

WHITMAN'S EPIC POETRY: FROM THE CELEBRATION OF THE BODY TO THE RESPONSE TO HOMOSEXUALITY

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INTRODUCTION

In its traditional definition, epic narrative and poetry underscores the criteria of the subject that must be one of the serious, the style that concentrates on the formal and elevated sizes, and the celebration of the hero who embodies tribal, or national ethics, or even universal values that humans wish to achieve (Abrams, 77-79). Even if in a novel like Lawrence Kasdan's *Body Heat* (1981) the main protagonist appears as the postmodern hero who tends to deconstruct the valorizing image of the hero in elevated narratives, the tradition of the epic heroism seems to be solidly engraved on human genes, often coming up on the surface of people's memories individually or collectively, when they face a given challenge or intend to highlight some particular values. Thus, epic narratives and poems instill in readers these values of the past. They also turn to be an evidence of people's desires of power embodied by the hero or the superhuman that has always permeated their inner dreams.

Whitman's celebration of democracy and subsequently the common people actively participating in the emergence and the growth of America's values of liberty, individually as well as collectively, has been cited in most discussions that define the poet as the inventor of the "modern, democratic hero" – just to cite Janice Law Trecker.¹ In their approaches to Whitman's poetry, many other scholars classify him into the category of writers who break the moral codes in their societies when they openly become the advocates of homosexuality. Contrarily to some critics like Catherine A. Davies for whom the poet is one of the first American writers expressing their freedom in confessing their homosexuality (*Whitman's Queer Children: America's Homosexual Epics* (2012)), my argument in this paper is one that points out how the American bard's poetry champions a kind of epic that celebrates another type of hero through a sublimation of his homosexual instinct. The article will therefore

¹ Janice Trecker's paper, "The Ecstatic Epistemology of *Song of Myself*" appeared in 2011 in *The Midwest Quarterly*, Vol. 53, No. 1, page 11 .

explore another facet of Whitman's heroism that draws its force from the savage sap of the poet's sexual instinct. In the same way as the English poet, William Wordsworth, who is said to "write an epic about himself" (*Studying Poetry* 2000: 43), Whitman exposes his sexuality, and beyond, that of all humans in order to celebrate the grandeur of human nature.

Poetry is the material on which the study is focused. Central to the production and writing of poetry is people's abilities to use language, that is, the power of words artfully chosen by speakers. The various implications of words in a poem, the imagery these words evoke, the feelings they tend to arouse in listeners and readers, all these prove to be important in responding to a piece of poetry. As a form of art that values words the most, and because words in a given poem constitute a complete structure, the analysis of Whitman's verses will draw its force from Roland Barthes's semiotic theory in the reading of the literary text².

As a contribution to the wide field of literature and homosexuality, the discussion will emphasize, firstly, the framework of the verses in *Leaves of Grass* in terms of celebration of the self; that celebration is designed to awake the hero in the common man. In its second articulation, the study will associate heroism with the exploration of the body in Whitman's poetry. In the final segment of this reflection the question of homosexuality will be explored as a conclusive process whereby human heroic actions can be displayed in sexuality.

1. Celebrating 'Myself', Awakening the Hero in the Common Man

Most epic poetry plays out a category of heroes whose fate predestined them to achieve actions beyond common reach. The Homeric hero, Achilles was said to be "king of men", with a godlike origin (*The Iliad*, Book I: 3). John Milton's hero in *Paradise Lost* is also "one greater Man" whose mission is to save the world upon the "loss of Eden" (Book I, lines 1- 6). Another distinctive characteristic of the hero in epic is the distance he keeps from common people, as he is always the other, but not me. Being the standard-bearer of a society, he is far-off these people though he will exist deep inside the dreams of every one of them. He is the idealized human with values embodied by a person of special breed. So, not all the people in a given community will have such noble qualities. Thus, the way the hero is viewed

² I mean to refer to Roland Barthes's influential essay "The Death of the Author," in his book *Image – Music – Text*. On page 143 of his the essay the French Semiotician states :"(...) it is language which speaks, not the author."

is something of the paradox: people dream of achieving heroic exploits while they have the feeling that they will never be capable of gaining the qualities of the hero.

All heroes, still, will embody the cultural values of their respective societies, describing the same principle of a human community that needs to defend the ideals to which any individual is asked to tend. Similarly, each of the various editions of *Leaves of Grass* echoed and responded to the challenges the American nation had to meet at the early times of the independence. The new nation was in need of another category of heroes after the stage of the Revolution had been successfully carried to the end, thanks to the heroic deeds of the Fathers of Independence. Whitman volunteered himself to accomplish that mission, in ways to make his poetry continue into the actions of the nation's Fathers. The use of the first person pronoun in many of his poems exemplifies the juxtaposition of the speaker and the poet.

