

Form, Eros, and the Unspeakable

Whitman's Stanzas

Whitman did not number the fifty-two sections in the 1855 version of the great, free-flowing outpouring that is "Song of Myself," or even separate them by much. But he must soon have realized the reader's need for a helpful scaffolding, since he added stanza numbers in the edition of 1860, and section numbers in 1867. Of these sections, the briefest are two six-line units, utterly different from each other. Here is section 17:

These are really the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not
original with me,
If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing, or next to nothing,
If they are not the riddle and the untying of the riddle they are nothing,
If they are not just as close as they are distant they are nothing.

This is the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is,
This is the common air that bathes the globe.

This is Whitman in his most discursive, transparent, and plainly rhetorical mode; he says what he means, and means what he says, and resorts to imagery only in the most generic of ways: grass, land, and water are common as the last stanza's air; the terms refer to *any* instance of grass, land, or water. His music, in that beautiful first stanza, arises from anaphora; it's the elegantly legalistic, argumentative syntax that makes the passage sing. Stanzaic form seems to have been dictated by this parallelism; the chain of "if they are" phrases dictates a symmetrical lining-up on the page, and the metaphoric leap—that these thoughts are in fact the psychic equivalent of grass and water and air, as

plain and necessary as those ordinary, inescapable things are—necessitates the second stanza.

But section 29 of the poem, though also only six lines long, is a production of quite a different order:

Blind loving wrestling touch, sheath'd hooded sharp-tooth'd touch!
Did it make you ache so, leaving me?

Parting track'd by arriving, perpetual payment of perpetual loan,
Rich showering rain, and recompense richer afterward.

Sprouts take and accumulate, stand by the curb prolific and vital,
Landscapes projected masculine, full-sized and golden.

Why does this section suddenly make section 17 seem entirely straightforward and transparent by contrast? And why is it delivered to us in couplets? And what on earth is going on within it?

This passage occurs in a suite of sections devoted to the sense of touch; this focus begins in section 27, which concludes with the declaration: "To touch my person to some one else's skin is almost more than I can stand." To touch another is disruptive, dangerous, powerful, and the next section elaborates this claim; there, touch is "My flesh and blood playing out lightning to strike what is hardly different from myself." Section 28 ends with a reiteration of the sense of excess aroused by touching another body, here constituted as a direct address to the sense itself: "Unclench your floodgates, you are too much for me." That is a charming inconsistency, and reminds one of the lover who cries out, "Stop, stop!" with absolutely no interest in being obeyed.

In section 29, the floodgates have, indeed, unclenched, and Whitman's startlingly lyric section seems intended to enter into this excess, to enact the ecstatic, after the two preceding pieces which have tried to hold overwhelming feeling at a distance.

The potency of the passage is, from the very beginning, oxymoronic; this touch is blind, loving, and wrestling all at once, and the adjectives in the first half of the opening line are mirrored by the three in the remaining half. Even though the two halves of the line are elegantly symmetrical (two participles in the first phrase, two adjectives ending in contracted form in the second), the result is a kind of adjectival overload—six modifiers for a single noun in one line!—that immediately makes the kind of touch being described here seem far less clear. It's simply not possible to conceptualize this touch in a logical way, and yet the overall sense created by this collision of terms is unmistakable: an evocation of sexual activity that is loving and rough, combative and piercing. It's a challenge to try to unpack its terms:

- blind —takes place in darkness
 —anonymous
 —indifferent to its object
 —desperate
 —out of control
- loving —tender
 —erotic
 —affectionate
- wrestling —combative
 —playful, sporting
 —masculine
- sheath'd —protected, like a sword
 —hidden
 —suggestive of foreskin
- hooded —hidden, clothed
 —anonymous
 —unknowable
 —suggestive of foreskin
 —suggestive of snake
- sharp-tooth'd —dangerous
 —venomous
 —suggestive of snake
 —phallic

Teeth appear in a similar context in the famously weird bit Whitman excised from “The Sleepers” after 1855—arguably the sexiest passage in American poetry of the 19th century, along with Dickinson’s “wild nights”—in which the speaker is involved in some sort of sexual encounter beneath a pier at night:

... Laps life-swelling yolks . . . laps ears of rose-corn, milky and just ripened;
 The white teeth shining, and the boss-tooth advances in darkness,
 And liquor is spilled on lips and bosoms by touching glasses, and the best
 liquor afterward.

