that relationships need not take the polar and unequal form that is the corollary of those traditional conceptions; that personality can be radically individualistic (in the meaning that term has in philosophical anarchism) and need not be organized around, and may not be best fulfilled by, the patriarchal nuclear family or biological procreation; and that nature is not adequately defined by the image of physical reproduction. Linked to these insights, of course, is the realization that the negative definition of homosexuality that is a corollary of the heterosexual model is false. This discovery creates a divided consciousness that is a fundamental part of the homosexual’s radical vision, in which we live within an atmosphere of continuous opposition between what culture tells us ourselves and what we feel from a direct sensuous apprehension of our experience to be true about our identity.

The false images of homosexuality that have been held up as signs of the menace homosexuals supposedly represent are usually displacements, in the form of inversions, of the real threats our situation poses: e.g., the notion that homosexuality represents an inherent threat to the perpetuation of the species is a mask for the actual threat homosexuality poses to culture’s definition of nature as physical reproduction and to the organizing of society around the patriarchal nuclear family (since, of course, homosexual men can father children and homosexual women conceive them, but it is not likely that we would live in, nor raise our children within, the traditional family structure); the image of the gay male as trivial and passive is exactly the opposite of the forceful threat that two autonomous men loving openly would inevitably pose to any competitive and hierarchical system. Ironically, this persistent falsification can work to intensify the radical imagination we can already derive from our potential insight into the arbitrariness of the heterosexual model—i.e., this stigmatizing forces us into an outcast situation which, if we can keep from being crippled by it, requires us to rely solely on our own intelligences for the creation of our identity and thus to be radically self-determining in a way that resembles the existentialist sensibility as defined by Sartre and Camus.<sup>8</sup> I do not mean to imply here that heterosexuals never experience stigma nor never reach these (at present) subversive awarenesses, but only that these aspects are implicit or potential in every homosexual’s situation at present in a way that is not true for all heterosexuals (heterosexuals may be ostracized for expressing their heterosexuality in disapproved ways—e.g., adultery, mixed marriages, taboo

sexual practices—but never for being heterosexual per se, and because of the support they receive from society for their orientation, heterosexuals may be lulled into accepting the heterosexual model or at least into wanting to believe that it is true).

Of course, we cannot expect to find these concerns and insights phrased in the same way by Whitman, since my terms derive from schools of analysis formulated after Whitman's major period, but they seem to me to exist in an early intuitive form in *Calamus*, clearly implied by the language and technique of the collection if we look at it outside the homophobic bias traditionalist critics bring to the text. Indeed, Whitman's work of the *Calamus* period is part of a much larger historical development that supports this interpretation further and whose connections need to be outlined in detail in a longer study; *Calamus* was contemporary with the first burgeoning of works by nineteenth-century scientific and social philosophers who revolutionized thought in the modern period (Darwin, Marx) and only slightly preceded the rise of "scientific" inquiry into sexuality later in the century, some of it by homosexuals themselves (Ulrichs, Symonds, Carpenter, Hirschfeld, Krafft-Ebing, Ellis). The *Calamus* poems suggest that this self-directed and continuous search for an authentic identity and form, with an accompanying skepticism about all conventions that have been established for sexuality and personality (including those that have been established for homosexuality), may be the most fitting description of a modern "homosexual sensibility" and are the first record in early modern writing of this kind of concerted (if only partly-conscious) effort by a homosexual.

The opening poem, "In Paths Untrodden," implies exactly this radical vision and establishes the standards by which all the poems in the group must be judged. It also represents in microcosm the ambivalence that marks the collection as a whole. In one aspect "In Paths Untrodden" conveys feelings of exhilarated release and of imminent disclosure that fit exactly with what later gay liberation terminology would call a "coming out"—Whitman states that he is "No longer abash'd" and promises now to "tell the secrets of my nights and days." The rest of this strand of the poem represents the break with accepted values that this step necessarily entails, implied by the title itself and in the very opening lines by the fact that the speaker has withdrawn to an isolated setting (several other strong pieces in the collection portray similar acts of separation—e.g., "These I Singing in Spring," "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing"). A hostile reader might see this situation as a sign of despair, the isolated location merely a metaphor for Whitman's feeling of "untouchableness," but such an interpretation is clearly refuted by the ensuing statements Whitman makes. Though the next lines retain an awareness of society's power to punish persons for homosexuality ("in this secluded spot I can respond as I would not dare elsewhere"), they primarily emphasize Whitman's sense of his unprecedented situation (the "path" of new understanding and expression he must "tread") and sug-