As he deploys his structuralist theory epitomized in "The Death of the Author," the French semiotician Roland Barthes holds that in the act of writing "the voice loses its origin", and "the author enters into his own death" (Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* 1977: 142). Foucault's theory of the author also emphasizes the idea that there is an "effacement" of the writer who constantly disappears in the sphere of creation (*Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology* 1998: 206). If a semiotic analysis of Whitman's verses corresponds with the reading of poetry as a literary genre that praises the words, it equally sounds pertinent to argue that the artist represents the voice of the Greek hero who is immortalized in his poems. His *Leaves of Grass* was first published when America, as an independent nation, was seventy nine years old. On the one hand, the book was innovative in actively contributing to give the pitch of the literary independence to the former British colonies, with a poetical orientation through the use of a purely American environment in the poems, the evocation here and there of the state of the nation's democracy, its early political crisis, its multiculturalism and landscape. On the other hand, it purported to instill in American people, regardless of social class and racial differences, the spirit of the hero capable of meeting new challenges.

Many poems in *Leaves of Grass* contain the first person pronoun, but it is the long poem 'Song of Myself' early appearing in the 1855-edition that sets up the various meanings of the 'I' that shifts to a metaphor of the heroic deeds that all humans are asked to achieve.

The speaker artfully associates the first person pronoun ‘I’ with the second person pronoun ‘you’ in the introductory lines which read: “I celebrate myself and sing myself, /And what I assume you shall assume.”³ The ‘I’ representing the poet – and everyone as well – strives to distinguish the self from the other, and this pronoun simultaneously envisages to create in the reader the desire of identification with the hero whose exploits are described in the epic poems. The pronoun ‘I’ refers to Whitman, but all readers of the poems allude to themselves by the simple fact of uttering the ‘I’. Thus, if the poems are characterized by the poet’s own voice talking about himself, there is evidence that the voice echoes those of others.

But the significance of the long poem ‘Song of Myself’ in line of the celebration of the hero can be fully disclosed through the contexts in which the verses were produced. On the political plan, the disunion of the United States was more and more visible as the disagreement on slavery worsened the weak ties between southern and northern states. As the biographer David S. Reynolds puts it, the poet Whitman “feared the worst” (*Walt Whitman’s America* 111), that is, the failure of the union, and subsequently the failure of the democratic experiment caused by the rising atmosphere of distrust between the two geographical regions. At that crucial turning of America’s history, the poet believed that the nation needed poets. Responding to that call, he would write with a view of saving the union and praising democracy. His celebration of himself – and by extension the common man – encourages individual heroic actions for a participation in the revitalization of democracy. The opening lines of the long poem – “I celebrate myself and sing myself, /And what I assume you shall assume” – reflect the new hero in the nation’s democratic experiment.

The defense of democracy was early one of the foundations of the United States, and it found in Whitman’s poems a way for its full blossoming. Indeed, if Jefferson’s view of democracy originated in the French tradition established by the Revolution in France, as to the “popular base” of government (*American Political Thought* 186), the Whitmanean formulation was in favor of the individual. Perhaps, in theory, there is no difference between the two understandings of the concept. In practice, however, Whitman’s vision of democracy emphasizes individual values for the process of democratization to be founded on and nourished by the genius of every single person constituting the unit of the nation. Thus, when

³ Walt Whitman, *The Complete Poems*, edited by Francis Murphy, Penguin Books, [1973] 1982

Jefferson focuses on the people's exercise of power, Whitman views the power of each individual in order to give the concept of democracy its practical meaning. His poetized hero symbolized by the 'I' that also becomes the 'you' undisputedly gives to America's democracy the energies it needs. Everyone is praiseworthy in the way to the collective construction of the nation; that implies the following: "every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" ('Song of Myself,'). In cluster 'Inscriptions', precisely in the poem 'One's-Self I Sing', he will insist on that idea of the unit, or the "One's-Self" constructing democracy when he writes: "One's-Self I sing, a simple separate person, / Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Mass."('One's-Self I Sing')

Ralph Waldo Emerson's legacy in the philosophical field can also be detected through the poem 'Song of Myself'. To his influential essay 'Self-Reliance' that celebrated individual values early in 1841, Whitman responded with a poetic voice by proclaiming the birth of the hero who was expected to become the receptacle of what the master of Transcendentalism names "power." That implies transforming every human into a unique hero, to the extent that this power of which an individual is endowed is "new in nature" ('Self-Reliance' in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* 133). Like his master, Whitman postulates that any person can embody the qualities and forces of the hero. That postulate gives to the notion of democracy its practical meaning. And in the light of the political reforms early proposed by the Progressives who advocated direct democracy and direct government, the transcendentalist poet relies on the individual's participation in the building of the society through collective actions.