Of course we couldn’t say who or what is lapping those yolks, or toward whom the “boss-tooth” is advancing; action is floating or swirling, unattached to

agency. Just as in the passage above, the opening salvo of section 29 has no specific actors, but in the second line the players appear: *your* departure has caused you to ache, leaving *me*; can the pain of this departure be likened to the wildly complex experience of touch described in the first line? Are we to reread that first line, now, as an evocation of the experience of not touching, the pain of withdrawal?

Who, we might well ask, is “you”? Tradition, of course, encourages us to read any poetic speaker and addressee not otherwise identified as lovers, and specifically heterosexual ones.

Whitman does not attempt to resist this tradition, exactly; by not specifically gendering his second-person pronouns, he makes use of this expectation; it allows him a guise, a theater of operations.

Certainly the first line of the section is loaded with masculine signifiers, and there are none of the Whitmanic pointers of the feminine. Despite the poet’s radicalism in asserting the fact of female sexual desire, and despite his call for women’s equality, he usually can’t place a woman in any sort of sexual context without asserting the primacy of reproduction; it’s all spurting milk and swelling belly.

We know from the context of previous sections that “I” is a consistent, male speaker, present in section after section (though in some of these he *does* melt briefly into a female body). But “you” is a far more slippery proposition. At times, the “you” of “Song of Myself” is clearly the reader; at times the addressee is the speaker’s own soul; at times, like this one, “you” seems to be a specific other who is already in relation to the speaker—and the structural politics of the poem are such that the boundaries between these three roles are intended to be called into question, to blur into a complex erotic and ontogenic relation that proposes a new platform for the description of reality. We can’t be certain if Whitman’s “you” is singular or plural, and that indeed is part of the point.

The sort of parting the poem considers is complicated in the next couplet, whose lines echo the internal mirroring of line one, the first with its parade of *p* sounds, the second with its recurrent *r*’s. From here on out, there is no agency in the poem, no identifiable actor; the exchange taking place is the operative force. This exchange is characterized in multiple ways: it is arrival and parting, paying and loaning, rain and recompense. (Interesting that the syntax here comes very close to that of the excised passage in “The Sleepers”: “richer recompense afterward” and “the best liquor afterward” are both the ends of sentences; did Whitman mean them to echo each other, to underscore his joy in what is richer than rain and better than liquor?) It suggests a notion of sexual exchange as part of complex cycles—of presence and absence, of economics, and of the natural world. To wrestle with the emotional

multivalence of touch, the known and unknown lover—to come and go, to plant seed and harvest, to borrow and repay—this free-floating exchange of the second stanza leads Whitman to a fiercely eroticized vision of the natural world, in which both specific sprout and entire landscape are prolific, vital, masculine, full-sized, and golden. About as far from the tradition of “Mother Nature” as a reader is likely to be carried! (And thus an instructive point of contrast with Whitman’s later, recurrent, and generally disastrous attempts to celebrate heterosexual fecundity and instruct women in the birthing of “superbest” offspring. D. H. Lawrence is on the money when he says that, for Whitman, women are always “a function.” When it comes to the free-floating exchange figured in this section, Whitman is neither hygienic, dutiful, nor merely productive, much less, as he is in the creepy “Children of Adam” poems, programmatically eugenic. This passage is marked, instead, by sheer participatory pleasure.)