gest that his separation represents a vigorous rejection of society's false or inapplicable terms. By proclaiming now that he has "Escaped from the life that exhibits itself,/ From all the standards hitherto publish'd, from the pleasures, profits, conformities,/ Which too long I was offering to feed my soul" and declaring that there are "Clear to me now standards not yet publish'd," Whitman implies an awareness of the arbitrariness of his culture's governing conceptions of sexuality and identity, conveying both a sense of freedom gained from a discovery of the validity and goodness of homosexual feelings and a need for new language and forms to express this startling situation.

The implications of this announcement inevitably place Whitman in conflict with his customary common reader, who we can assume held to the heterosexual model of experience and whose understanding of homosexuality, as I have already suggested, thus resembled the homophobia that still prevails today. Here Whitman is in a situation exactly opposite from the identification with his audience he proclaimed at the opening of "Song of Myself"—now "what I assume" is definitely not "what you shall assume"—and one that also seems to disprove the Emersonian vision of correspondence he had accepted as part of his model of the universe. In particular, he counters assurances like Emerson's claim in "The American Scholar" that "the deeper [man] dives into his privatest, secretest presentiment, to his wonder he finds that this is the most acceptable, most public, and universally true" and Emerson's guarantee that whatever is discovered on that search "can be translated" in the "language of . . . all men."<sup>9</sup> In the least satisfying strain of *Calamus* Whitman is not able to sustain the separation and conflict that his new insights entail; he turns away from the radical implications of his situation, trying instead to "translate" it into "languages" drawn from the experiences and values of his assumed common reader that will support his earlier belief in an inherent moral order and unity to experience, a belief which is clearly denied by the persecution he has undergone as a homosexual.

Whitman's chief means of making this "translation" are his adjustment of homosexuality to the idea of radical democracy that pervades his earlier poems and that reflects the political values of the Jacksonian Age of his youth, and his application of the concepts of "manly attachment," "athletic love" and "the comrade" to his situation. These two motifs often appear together and obviously dominate several poems in the collection, especially "To the East and To the West," "I Dream'd in a Dream," "I Hear It was Charged Against Me," and, perhaps the best-known of these, "For You O Democracy," where Whitman declares that he "will make the continent indissoluble,/ . . . With the love of comrades,/ With the life-long love of comrades." My objection is not that these themes are inapplicable; in some ways they are prophetic and inspiring. For example, Whitman's emphasis on the democracy of homosexuality, as when he calls his lover his "perfect equal" in "Among the Multitude," stresses what gay liberationists would later argue is the

greater potential for equality between lovers of the same sex. By implication, it also indicates one of the chief ways homosexuality can threaten the heterosexual model's conception of relationships, where the partners are not trained to think of themselves as peers and which traditionally has been built around the idea of polarity. His proclaiming the "manliness" of his love also implicitly challenges some of culture's longest-standing falsifications of homosexual identity, e.g., the notion that the homosexual is somehow not a member of his/her own sex; the image of the gay male as ineffective and "effeminate."

Despite such liberating implications, these aspects of *Calamus* must still be called unsatisfactory, precisely because they are "translations" and thus a lapse from Whitman's implied intention in the collection (even if an understandable lapse, given the absence of appropriate forms in the dominant culture that Whitman could draw on): instead of beginning at his felt immediate experience and questioning *all* established conceptions of sexuality, gender identity and relationships, social arrangement and nature, the step that his opening claim in "In Paths Untrodden" implies is the most logical consequence of homosexual experience, Whitman reverts to "standards hitherto publish'd" he claimed he had "escaped" and thus falls into what the poem calls "conformities." This pattern is almost obvious in the "democracy" pieces where Whitman works to understand and present homosexuality as a respected form of experience by associating it with a favored political vision he assumes his popular audience also admires. His central concept of "manly attachment" is a "conformity" in a more subtle and abstract sense; though by invoking it Whitman is implicitly rejecting a popular misconception about male homosexuality, he is still conforming to popular assumptions about gender identity and behavior in general in the way he sees his experience here. In this case Whitman accepts basic assumptions of the American masculinist tradition, particularly the notion of the male as robust, rugged, athletic and dominant (as when in "We Two Boys Together Clinging" he describes the central figures as "Power enjoying . . ./ Arm'd and fearless, . . ./ No law less than ourselves owning, sailing, soldiering, thieving, threatening, / . . . ease scorning, . . . feebleness chasing"), simply substituting an approved stereotype for a negative one and implying that what is usually thought of as an outcast state is actually characterized by the most regular kind of behavior. Whitman may also have been recalling here the loving warrior-companion relationships of early literature—e.g., Achilles and Patroclus, the Sacred Band of Thebes, Roland and Oliver—which were among the few images from the past that seemed to offer male homosexuals of the period support for their feelings. Whitman's masculinism here is exactly the same in spirit as the stereotype of "effeminacy" it by implication challenges—both derive from the heterosexual model's dualistic conception of gender identity and do not develop the radical implication in homosexuality that personality cannot be adequately understood according to exclusive polar