The poet's use of the pronoun 'I' is associated with the 'you' and the juxtaposition of the two pronouns means to transform all individuals into heroes. Whitman innovates in his poems when the mythological hero incarnates himself as an ordinary or common man. His poetry is one in which the myth comes true, to the degree that the poems drive all humans to create in themselves the qualities of the hero. His conviction is that the acts of bravery of such outstanding beings are accessible, hence the praising of all births:

Births have brought us richness and variety,
And other births will bring us richness and variety.
I do not call one greater and one smaller ... ('Song of Myself', section 44)

Thus, whereas heroes distinguish themselves in the extraordinary conditions created and manifested at their respective births, being traditionally described at some times through their godly origins, or their noble breed at other times, all humans, for the poet, are endowed with richness similar in importance. The poet means that history witnessed the birth of heroes in the past; but there are still other heroes coming into existence and the course of history will be fertile with others to come. His poetry contains evidence of the American Transcendentalists' concept of individualism which finds its expression in a hero who celebrates himself or herself as the embodiment of praiseworthy values.

At the time of Whitman, the values of democracy had appeared as the field whereby the individual needed to be celebrated in his poetry. His poems celebrate individualism and proportionally help to breathe new life into heroism, one that is first and foremost committed to the building of the new nation. The fight for the forming of a democratic nation necessitates in Whitman's epic poems particular qualities of the new hero. In similar ways, sexuality constitutes a field that needs to be explored by the hero, far from the beaten tracks. Accordingly, the body becomes not simply a trope but also a major stake for all humans who are poetically invited to play out another dimension of their heroism.

2. A Hero Exploring the Body

Whitman's poetry is often read as an apologia for sex. This private issue developed in the book of poetry relating to human sexuality becomes a subject matter. As a motif in the poems, sex is not given the attention it deserves, for most readers misjudge at other times. Thus, the verses that evoke sexuality come to be defined in the disreputable terms of obscenity. In an edition of Emerson's *Journals* Joel Porte expresses his astonishment at the fact that the master of the transcendentalists did not show total disapproval of Whitman's constant evocation of what the editor calls the "carnal and sexual" (*Emerson in his Journals* 364). The biographer accuses the disciple Whitman of being disrespectful to his master. When Porte justifies that accusation, he quotes Emerson who had urged the poet to "remove sexual images from his poems" (*Ibid.* 194). But it is clear that such images are pervasive in the collection of poems. Whitman is said to have shown his disagreement on the fact that pornographic magazines are sold to teenagers (*Loc. Cit* 194). Expressing his opinion about

the poems that promote and exhibit the sexual, Porte takes a look at the author. For him, the latter is certainly present in his work of imagination, and the man cannot be disconnected from his artistic achievement. That is how the biographer emphatically mentions that the poet is an “embarrassment” for readers when he exposes in words the human body in all its nakedness (364).

When Whitman writes the verse entitled ‘I Hear It was Charged against Me’, one can understand that as a citizen, he is aware of the transgressions his poetry is likely to commit against the social ethics of the time. The introductory line of the poem states: “I hear it was charged against me that I sought to destroy institutions” (“Calamus” in *Leaves of Grass* 160 - 161). As a poet, he has the feeling that he cannot help writing on a subject that has become something of the abscess, which creates a malaise to people and mostly to the whole society. Writing on a sexual taboo is certainly provocative in a society strongly marked by the presence of Puritanism, particularly as he adds that he is “neither for nor against institutions,” the only one he defends being the “institution of the dear love of comrades.”

Whitman gives the impression of disregarding public opinion. But, when he keeps in his poems such “sexual images,” one can understand that his poetry is read from a perspective that sounds inaccurate. The disagreement between the poet and some of his readers is presented in the following terms: if the hero for democracy is indisputably accepted, the one for the body raises controversies. Mostly evoked is the cluster “Children of Adam” with such poems as ‘I Sing the Body Electric’, ‘A Woman Waits for Me’, ‘Spontaneous Me’, ‘One Hour to Madness and Joy’, ‘O Hymen! O Hymeneel!’ just to cite a few. The ‘Calamus’ group is not least seditious when it contains poems like ‘Not Heat Flames up and Consumes’, ‘City of Orgies’, ‘I Hear It was Charged against Me’, ‘We Two Boys together Clinging’.