But what to make of “projected”? Whitman touches on this notion in section 25, when the sun’s rising:

Dazzling and tremendous how quick the sun-rise would kill me,
If I could not now and always send sun-rise out of me.

We are, it seems, co-creators; the outer world is not alien to consciousness but overlapping. Is to “send” the same as to project? Whitman, lover of theater and opera, would have known the power of scenic projections; magic lanterns had been in use since the 17th century, and by the mid-19th the powerful lamps called “lime-lights” (which burned the eponymous substance, and which give us our term for the spotlight of public attention) shone brilliant projections onto the stage. In this light (forgive me), the notion of the projected landscape takes on another dimension—or perhaps it’s more accurate to say it has less dimension, but becomes phantom, a phenomenon of appearances, no more solid than images cast upon a wall or a stage curtain. Such a sense of ephemerality is perfect for Whitman’s poem; it suggests that landscapes, the things of this world, arise out of the exchange, the process in which we participate: they are born, as we are, in eros; we make them; we participate in the erotic work of the generation of reality. No wonder Mother Nature is not the appropriate figure here, for in Whitman’s wild revisioning, it’s a pair—or a multiplicity?—of male lovers who generate the sprouts. The stanza hides behind its innocent-looking couplets a vision of homoerotic creation.

And this leads to the *why* of the form. Why does Whitman deliver this passage in couplets, in a much more regular stanzaic pattern than the bulk of his great poem? His stanza-making frequently feels like paragraphing in verse. He shifts to a new stanza as time or focus shifts, or when he introduces

a new rhetorical movement. Consider the glorious section 31, which begins, "I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journeywork of the stars. . . ." The poem arrives in three stanzas of unequal length, each a single sentence. The first opens with "I believe"—a bold assertion of a new credo—and each of this initial stanza's following six lines begins with "And." The following stanzas reproduce this patterning, using anaphora as the determinant factor of shape. This is a transparent form of pattern-making—a naked stanza, if you will, for a poet who professes his love of nakedness. Here the form conceals nothing, its workings and rationale on open display.

But the couplets of section 29 are another matter; their pattern does not immediately arise from syntactical necessity. Unlike the more characteristic form of section 31, here a mathematical symmetry is foregrounded: three couplets, the first of two sentences, the second and third each a single sentence. The couplets could easily be seen as "arbitrary," in the way that all regular forms are; they impose an order on the freer movement of sentences. They are, unmistakably, a form of "clothing" experience, and to clothe is always both to cloak and to emphasize what is covered. Style, said Jean Cocteau, is a simple way of saying complicated things, and Whitman's formal choice seems a superb example of the point.

One possible rationale is that a clear duality is evoked in this passage—both in the parallel ordering of line 1 and stanza 2, and in the presence of two partners in the exchange, two aspects of the cyclical processes of parting and arriving, loan and payment, rain and recompense.

But these couplets are more than mimetic. They underscore what isn't said; they point to the silence generated by the white space between them, which is much more present and insistent here than in the freer verse of section 31. In his *Summa Lyrica*, Allen Grossman has argued that the short line points toward the absence of what is excluded from it; it indicates the pressure created by what is missing. Whitman's use of the couplet works the same way, I think, as if he wishes to underscore the discontinuities of the passage, to point to the veil that falls between the reader and the text, unlike those famous declarative moments in "Song of Myself" when Whitman seems determined to rip veils (and even whole doorways) away. Here, in contrast to those moments of great clarity, what he is saying cannot be taken at face value quite, because there isn't any "face"—instead we're presented with a swirl of terms of exchange and images of fertility, tension, and release held inside the framing devices of the couplets, which invite us to read, literally, between the lines.

Whitman has more or less said this, in section 21, when he considers the limits of speaking: "Do you not know O speech how the buds beneath you are folded?" (There, by the way, is another wrinkle in the poet's thrilling uses of the second person!) The couplets of section 29 seem arranged to *show* these

folded buds—the desire, pleasure, and intensity folded inside of language, which remains unspeakable.