categories of “male” and “female.” Ironically but fittingly, the attraction these “standards hitherto publish’d” have for Whitman in this strain of *Calamus* can be seen immediately after he has declared his freedom from them in the opening poem. Instead of going on in “In Paths Untrodden” to announce his promised new “standards,” he simply proceeds to cast his experience in these already established frameworks, introducing the theme of “comrades” and its associated ideas (“the soul of the man I speak for rejoices in comrades,” “Resolv’d to sing no songs to-day but those of manly attachment,” “Bequeathing hence types of athletic love”) and trying to hold on to an Emersonian sense of the inherent moral unity of experience. He attempts this despite his experience as a persecuted outcast by claiming, in familiar transcendentalist language, that his feelings are microcosmic of everyone else’s (“Strong upon me the life that does not exhibit itself, yet contains all the rest”).

The other poems that most extend the tension of the opening piece, reflecting even more strongly the dissent of *Calamus*’ radical strain, are the two that follow “In Paths Untrodden”—“Scented Herbage of My Breast” and “Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand.” “Scented Herbage” continues the themes of exhilarated release and imminent disclosure in a more exclamatory tone than in “In Paths Untrodden,” with the “herbage” primarily a metaphor for the feelings Whitman declared in the opening poem he had hitherto kept “secret.” Whitman’s most intense statement occurs almost exactly in the middle of the poem where he finally even rejects the leaves he had been using as a symbol, seeing them now as only another form of camouflage:

Grow up taller sweet leaves that I may see! grow up out of my  
breast!  
Spring away from the conceal’d heart there!  
Do not fold yourself so in your pink-tinged roots timid leaves!  
Do not remain down there so ashamed, herbage of my breast!  
Come I am determin’d 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,  
I will say what I have to say by itself.

This aspect of the poem as an “unbaring,” as an attempt to speak freely after having been “stifled and choked,” has been skirted by the few critics who have given detailed attention to *Calamus* and who, approaching the collection from a heterosexualist and Freudian bias, have focused entirely on “Scented Herbage’s” seeming preoccupation with death, a theme that brackets the anticipation of freedom and revelation in the middle of the poem (“Indeed O death, I think now these leaves mean precisely the same as you mean”). These other interpretations are excellent examples of how a misunderstanding or fear of homosexuality can determine a misreading. For instance, Stephen Whicher sees “Scented Herbage” as an example of the “tragic acceptance” he believes Whitman reached after

what he calls the “Calamus crisis” of 1858-59 and which he believes is expressed in the poem, as it is in “Out of the Cradle,” by Whitman’s final acceptance of death as a real fact of existence. Whicher’s argument rests on his belief that Whitman’s “discovery” of his homosexual love at this time (though Whitman’s statement that he has “long enough stifled and choked” surely suggests that he had already discovered it far before the poem’s composition) was also the discovery that this love is “necessarily something unaccomplished” and “inherently unsatisfied.” Such an interpretation, as I shall illustrate below, is refuted outright by other presentations in the collection. It also rests on several unexamined traditional assumptions about homosexuality—e.g., does Whicher think that homosexuals do not express their love for each other physically? does he assume that, as the heterosexual model dictates, only heterosexual love and biological procreation bring “satisfaction” and constitute “accomplishment?”<sup>10</sup> Something like that assumption determines Clark Griffith’s reading of the poem, whose approach is dominated by the familiar language of Freudian aversion to homosexuality. Arguing that *Calamus* is marked by a “profound melancholy,” Griffith sees Whitman’s preoccupation with death as a sign of his recognition that the “way” of homosexuality is “a way of unproductivity and of unremitting lifelessness,” one that is “everlastingly sterile,” in which “fertility of any kind is altogether unimaginable,” one that is “threatening [to] the very bases for physical existence.”<sup>11</sup> Griffith’s interpretation reflects one obvious truth (that homosexual sexual intercourse can not be biologically procreative), but rests primarily on several mistaken assumptions or omissions. For example, he seems to assume that a homosexual necessarily never has heterosexual feelings and is incapable of parenting a child; he also overlooks the fact that heterosexuals are in the majority and will thus in all likelihood continue to procreate the race even if all homosexuals never have heterosexual intercourse. Most importantly, Griffith’s preconception blinds him to the possibility that, as I have already suggested and shall illustrate below, Whitman’s joy in his homosexuality led him to a new conception of nature radically opposed to the heterosexual model’s notion, one that goes beyond the concept of material reproduction and redefines “fertility” and “life” to include intangible exchange and growth as well.