However, a reading of Whitman’s poetry, with no consideration of any extra-textual facts, shows how his creative genius explores the public issue of democracy that necessitates a type of heroism, in parallel with the exploration of the inner world of the human being illustrated by the trope of the body. In ‘One Hour to Madness and Joy’ (*Leaves of Grass* 140 – 141) and in other poems that will be analyzed in the course of this study, one could think that the speaker is consumed by sexual passion, “the mystic deliria” as he calls it in line 4 of the verse. Read in this way, the speaker presents himself as a weak and ordinary person

unable to have any mastery of his impulses. The repetition of “O” in many lines adds to that consuming passion in the speaker whose moans become the expression of an intense pleasure. Another reading can show that he exposes sexuality in all its variances, including passion – as one can see in this poem – but also the harmony of the bodies that intertwine.

The poem ‘I Sing the Body Electric’ (*Leaves of Grass* 127- 136) indisputably praises the physical body, and it can be argued that the symbol of the body relates to the poet’s trope of the grass that alludes to his great ambition of connectedness among humans. But many people of Whitman’s day felt quite uncomfortable at the way the physical body was indecently exposed. For such readers, the exposure gave the poems their immoral connotations. However, the first four lines can help answer that question, when they somehow clarify the context and emphasize the guideline in the whole verse:

I sing the body electric,
The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them,
They will not let me off till I go with them, respond to them,
And discorrupt them, and charge them full with the charge of the soul.

These lines refute the opinion that sexuality is intimately linked with corruption of the body; they also announce the idea of what the speaker qualifies as “discorrupt” sexuality. The poem tends to generate a category of men and women capable of detaching any sentiment of culpability from the sexual act. But how can that happen? The introductory lines provide the following answer. Just as the physical body is visible, and becomes accordingly a door that enables to access people’s soul, that is, the inner and subtle body, the connectedness with the physical poses as the beginning of a process. Thus, the physical body becomes not a final stage, nor an end in itself, but rather a preliminary step to sow the seed of love in society. That the artist’s ambition to define his poetry in the sense of the promotion of love among people is not surprising. Yet, the unusual aspect of his imagination comes out when it takes the form of an act of sexuality. His hero is one who does not develop the feeling of guiltiness in the act of sexuality, to the extent that sexual acts become not an end in themselves but a way to communicate with the soul of each partner in a wide network of the development of love, either platonic or carnal.

In this sense, too, the reading of the poem in terms of no license sexuality proves incomplete, if it is not connected with the postulate enunciated in the beginning of the poem. The exposure of the body coupled with the erotic scenes in the verse becomes the idealistic description of an uncorrupt sexuality taking place in ways that the female comes to be viewed not as a mere sexual partner, but as one in whom the male discovers the qualities she contains. In its fifth section, for instance, the verse emphasizes three “qualities” attributed to the female; these include virtues, temperance also termed as “balance” and decency expressed as “duly veil’d”:

The female contains all qualities and tempers them,
 She is in her place and moves with perfect balance,
 She is all things duly veil’d, she is both passive and active,
 She is to conceive daughters as well as sons, and sons as well as
 /daughters.

Therefore, it is only on the surface that the verse appears provocative and indecent for a society founded on religious precepts. The poet’s hero does not view sexuality as an act neither against society, nor against such rules of decency. The sexual act carries the whole of its significance when it is associated with procreation, as the energies set in motion by the two heroes, male and female, give to the latter her power to “conceive daughters as well as sons.” Thus, procreation is certainly not accidental in the heroes’ sexual act but rather the marks of their immortality expressed by the cycle of life of their “daughters and sons, and sons as well as daughters.” Definitely, this verse shows that life resides in sexuality, and the sexual act is transformed into heroism to the degree that the partners participate in the uninterrupted process of creation.

In similar ways, the poem ‘A Woman Waits for Me’ (*Leaves of Grass* 136-137) deals with a female sexual partner described in her completeness: “she contains all, nothing is lacking.” Apparently, still, the poet’s verse encourages people to give themselves up to pleasure when it mentions: “Without shame the man I like knows and avows the deliciousness of his sex, / Without shame the woman I like knows and avows hers.” One approach to these lines consists in interpreting them in connection with the poet’s time. They can testify to a conception of sexuality, which was considered so much a taboo that people,

stricken with remorse, could blame themselves when they had sex. And accordingly, the poem suggests total liberation in the course of sexuality.