“Unspeakable”—unspeakability?—comes in three varieties. First, that which cannot be said because one does not know it, and therefore cannot say it. Second, that which cannot be spoken because it is culturally impermissible to do so. And third, that which cannot be named because it is impossible, since the language provides no terms, no words to enable articulation.

I do not think that the unsayable, in Whitman, partakes much of the first quality, though critics have argued that only a complex internal mechanism of repression could allow a poet to both proclaim a radical philosophy of sexual fellowship, especially same-sex coupling, as a basis for political change and expect that he would be “absorbed by his country.” While this is indeed a shattering contradiction, Whitman seems to have been acutely aware that he wanted to be a radical seer and also a beloved prophet, and he surely knew that in America we cannot reconcile horniness and wisdom (that this is still the case was richly demonstrated in the debacle of the last years of the Clinton administration). Perhaps this irreconcilability lies behind the formal tensions between “verse paragraphing” and the tight construct of the couplet; the transparency of one sits beside the opacity of the other, and the contradiction cannot be resolved, but instead must simply be accommodated. The great poem of self-doubt of the later 1850s, “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life,” shows us a speaker ferociously disappointed in the reception of his own vision, acutely aware of the strangeness of what he’s said. Whitman’s great poems demonstrate an almost unimaginable prescience; with Dickinson he is alone among 19th-century poets in possessing an almost chilling self-consciousness, an acute self-analysis. In other words, Whitman seems to know what he is talking about, even when many of his readers may not. (Edward Carpenter has left us this lovely description of a visit with Whitman in 1877; the italics are Carpenter’s own: “If I had thought before that (and I do not know that I had) that Whitman was eccentric, unbalanced, violent, my first interview certainly produced quite a contrary effect. No one could be more considerate, I may almost say courteous; no one could have more simplicity of manner and freedom from egotistic wriggings; and I never met any one who gave me more the impression of *knowing what he was doing* more than he did.”)

But the second and third forms of the unsayable are central to a reading of the poems. On the first front, the realm of the impermissible, Whitman astonishes over and over with his forthrightness. From 1855 till the final edition of the *Leaves* in 1892, three years before the trial of Oscar Wilde, he persisted in importing the unnamed into the public world of the sayable. Of course he made choices which seem, to the contemporary reader, ill-advised; surely the funniest of these is his revision of the line in “Native Moments” which shifts

from 1860's "I take for my love some prostitute . . ." to 1876's "I pick out some low person for my dearest friend . . ." If he sometimes changed his pronouns, or shifted the order of poems in order to blur the nature of a particular allegiance, and if he betrayed his own sexuality when pressured by John Addington Symonds for a direct, written answer, it would nonetheless be absurd to expect him to have been any *more* radical than he actually managed to be.

In section 24 of "Song of Myself" alone, there are passages so odd and nervy that they have lost little of their power to startle. Here Whitman discusses the voices that move through him:

Through me many long dumb voices,
Voices of the interminable generations of slaves,
Voices of prostitutes and of deformed persons,
Voices of the diseased and despairing, and of thieves and dwarfs,
Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion,
And of the threads that connect the stars, and of wombs and of the father-stuff,
And of the rights of them the others are down upon,
Of the trivial and flat and foolish and despised,
Of fog in the air and beetles rolling balls of dung.

This is startlingly bold in its identification with the suffering, with all those whom—in an endearing Yankee-ism—"the others are down upon." But who could have imagined the end of the list? Whitman will also vocalize the least likely of actors, the ephemeral fog, the ignored beetle. These images are figures for the invisibility of the downtrodden, but they are actual things, too—and what an utter demonstration of sympathy, how completely unlikely that they should also be citizens of the world deserving voice and justice.