Though “Scented Herbage” certainly asserts a fundamental connection between love and what Whitman calls “death” (“you . . . are folded inseparably together, you love and death are”), there are at least two other ways to read the poem that such approaches to the subject as I have described above prevent critics from seeing. One is to accept that Whitman’s preoccupation with death may indeed be the expression of a despair about his homosexuality and to interpret this not as a sign of anything inherently true about homosexuality but rather as one of the moments in *Calamus* when Whitman lapses into the negative understanding of the subject held by his assumed common reader, that is, associ-

ating it with "sterility." In this light the poem becomes the expression of an ambivalence more severe than in "In Paths Untrodden," divided between the senses of release and new vision in the middle of the poem and a morbidity that represents Whitman's failure to sustain the radical implications he senses in his situation. Yet as the poem contains indications of another relationship between love and death, this interpretation can't be supported entirely. An alternate reading that allows for this connection and that seems to me thoroughly convincing is to interpret "death" here not literally as traditional critics do, but as a metaphor for Whitman's sense of his new relationship to society now that he senses the radical vision I have argued is potential in the homosexual's situation. Then Whitman's welcoming of "death" here becomes his acceptance of the fact that he is now "dead" to his dominant culture, which of course bases its conception of identity on the heterosexual model, and this "death" is unavoidably a consequence of his accepting the validity of his homosexual "love." This reading gives "Scented Herbage" a unity it otherwise lacks (in this sense love and death are "folded inseparably together" in the poem, and the alienation inevitably involved in this new vision explains how Whitman can say that his "herbage" is both "bitter" and "beautiful to me" at the same time) and gives a concrete and political meaning to phrases in the poem that otherwise seem vague and metaphysical—e.g., Whitman's claim that "death"—his new radical vision of the possibilities of personality and nature—is "the real reality,/ That behind the mask of materials you patiently wait, no matter how long,/ That you will one day . . . perhaps dissipate this entire show of appearance," i.e., the heterosexual model. There is convincing support for this reading of the term in Whitman's other poetry of this period. For example, "As I Lay with My Head in Your Lap Camerado" (*Drum-Taps*, 1865) seems to me an especially moving statement of the situation of male homosexual love in a hostile world, one in which Whitman clearly uses "death" figuratively to refer to a radical opposition to established doctrines; here he tells his "camerado" that "my words are weapons full of danger, full of death,/ For I confront peace, security, and all the settled laws, to unsettle them," and urges him "onward with me . . . without the least idea of what is our destination,/ Or whether we shall be victorious, or utterly quell'd and defeated." Though Whitman of course continued to be preoccupied with physical death in his poems, the fact that traditional critics have settled for a literal reading of the term in "Scented Herbage" without considering different and subversive uses of the word in his work is convincing evidence of the way their approach is limited by the same heterosexual model Whitman implicitly rejects in *Calamus'* radical strain.

In "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand" Whitman continues and intensifies central themes from "In Paths Untrodden" and "Scented Herbage"—e.g., his separation from society is stressed by his placing himself and his companion "in some wood for trial" or "possibly