The following lines of the poem complete that feeling of freedom, and emphasize sexuality with a dimension nobler than the simple pleasure attached to it. On the one hand, the sexual act is described as repeating the act of creation which is shown by the “fruits” and “crops.” The poet becomes a hero when he successfully shifts his sexuality into a task of participating in the birth of a society with “perfect men and women.” On the other hand, the heroism of men and women as sexual partners comes into being when they get awareness of the richness of their body to the point of discovering the kind of love that associates “bodies” with “souls,” giving to them the possibility of regeneration that results in “immortality.” The eroticism in the poem is balanced by the evocation of “souls” which become, in this respect, the vehicles whereby the two sexual partners reach spiritual elevation.

Also dealing with sexuality, ‘Spontaneous me’ (*Leaves of Grass* 138 – 140) plunges the reader into the universe of instinct. The particular feature about the verse is its “set of representations” which, according to Stephen Heath, comprises “images, discourses, ways of picturing” (*The Sexual Fix* 1982: 3). These representations take the form of a wild sexuality that becomes an uncontrolled force. The first line of poem draws some links between that uncontrolled sensuality and “Nature.” It suggests that the speaker’s sexual passion is of the natural, and that he is allowed to give free rein to this instinct. This might be true about the poet’s suggestion of passionate sexual intercourses, but it can also be argued that what the poem describes is the power of sexual force which humans can hardly resist. The poem suggests that when people find it difficult to resist their sexual instinct, the sexual subject matter becomes a taboo. But it is freely discussed or even exposed at other times, as if the society could no more repress its own taboos. Those changes in people’s attitudes to sex and the displaying of bodies are eloquently chronicled by Michel Foucault in his comparison between the 19th century and the Victorian period (*The History of Sexuality* 1978: 3). Sex has never been a subject easy to grasp, but the sexual attraction seems irresistible, despite the secrecy and the taboo it is often shrouded in. In 19th -century America, for instance, the Puritans would consider sex as a source of corruption, and men should take their distance from women to keep a so called purity.

However, the poem ‘Spontaneous me’ mentions that the speaker is fully aware of this sexual force described as a naturally-acquired legacy. And his heroic achievement in the poem takes form in two ways. First, he audaciously explores the field of sexual attraction as one that is little known and one before which most of us will be defeated. The speaker’s attitude is one of the suggestive. Thus, the second dimension of his heroism becomes apparent. Indeed, the verse shows how his love beginning with the human is extended to the nonhuman, as illustrated by the link between the body of the poet’s lover and the earth: “The body of my love, the body of the woman I love, the body of the man, the body of the earth (...).” In this way, the poet’s love grows both wider and richer, enabling him to experiment a stage of life that leads to immortality through the power of “procreation.”

The poet’s uncontrolled sensuality indicated in the first line of the verse shifts into a force of procreation the quality of which rests on his attaining purity. In this respect, ‘Spontaneous me’ is suggestive of a transformation that takes place inside the poet who successfully operates a sublimation of his own sexual force to the extent that, like the earth, he becomes chaste and the woman as well. The verse sounds self-contradictory when it reads: “The great chastity of paternity, to match the great chastity of maternity,” considering that in its religious understanding, “chastity” applies to a state of virginity or not having sexual intercourse. One can therefore see the surface provocative tone used in the passage. But the term “chastity” applied to the lovers having sex means to castigate what is termed by the psychologist Helen Haste as “Puritan model” – dominant in Whitman’s time – which qualified sex as “sinful” and “evil” (*The Sexual Metaphor* 1994: 168). Responding to that conception of sex and sexuality, the poem celebrates a hero who opposes what might be considered as some puritan hypocrisy. Instead, as the speaker is aware of the power of sexual attraction, he courageously faces it and his undertaking enables him to access the qualities of a hero whose strength resides in his abilities to transform that natural impulse into procreation energies and love among people. The hero in Whitman’s poems is engaged partly in the birth of men and women of value, and partly in giving love its significance in the construction of a nation, be it new or old. The hero’s exploration of the body and his subsequent sexual exposure results less in the provocative intentions or the obscenity than the suggestion of ways to give to one’s sexual instincts orientations beyond pleasure. That implies the necessity

to re-examine the poet's view of the celebration of sexuality involving men and women but also the homosexual orientation.