Later in this same section, the speaker praises his own clean bowels, the famously "finer than prayer" scent of his armpits, his genitals—and then, in one of those moves with which Whitman takes his reader's breath away again and again, the genitals of the wind, and even suggests that the daybreak represents a kind of gorgeous atmospheric come-shot:

Something I cannot see puts upward libidinous prongs,
Seas of bright juice suffuse heaven.

The boldness, the abiding strangeness! From whence did the nerve to write these poems arise? How did he do it?

One answer to that question has to do with the third form of the unspeakable, that which is wordless, undefined. It is the most difficult form of silence to talk about, since once a word exists for something, it does, and the quality

of being nameless, outside the realm of speech, becomes irrecoverable. Samuel Delaney tells an instructive story about this problem in one of his essays; he describes meeting a man in a Times Square porn theater, a shoe fetishist who's passionately turned on, in several wordless encounters, by the writer's sneakers. When Delaney needs to buy a new pair, he figures he might as well make the guy happy, and so he breaks their silence and asks him what *kind* of new sneakers he'd most enjoy. The questioned man is speechless, stricken; he flees; later he returns and manages to choke out only the words, "light blue." But though the desired shoes are purchased, the sexual relationship is never the same. Delaney speculates that the man's desire exists in the realm of the unsaid; it has never been brought into the light of articulation, and to do so, in this case, damages or limits or at least changes the experience.

That there were words for homosexual behavior in Whitman's day there can be no doubt. Social structures for enabling same-sex congress seem to have been a feature of life in the modern city at least since the later 18th century, when the "Molly houses" of London offered a zone of permission for transvestism. Luc Sante describes downtown Manhattan dance halls where men could dance with "fairies," who were identified as men who dressed as women; Sante also points to a 19th-century pamphlet which takes as its project the publication of the locations of particular spots of diverse sexual practice in New York City—so that those informed of, say, the precise address of a bordello featuring willing boys can take special care to avoid this hazard! Perhaps the most trenchant evidence comes from Rufus Griswold's shocking review of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* in the *New York Criterion*:

In our allusion to this book, we have found it impossible to convey any, even the most faint idea of style and contents, and of our disgust and detestation of them, without employing language that cannot be pleasing to ears polite; but it does seem that someone should, under circumstances like these, undertake a most disagreeable, yet stern duty. The records of crime show that many monsters have gone on in impunity, because the exposure of their vileness was attended with too great indelicacy. *Peccatum illud horribile, inter Christianos non nominandum.*

It seems impossible to know, now, if Griswold truly meant to condemn the book or to advertise it to a knowing clientele. Surely placing his specific identification of Whitman's particular form of "vileness" in Latin (the quotation, from Blackstone's 1811 *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, is intended to indicate the crime of sodomy as that sin which cannot be named among Christians) limited the audience for the review severely. What does it mean, to be warned away from what must remain nameless? Not much, on the one hand,

and on the other, a great deal indeed. To be told that one must never commit the sin that is so great it can't be spoken—isn't that necessarily an invitation as well as a warning, an act of pointing to a possibility, just like Sante's self-contradictory guidebook?

But it bears noting that none of these examples posits a homosexual identity. Instead, as historians have instructed us, they reveal instances of same-sex behavior. The men who danced with fairies don't seem to have thought of themselves as fairies. And was one only a fairy when dressed as such, in makeup and some semblance of drag? The archives of the 19th century bulge with evidence of intense same-sex friendship, passionate attachment; does sex lie right beneath that, like those buds folded beneath speech?