with you sailing at sea, or on . . . some quiet island.” “Whoever You Are’s” chief significance lies in its explicit statement of the existentialist theme suggested in “Scented Herbage,” in its related challenge to transcendentalist assumptions Whitman had accepted elsewhere in his work, and in the way it prepares us for the disavowal of the common reader in *Calamus*’ most radical strain. “Whoever You Are” is much more direct than “Scented Herbage” about the uprooting and jeopardy involved in the homosexual’s “death” to society and the task of self-determination that imposes; lines like “The way is suspicious, the result uncertain . . ./ The whole past theory of your life and all conformity to the lives around you would have to be abandon’d, . . ./ . . . these leaves conning you con at peril” prophetically express what I described earlier as the existentialist character of homosexual experience under oppression. They forecast modern attitudes that implicitly clash with fundamental transcendentalist assumptions Whitman had accepted from Emerson; instead of a unifying moral principle pervading the universe and informing human experience, establishing a correspondence among all persons based upon participation in a universal spirit that transcends society’s corrupting forces, Whitman’s lines imply a fragmented cosmos where most people’s sensibilities are limited to the terms their culture establishes for them and in which morality and awareness are only forged by the individual’s continuous resistance to accepted codes.

These points are also implied in Whitman’s attitude toward the “you” of “Whoever You Are,” who is sometimes the reader and sometimes a beseeching companion-figure in the poem. “Whoever You Are” is striking for the way Whitman continually challenges these “you’s” and in the end almost completely repudiates his reader/companion. The poem starts by characterizing the “you” as limited in understanding (“I give you fair warning before you attempt me further,/ I am not what you supposed, but far different”) and is structured in a litany-like repetition of dismissing phrases, the last of which serves as the poem’s final line—“For all is useless without that which you may guess at many times and not hit, that which I hinted at;/ Therefore release me and depart on your way.” Elsewhere in his work Whitman also prods the reader and makes similar claims to special knowledge, but the conclusion of “Whoever You Are” contrasts absolutely with the way he usually associates himself with and above all tries to include his audience at the conclusions of his poems. Compare the final lines of “Song of Myself,” where Whitman draws back from a similar suggestion about his audience’s limitations, first declaring that “You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,” but finally promising that “I stop somewhere waiting for you.” Given the homosexual concern of *Calamus*, “Whoever You Are” is best understood as an example of the distance that, as I discussed earlier, the uncorrupted homosexual feels from his/her society’s governing heterosexual model for identity and social organization—the “you” of the poem is the sensibility that clings to what in “In Paths Untrodden” Whitman calls “stand-

ards hitherto publish'd," and Whitman's final command to this figure to "depart" signals his willingness to follow his new separate vision; it also prepares us for the rhetoric of *Calamus'* most radical strain, where a "you" is no longer of concern and is simply not addressed. Like "In Paths Untrodden," "Whoever You Are" has lapses that reveal the tension this radical intuition created in Whitman and that reflect the difficulty of the primal kind of invention he faced. The rhetoric of the poem could in itself be considered a violation of the poem's implied outlook since it literally attends to the conforming consciousness Whitman says he wants no further part of. In addition in the imagined encounter with his companion in the middle of the poem Whitman falls back on "hitherto publish'd" language to describe their relationship, alternately using the vocabulary of masculinism ("I am the comrade") and the heterosexual model's terminology of marriage ("I am the new husband").

The radical vision that impelled Whitman in *Calamus* and that is consistent with the call for new standards he implicitly makes in "In Paths Untrodden" is best represented by the poem that seems to me the most complex and moving in the collection—"When I Heard at the Close of the Day," the tenth in the group's final order. "When I Heard at the Close of the Day" has rarely been emphasized in analyses of *Calamus*, most likely because it bears no signs of the "profound melancholy" and "inherently unsatisfied" love that traditionalist critics find in the collection. Here instead we have Whitman's radical insight in uncompromised form; the poem seems to sense acutely the falsification of homosexuality I outlined earlier, in each of its aspects implicitly attacking that process, and is free of the "translation" devices Whitman resorted to in *Calamus'* less satisfying strain. In the opening line the speaker reports that he had "heard at the close of the day how [his] name had been receiv'd with plaudits in the capitol." As the larger context indicates, the reference must be considered as a metaphor for what in "In Paths Untrodden" Whitman called the "profits" that come from accommodating one's self to the prevailing culture's "conformities," particularly, in this case, to the cluster of assumptions in the heterosexual model.<sup>12</sup> At this point we do not know exactly where the speaker is, except that he is not in "the capitol" (he only "heard" the news), and, most important, we know that these "plaudits" are neither significant nor sustaining to him, for he completes the line by saying that "still it was not a happy night for me that follow'd." The second line repeats this feeling, but in new contexts—"And else when I carous'd, or when my plans were accomplish'd, still I was not happy." Here we have a statement that reinforces Whitman's distance from authorized values in the poem, for it is an implicit rejection of the masculine code he relied on in the collection's "conforming" strain. The line evokes two complementary images of approved American manhood: "when I carous'd" suggesting the rugged and rowdy "real man" and "when my plans were accomplish'd" suggesting the male as practical, industrious and unerringly competent, but by his dissatisfaction

here Whitman now implies how insufficient those models are as definitions of identity and as approaches to complex experience.