3. Homosexuality: Sublimating the 'Natural' in the Body

Whitman's poetic language is founded on two recurrent and principal pillars: the promotion of democracy and the homosexual orientation. Whereas the poet's epic poems which take the form of songs for democracy raised no problem – just because the US nation in the 19th century sought any contributions that could help encrust in people's minds the notions of self-government and liberty – the homosexual pillar that people saw in his verses caused a tremendous controversy, if not rejection. From the reading of these verses, some analysts come to the conclusion that Whitman is homosexual, or at least, promotes that sexual tendency. Like Ellis Shookman who provides a broad and varied analysis of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, one can say that the American's poetry is situated in the tradition of authors writing on homoeroticism (*Thomas Mann's Death in Venice: A Novella and Its Critics* 2003: 2; 19 – 25). In his rich and multifaceted presentation of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, Shookman points out critical readings of the novella, and he notes how it inspired and/or could be compared to other literary productions. Published in 1912, Mann's fiction is obviously posterior to *Leaves of Grass* that early came out in 1855. In his analysis of the German's narrative, Shookman suggests a comparison between the two literary works. Like Shookman, some readers argue that the speaker in Whitman's poetry is gripped by homoerotic desires; so one can compare the verses with Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* in which the main protagonist Aschenbach feels a passionate love for the character of Tadzio, a boy who embodies for him a mythological beauty.

According to David S. Reynolds who produced a well-documented biography of the poet, "the issue of Whitman and homosexuality has been hotly debated over the years" (*Walt Whitman's America: a Cultural Biography* 1995: 390). When the biographer states his own opinion, he first argues that the American bard's "homoerotic" collection of poems should be read in the context of the day when same-sex relationships were common. Next, noting facts beyond the confines of the poems, Reynolds affirms that the poet used to meet "young men" with whom he had "intense relationships" (ibid. 391). In addition, the biographical book

tends to emphasize two facts in the poet's life. First, it is reported that the displaying of homosexuality was not a taboo in antebellum American society, an attitude that is to be considered as an expression of freedom (ibid. 198). The second fact relates to a testimony of the poet's brother, George who early said with certitude that he had never seen Whitman with female friends (ibid. 73). Additionally to such instances, if one considers Catherine A. Davies's analysis of *Leaves of Grass*, there is evidence of the poet's homosexuality in the poems, a sexual orientation that many other poets – supposedly Whitman's children – tried to interpret despite differences in the “ideological constraints of being homosexual subject”(Whitman's *Queer Children: America's Homosexual Epics* 2012: 32). It therefore appears that the poet's homoeroticism is a proven fact through his life and his poems as well.

However, Reynolds's biography of the poet reads that such a statement about his sexual orientation would be a premature conclusion, to the extent that the biographer himself mentions cases when the artist did not have a ‘coherent’ or clear-cut attitude to sexuality. In his biographical notes on Whitman, Reynolds puts that following the publication of *Leaves of Grass*, the poet would show some disgust to pornographic magazines which he qualified as “reptile” and “poison” (*Walt Whitman's America* 194). But, paradoxically enough, the poet was reluctant to withdraw from his verses images displaying sexuality, contrarily to Emerson's suggestion, that took the form of advice given by a master to his disciple. The question for Reynolds is to know how to classify Whitman concerning the subject of sexuality, given that heterosexuality, pornography, and homosexuality are all forms of sexuality. The biographer can understandably interrogate: “What was the real Whitman? The antipornographer or the daring defender of sex in literature?”

He thinks he has found the answer to this question, when he writes that the poet was hostile to pornography which exposed a form of prissy sexuality, in ways that “reflected skewed visions of womanhood and manhood” (Loc.cit). Reynolds's in-depth research leads him to specify the poet's opinion, according to which such a distorting image of pornography is associated with repression, one that is operated by a so-called virtuous or “good” society, as well as by male chauvinists whose desires are to “excite, express, and dwell on [a] merely sensual voluptuousness”(Loc.cit). Although these statements clarify Whitman's opinion about sexuality, they are revealing of the artist's attempts to assure a good reception to his poetry at a time when the subject was still tricky. Moreover, when the biographer discusses

the specific issue of homosexuality, he does not ‘interrogate’ the poems enough. This section shall not linger on the rumors about Whitman’s homosexuality, because as reported by Reynolds in his book, the accusation of abuse on school boys might have been exaggerated by a pastor reputed for his paranoia and homophobia (Ibid 69 – 73).