I suppose the answer isn't really recoverable. But I can't help but think of a man I met in north central Vermont, in the 1980s. A native Vermonter from a rural town, he was in his seventies then, and newly and proudly out; gay political associations in Vermont accepted him as a delightful sort of mascot. He told a story which is instructive, placed beside Delaney's anecdote of speechlessness. Near the town of his boyhood was a river that featured one of those delightful Vermont swimming holes, and beyond this inviting spot were wooded islands and further streams. All summer, the place was the favorite of adolescent boys, and it was simply understood that they would pair off, wander to some more private spot, and enjoy one another's bodies. This behavior was neither named nor spoken of, and it clearly did not constitute an identity; the teller of the tale did not come out when he joined in this idyllic scene—did not, in fact, come out for sixty more years! Vermont, in the 1920s, was arguably a 19th-century place, and I wonder if this man's experience might not be as close as we could come to a sense of what same-sex practice might have been like before the coining of terms for it, before the medicalization of sexuality, the rigid enforcing and policing of the newly nominalized heterosexual norm. It is an erotic landscape that seems to appear in the paintings and photographs of Thomas Eakins, and certainly in the poems of Whitman—a free-floating, unfettered homosexual praxis that's both amative and adhesive at once.

But still not an identity. The boys didn't think they were queers, and presumably they mostly didn't go on having sex with men; that was not an available position for them, just as it wasn't supposed to be such for Whitman. His poems suggest an erotic life that is centered on encounters (often outdoors, but not always) with working-class guys and with younger men; he is at some pains to construct this as an experience of the love of equals, because this notion, a same-sex relation founded on equality (and not the Greek model of transmission of knowledge from older man to younger, or the Renaissance model of boy-loving, or the later *fin de siècle* notion of the sensitive esthete enjoying the

more animal sexuality of working-class youths, as in Oscar Wilde's "feasting with panthers") is entirely anomalous. Its genesis can be found in the new cities, where one can leave the fixed social and familial roles of rural life and decide who you want to be today. Does this new sense of freedom inform Whitman's slippery use of "you"—and his free-ranging, interpenetrating, omnipresent "I"? The new subject isn't simply a farmer, a son, a father, a teacher, a soldier: the citizen of the new world comes and goes, participates, observes, empathizes, slips into new relations and positions with a freedom the past couldn't have foreseen. How characteristic of its century this new freedom is—like the railroad, it moves you from one place to another swiftly; like the photograph, it allows you to travel in time. One of the more benign projects of industrialism, finally, is the liberation of subjectivity from the bonds of limited roles.

Which is all a way of saying that Whitman inscribes his sexuality on the frontier of modernity; he is writing into being—perhaps particularly in the "Calamus" poems, with their frank male-to-male loving, their assumption of equality on the part of the lovers—a new situation. He does not know how to proceed—he has no path—but he does it anyway. My guess is that he couldn't have written "Calamus," or the boldly homoerotic portions of the 1855 *Leaves*, even ten years later, as the advent of psychology increasingly led to a public perception of the normative, and imagery of the sacred family became the object of Victorian romance. As a category of identity—sodomite, invert, sick person, debauchee, pervert, Uranian—begins to emerge, so the poems with their claims of a loving, healthy, freely embraced same-sex desire become unwritable, paradoxically, just as new language of homosexual identity begins to appear. Unwritable and, it would seem from Whitman's later remarks, and some of his revisions (his re-markings), barely defensible.

Thus comes about more than a century of remarkably agitated, confused, and fascinating writing about the subject of Whitman and sex, a dialogue (or shouting match) which seems to have begun with Griswold's review, published mere months after the *Leaves*' first edition. And which Whitman himself furthered, in his attempt to both say what he felt and still reach wide audiences, gaining the love and admiration of his nation. The history of the reading of Whitman's sexuality is a drama in itself, and it shows no real sign of letting up. Depending on your critic, Whitman's an onanist who never touched anybody, or a bisexual fantasist who might have had a *little* queer sex, or a trailblazing sexual pioneer.

What is not at all vague are the needs which Whitman's poems met, the powerful voice they gave or loaned to an emergent class of men who had felt themselves isolated and voiceless. The most moving example of this I've seen is Edward Carpenter's book *Days with Walt Whitman, with Some Notes on His Life and Work*, published in London in 1906. Carpenter describes his powerful

impression of his first encounters with his hero in limpid prose: "I was aware of a certain radiant power in him, a large benign effluence and inclusiveness, as of the sun, which filled out the place where he was—yet with something of reserve and sadness in it too, and a sense of remoteness and inaccessibility."