Appropriately, at this point, when Whitman has developed this maximum distance from dominant “standards,” the poem turns and begins the extended resolution of the tension the opening lines have created. In the next six lines, which refer to a span of three days, we learn that the speaker is near the sea, in isolated nature, that it is autumn, and that he is joyously awaiting his lover, who arrives on the evening of the third day:

But the day when I rose at dawn from the bed of perfect health,  
refresh'd, singing, inhaling the ripe breath of autumn,  
When I saw the full moon in the west grow pale and disappear in  
the morning light,  
When I wander'd alone over the beach, and undressing bathed,  
laughing with the cool waters, and saw the sun rise,  
And when I thought how my dear friend my lover was on his way  
coming, O then I was happy,  
O then each breath tasted sweeter, and all that day my food  
nourish'd me more, and the beautiful day pass'd well,  
And the next came with equal joy, and with the next at evening  
came my friend.

This section and the two lines that follow (“And that night while all was still I heard the waters roll slowly continually up the shores,/ I heard the hissing rustle of the liquid and sands as directed to me whispering to congratulate me”) answer the question raised implicitly in the opening lines, for we find out that the speaker’s lover is the source of his greatest happiness. They also have subversive implications that continue some of the liberating themes from elsewhere in the collection and in some aspects are also more subtly dissenting. For example, Whitman’s use of the language of friendship to describe his lover (“my dear friend my lover was on his way coming”) echoes the implication in the “democracy” poems about the greater potential for equality in homosexual relationships, but here he has dropped the language of “comradeship” and chosen instead the more encompassing and gentle word “friend,” with no masculinist connotations, no suggestions of athleticism or militarism. An even more subtle revision is expressed by Whitman’s emphasis on love throughout the poem and in his portrayal of the speaker as boundlessly sensual (he “rose at dawn . . . refresh’d, singing, inhaling the ripe breath of autumn, . . . undressing bathed, laughing with the cool waters”); the characterization here is an implicit challenge to another long-standing stereotype, the notion that the homosexual has no identity other than a narrowly sexual (i.e., genital) one, a minimalizing that deflects attention from the profounder threat that would be posed to culture if it had to admit that we had loving relationships and full, dimensional personalities.

Perhaps the poem’s most fundamental undercutting of traditional stereotypes appears in the way Whitman repeatedly links the speaker with nature, an association that seems almost a direct attack on the stigma

of comprehensive degeneracy I mentioned earlier and that contrasts sharply with Whitman's reference to his "diseased adhesiveness" in the notebook entry quoted earlier. As already mentioned, the speaker is out in nature, and Whitman uses terms that imply a bond between the speaker and the natural world. At first it seems that the speaker's residence in nature is itself the reason for his happiness, and even when his lover has come and we know that his presence is the chief source of the speaker's joy, the poem maintains the speaker's closeness to nature in a simile suggesting its sympathy with him ("the hissing rustle of the liquid and sands as directed to me whispering to congratulate me"). A related motif that supports the same conception are the pervasive references to the speaker's "health" and the mention that he is well "nourish'd." In choosing the sea for a locale, Whitman has picked perhaps the most appropriate symbol from nature for justifying this radical definition of the homosexual as a fully natural being. As I suggested above, one of homosexuality's most unsettling aspects is the threat it poses to patriarchy's definition of nature as exclusively based on a model of physical reproduction, implying instead a system of nature that includes intangible exchange and growth and personal pleasure as values as well. Though in certain cultures the sea has obviously been associated with fertility and vegetation, it has been a flexible and ambiguous symbol throughout history, with basic associations besides the idea of biological procreation. Two that make Whitman's choice of the sea here particularly pertinent are its traditional associations with the concept of a cyclically renewing spirituality and with sexuality in general, beyond the notion of literal reproduction, connotations according exactly with the more subtle definition of nature I have argued homosexuality implies.