By contrast, this section means to concentrate on the poems, in that they disclose the full creative genius of the artist, a genius that equally clarifies the way homosexuality is treated, and testifies to the heroism he – and also other people – can successfully achieve in similar contexts. To begin with, it is convenient to mention that the qualification of Whitman as a homosexual is often hard to prove when one reads such poems as ‘A Woman Waits for Me’, ‘O hymen! O Hymenee’, ‘Spontaneous Me’, and ‘One Hour to Madness and Joy’ in the cluster “Children of Adam”. The fact that all these poems display a heterosexual orientation is undisputable. But if most readers consider that the sexual tendency in “Children of Adam” is different from the cluster termed “Calamus,” for the heterosexuality of the former and the homosexuality of the latter (*Walt Whitman’s Mystical Ethics of Comradeship* 2010: 3), responses to same-sex passions can be found out in the first group of poems. One of such responses is contained in the second stanza of the poem ‘A Woman Waits for Me’ when the speaker lists the associating images of sex, which comprise “bodies, souls, meanings, proofs, purities, delicacies, results, promulgations, songs, commands, health, pride, maternal mystery, seminal milk, hopes, benefactions, bestowals, all the passions, loves, beauties, delights of the earth, governments, judges, gods, follow’d persons of the earth”.

What is striking about the speaker’s list is the diversity and apparent disconnection of the constituent elements of sex. The following lines create the coherence in the poet’s images: “These are contain’d in sex as parts of itself and justifications of itself”. In other words, terrestrial existence and any achievements on earth are fuelled by the power of sex. Thus, the speaker adds in ‘Spontaneous Me’ that sexuality should be considered as “This poem drooping shy and unseen that I always carry, and that all men carry”. Because this reality proves self-evident, the verse calls for new attitudes suggested by the poet in ‘One Hour to Madness and Joy’: “To ascend, to leap to the heavens of the love indicated to me! / To rise thither with my inebriate soul!” This image of ascension associated with sexuality in these lines are repeated and clarified in the opening poem of the cluster “Children of Adam” titled ‘To the Garden the World’; in the first line of the verse the speaker says: “To the garden

the world anew ascending”. The “garden” is evocative of the religious myth of the Paradise with Adam and Eve. The speaker reproduces the same myth but gives it another interpretation that develops as follows: if so true is the religious vision that the fall of mankind originated in the fall of Adam and Eve, if from that fall, many other moral deviations have come into being on earth, and if that episode of the fall is connected with sex, he now calls for the ‘new Adam’ and ‘new Eve’ who can operate this ascension evoked in the epic poem ‘To the Garden the World’. In this respect, the verse suggests the birth of heroes who will draw their forces from sex, and rather than being the cause of humans’ fall, sexuality generates new heroes.

Disconnecting the cluster “Children of Adam” from “Calamus is a mistake for two reasons, at least: first, no matter the form it takes, the two clusters deal with sexuality and, second, they all define it as a natural attraction. With the mental strength of heroes, the poet will deal with the issue of homosexuality in “Calamus”, facing it both shamelessly and frankly. The opening poem of this group, ‘In Paths Untrodden’(*Leaves of Grass* 146), is based on an irrefutable reality, the one concerning “manly attachment”, viewed as “paths untrodden” and “margins” – certainly a rephrasing of public opinion of the day. The poet adopts a posture different than the one of his society. He purposely mentions the “standards hitherto publish’d” and “conformities” as to restate what society might think about the “manly attachment”. But subtlety enough, he hides within this opinion held by people, his own vision through the words “pleasures” and “profits”. Unlike society, Whitman does not intend to blame homosexuals, as he does not deal with same-sex love in terms of established social codes. But also important, while one may expect him to clearly state his choice of sexual orientation, he unveils an intention to escape from “pleasures” and “profits.” Therefore, when the poet mentions that homosexuality is sexuality based on the need of “pleasures” and “profits”, he suggests another way, that which feeds the “soul”. The first lines of the verse are fundamental in exposing these two attitudes to homosexuality when we read:

In paths untrodden,
 In the growth by margins of pond-waters,
 Escaped from the life that exhibits itself,
 From all the standards hitherto publish’d, from the pleasures, profits, conformities,
 Which too long I was offering to feed my soul, (...)