Carpenter goes on to chronicle a subsequent visit, and then to generalize about Whitman's work, suggesting that the poet extends his affections to women and men alike, circling repeatedly around this theme, then asserting the physicality of these affections, the poet's bodily embrace, and finally coming out with it, late in his text: these affections are expressed sexually as well. It is a thrilling rhetorical performance; Carpenter, clearly, wishes to signal to the flock; he wants the like-minded to find in Whitman their experience reflected, their voices—their soundless voices—carried.

I read the first edition of Carpenter's book in the library at Rice University, a beautiful old green volume. Penciled in the front was an unreadable name in a man's hand; stenciled at the bottom of the page was the name and address of a long-ago bookshop in L.A. What had been this book's odyssey? It had to have been passed hand to hand from one man like me to another, in a more or less underground transmission; they had to have known of Carpenter's pioneering work, and perhaps of the courage he took from Whitman. Would any of them have known, later on in the life of this gentle and startling little book, that Carpenter and his partner of forty years, George Will, were buried together, in 1928, in Surrey? Or, that they'd become the models for the lovers in E.M. Forster's *Maurice*, a book not published until 1971?

I do not wish to suggest that the contents of the unspeakable, for Whitman, are entirely sexual, for there is more deep down in his pockets than what obviously resides there. Carpenter and his readers were reaching for signposts of a gay identity when such a thing barely existed, but Whitman is ultimately a queer poet in the deepest sense of the word: he destabilizes, he unsettles, he removes the doors from their jambs. There is an uncanniness in "Song of Myself" and the other great poems of the 1850s that, for all his vaunted certainty, Whitman wishes to underscore. Again and again, he points us toward what, it seems, *must* remain folded in the buds beneath speech, since it cannot be brought to the surface. Here are two instances:

There is that in me—I do not know what it is—but I know it is in me . . .

I do not know it—it is without a name—it is a word unsaid,
It is not in any dictionary, utterance, symbol.

("Song of Myself," section 50)

We understand then do we not?
What I promis'd without mentioning it, have you not accepted?
What the study could not teach—what the preaching could not accomplish is
accomplish'd, is it not?

(“Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” section 8)

In more or less a lifetime of reading these poems, I've never been able to encounter those last lines without a bit of a shiver. How does he know this? How does he understand what has happened to me as I've read his poem—how, just as he predicted, “It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not, / I am with you . . .” He has written his audience into being in this poem, and explained to us something crucial—something unsayable—about the transmission taking place. Surely sexuality is part of this transmission—the fact of the speaker's longing, connected body, its material and sensual presence in the world from which he addresses us—but as sexuality is inclined to be, it is and is not the entire story. As in section 29, the exchange is deeply eroticized, but it points on past the simple interaction of bodies toward a larger understanding of the structure of the real. Sex colors everything, shapes every aspect of our perception, and as the erotics of exchange, of faith, of writing itself, it defines the ethos of participation. Is desire itself a lust toward the unsayable? Something about Whitman's outsiderness—in the sense of his participation in what cannot be said, his huge pressurizing awareness of all that resists language—thrums in these passages; that presence, felt and almost-named, makes these poems as alive as the hour they were written. For all their vast claims, there is a silence at their center. He's a genius to use form to point toward this necessary silence, but a further kind of genius—one marked by a nearly unthinkable nerve—is at work in these passages too, where the poem resolutely addresses itself to the underside of speech, our common human possession: untranslatable perception, unvoiced longing, and what glimmers at the edges of knowledge—all we do not know.

Copyright of Virginia Quarterly Review is the property of Virginia Quarterly Review and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.