"When I Heard at the Close of the Day" ends with the speaker lying next to his sleeping lover, apparently after they have just made love, as suggested by Whitman's use of the classic sexual symbol of waters rolling "slowly" and "continually up the shores" in the two lines preceding the poem's last lines:

For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover  
in the cool night,  
In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams his face was inclined  
toward me,  
And his arm lay lightly around my breast—and that night I was  
happy.

These last lines convey a tranquility and feelings of satisfaction and connection exactly opposite to the atmosphere and sentiments at the opening of the poem. All is "stillness" now in contrast to the "plaudits" at the beginning; the speaker and his lover are "under the same cover," the lover's arm "lightly around" the speaker, the lover's face "inclined toward" him; and the concluding phrase, preceded by an emphatic dash, directly addresses the lament at the beginning, using the same language but asserting now in contrast, "and that night I was happy." The con-

cluding senses of unity and completeness are supported by the syntax, punctuation and skeletal vocabulary of the poem as a whole—the entire poem is constructed as one continuous sentence; only commas are used until the final dash and period; the most frequently used word at the beginnings of lines is “And.”

Whitman’s withdrawal from “the capitol” in “When I Heard at the Close of the Day” should not be misunderstood as similar to classic patterns in heterosexual love poetry, such as conventions from pastoral romance or the tradition of outlawed lovers. For instance, whereas in classical pastoral the withdrawal from society is often a guise for a continuing preoccupation with society but from a clarifying distance, Whitman’s separation here represents a literal and final rejection of society’s norms. And whereas outcast heterosexual lovers (e.g., Romeo and Juliet) may re-enter society if only they express their heterosexuality differently, there are no grounds on which the speaker and his lover here, as unashamed homosexuals, may meet “the capitol’s” terms. Thus, the resolution of “When I Heard at the Close of the Day” does not so much proclaim romantic love as the only sustenance the homosexual has in the face of society’s hostility as indicate how for all homosexuals, which is not true for all heterosexuals, the moment of love always has the potential to be socially subversive—our perception of its naturalness and our accompanying joy are exactly the opposite of what the dominant culture has told us is supposed to happen in our situation and thus inevitably place us in opposition to its established heterosexual model for identity, relationships and nature. The development and rhetoric of “When I Heard at the Close of the Day” support this implication fittingly. Instead of moving outward toward greater and greater comprehensiveness as he does in the majority of his poems, a procedure consistent with faith in “the word En-Masse,” here Whitman withdraws from “mass” understanding to a private and unaccommodating vision and, appropriately, makes no effort to include his audience or to engage it otherwise actively in the experience of the poem. As though fulfilling the implied threat of “Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand,” in “When I Heard at the Close of the Day” there is no direct address to a “you” at all, no presumed reader-companion or conforming reader whose complacency must be jolted; instead the common reader is simply pushed to the sidelines and is at most a listener, an untended observer.

Though Whitman does not literally announce in “When I Heard at the Close of the Day” the “standards not yet publish’d” that he said in “In Paths Untrodden” were “Clear to me now,” his procedure in the poem as a whole can itself be thought of as the new standard he implicitly promised. The implied value in the poem lies not so much in its presenting a new fixed doctrine to replace the prevailing model he is dissenting from; the poem is not a praise of homosexuality in opposition to heterosexuality. The poem’s implied outlook is instead a critical consciousness skeptical of all imposed categories of identity, relationships



and nature. As stated earlier, this characteristic seems to me the most apt description of a modern "homosexual sensibility," and it clearly illustrates the existentialism of *Calamus'* radical strain, in which Whitman experiences great tension with the transcendentalism he was also strongly drawn to; forced by his persecution as a homosexual to doubt that there was an inherent moral order to experience and an innate benevolence in others he could rely on for understanding, in *Calamus'* most subversive strands Whitman adopts a decidedly non-Emersonian kind of self-reliance and affirms the integrity of his private vision with no suggestion that it will also be deemed "most acceptable . . . and . . . true" by his culture. It does not matter to my argument that Whitman could not sustain this radical vision throughout *Calamus*, but periodically fell into "conformities," nor that at times he continued to echo his culture's oppressive conceptions as he did in the notebook entries quoted earlier, which date from after *Calamus*. The relentlessness of homosexual persecution and the uniqueness of his enterprise, the unaided and primal kind of invention he had to undertake made it almost inevitable that Whitman should only partly succeed. But in its cultural context that limited success was an imaginative triumph, setting in motion a search for new "standards" that Whitman would continue most explicitly a few years later in *Drum-Taps*, a work that would be recognized intuitively by English homosexual readers like Symonds and Carpenter who invoked him in their parallel struggle there, a work that precipitated in Whitman a clash with his "common" reader's vision which was, in his day, irresolvable.