His definition of homosexuality shifts into asexual sexuality, at least if one does not lose sight of the fact that Whitman is one of the advocators of Transcendentalism, and if one considers that in the transcendental perspective the needs of the soul do not primarily reside in physical contacts. When the speaker mentions a “secret” about homosexuality in the final stanza of the poem, he addresses “young men”, perhaps because they are the most important portion of population practicing it, but certainly to suggest the union of souls that results in true comradeship found in most poems of the “Calamus” cluster. ‘The Base of All metaphysics’ (*Leaves of Grass* 154), another verse of the group, exemplifies this union of souls termed as “[T]he dear love of man for his comrade, the attraction of friend to friend.”

The poem “Who Is Now Reading This?” (*Leaves of Grass* 607- 608) is among those excluded from the Whitman’s book of poetry, but it phrases the same context of homosexuality. In the poem, indeed, the speaker avows his homosexual tendency, one “interior in myself”. When he confesses this impulse through the line “As if I were not puzzled at myself,” he shows the degree to which it is hard to escape it. Thus, this poem restates what he speaks about in the “Calamus” poems, notably in ‘Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand’, ‘Not Hearing from my Ribb’d Breast Only’, ‘In Paths Untrodden’, just to cite these for illustration. The common point about them is that homosexual love is something of the natural. As such it can be compared with a ‘brute sap’ in the interior of the poet, and also in all humans. Yet, the poems play out how this savage energy has to be ‘elaborated’ or ‘refined’ in ways that homosexual love feeds the soul rather than being based on “pleasures” and “profits.”

In many poems of the ‘Calamus’ cluster the poet confesses his homosexuality, not so much as one to which he gives himself up, but as one that exists in all humans. Providing a response to this form of sexuality, the speaker in these poems adopts two attitudes. On the one hand, he does not preach any moral lesson, because he avows his own attraction for male characters. On the other, in reference to the terms used by Tim Edwards, he does not believe that it is a “problem for society” (*Erotics and Politics: Gay Male Sexuality, Masculinity and Feminism* 1994: 14). Similarly, in his essay “Higher Laws”, the transcendentalist Thoreau will advocate that people cannot gain awareness of such higher laws if they do not experiment, first, a stage when tastes and needs are not refined and when they behave like a

boy seeking pure physical satisfaction (“Higher Laws” in *Walden and Civil Disobedience* 2003: 168).

In his poems, Whitman is involved in heroic undertakings that lead him to gain victory over his natural tendency of homosexual love. When, simultaneously, he evokes the soul and confesses that attraction, one can see that through ‘metaphysical’ efforts, he has come to a sublimation of his sexual energies to such a point that he can understand another meaning of comradeship based on the union of souls. In other words, he successfully substitutes his sexual desires for the ideal of love not based on and not resulting in “pleasures” and “profits.” The poet endeavors to escape such “pleasures” and “profits” in the verse ‘In Paths Untrodden’ and in many others. His epic poetry is one that explores all human needs and desires, even the most concealed ones.

Catherine A. Davies’s observation about epic narrative leads her to note that “the American epic differs from those of the European tradition by being prospective nation-building, rather than retrospective celebration of the founding of an Empire.”(*Whitman’s Queer Children*: 43). This opinion becomes all the more pertinent as Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* deals with homosexuality as a means of self-knowledge and the building of human nature, given that the body constitutes a great empire that needs to be explored in all its facets.

CONCLUSION

The mitigated reception of Whitman’s poetry has always been caused by the fact that when his verses celebrate democracy, they are also ‘vitiating’ by his use of sexual images and homosexual suggestions. This study has shown that the Whitmanean hero is a celebration of the individual, not as one engaged in the conquest of new territories, but one who contributes to the building of the society s/he lives in. The poet’s hero playing out his or her wit for the reinforcement of democracy is justified when the need to instill into the people’s mind the ideas of liberty and self-government was perceptible. Likewise it was necessary to remove the veil that covered the discourse and the practices about sexuality.

The paper has attempted to prove that the reading of Whitman’s poetry as one that promotes sexuality for mere pleasures is an error. His epic poems deploy a hero who is ‘invaded’ by the sexual instincts, just like any person. But the hero in the poems refuses to

become like a citadel taken over by such forces. When the poet writes on homosexuality, he adopts the posture of a hero who successfully sublimates his love for male characters, to the point of realizing some sort of platonic love, which is termed comradeship. Whitman's poetry neither promotes same-sex love, nor castigates it. In this sense, because he attains the stage and qualities of the hero, homosexual love is not a problem for him, but a natural attraction that leads to self-knowledge and sublimation of his hidden desires.

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