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### footnotes

1. A few earlier critics have spoken openly about Whitman's homosexuality. See Whicher and Griffith below and Edward Haviland Miller in *Walt Whitman's Poetry: A Psychological Journey* (Boston, 1968). But Whitman's homosexuality was not discussed positively until Robert K. Martin's pioneering "Whitman's Song of Myself: Homosexual Dream and Vision," *Partisan Review*, 42, No. 1 (1975), 80-96. Martin's article contains an excellent survey of the prevailing homophobia in Whitman criticism, including the attempts to deny the interpretation of "164" that I mention below, which makes it unnecessary to repeat that discussion here. Stephen A. Black's recent *Whitman's Journeys into Chaos: A Psychoanalytic Study of the Poetic Process* (Princeton, 1975) continues the earlier trend of creating what Martin calls a "false [i.e. non-homosexual] Whitman."

2. Quoted in Gay Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer*, rev. ed. (New York, 1967), 421, 423. Culture gave homosexuals in Whitman's day no ways of understanding themselves that were not condemning; at that time they were described mostly through damning terms derived from religion, such as "sodomite." The word "homosexual" had not even been invented when Whitman was writing *Calamus* (it was coined in 1869 by a gay Hungarian physician, Karoly Benkert). The pseudo-science of phrenology, popular in mid-nineteenth-century America, was one of the few fields that discussed sexuality in a near open way at that time, and given the absence of positive terms, it is not surprising that Whitman should have turned to phrenology for a language for his sexuality; I am grateful to Sara Moore Putzell for pointing out this aspect of phrenology to me. Scholars like Edward Haviland Miller ignore this cultural context and thus mistakenly conclude that Whitman's use of phrenological language is evasive (Miller, 145). For the famous Symonds' correspondence, see Allen, 535.

3. Allen, 217-18, 221 ff.

4. *Ibid.*, 250 ff. For the original lines, see *Leaves of Grass*, ed. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett (New York, 1973), 109-10. All quotations from Whitman are from this edition.

5. As of this writing (Spring 1976), the state of commentary about the history of attitudes toward homosexuality is represented, unfortunately, by Arno Karlen's *Sexuality and Homosexuality* (New York, 1971). Karlen perpetuates most of the stereotypes about homosexuality, but his book is a useful compilation of most of the existing studies until the early 1960s and presents ample evidence of the stigmatizing and persecution that I mention. The chapters most pertinent to my discussion are 10 ("The Scientific Overture"), 12 "The Apologists"), and 14 ("The Life"). [Since completion of this essay, two valuable sources have appeared: Vern Bullough's survey, *Sexual Variance in Society and History* (New York, 1976), and Jonathan Katz's pioneering documentary, *Gay American History* (New York, 1976).]

6. See Roy Harvey Pearce, "Introduction," *Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman: Facsimile Edition of the 1860 Text* (Ithaca, 1961), xxxvii.

7. I am especially indebted here to Dennis Altman's *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* (New York, 1971), to Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (New York, 1970), and to Charlotte Bunch, editor of *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly*, who first stimulated me to think in terms of a "heterosexual model" in a speech before the National Gay Task Force in New York in the fall of 1975.

8. See Benjamin DeMott, "'But He's a Homosexual. . .,'" reprinted in *Supergrow: Essays and Reports on Imagination in America* (New York, 1969), for an insightful discussion of similarities between the homosexual situation and Existentialism.

9. *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston, 1957), 74.

10. Stephen E. Whicher, "Whitman's Awakening to Death: Toward a Biographical Reading of 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,'" in *The Presence of Walt Whitman: Selected Papers from the English Institute*, ed. R. W. B. Lewis (New York and London, 1962), 24, 16, 15, 22.

11. Clark Griffith, "Sex and Death: The Significance of Whitman's *Calamus* Themes," *Philological Quarterly*, 39 (Jan. 1960), 18, 23, 26, 37. I am grateful to John L. Gilgun for informing me of this article.

12. Allen points out that Whitman's mention of "plaudits in the capitol" may be an allusion to a review of *Leaves of Grass* in the Washington, D.C., *National Intelligencer* on 18 February 1856 (*The Solitary Singer*), 566.