

**“HOT LITTLE PROPHETS”:
READING, MYSTICISM, AND WALT WHITMAN’S DISCIPLES**

A Dissertation

by

STEVEN JAY MARSDEN

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2004

Major Subject: English

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ABSTRACT

“Hot Little Prophets”: Reading, Mysticism, and

Walt Whitman’s Disciples. (August 2004)

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While scholarship on Walt Whitman has often dealt with “mysticism” as an important element of his writings and worldview, few critics have acknowledged the importance of Whitman’s disciples in the development of the idea of secular comparative mysticism. While critics have often speculated about the religion Whitman attempted to inculcate, they have too often ignored the secularized spirituality that the poet’s early readers developed in response to his poems. While critics have postulated that Whitman intended to revolutionize the consciousness of his readers, they have largely ignored the cases where this kind of response demonstrably occurred.

“Hot Little Prophets” examines three of Walt Whitman’s most enthusiastic early readers and disciples, Anne Gilchrist, Richard Maurice Bucke, and Edward Carpenter. This dissertation shows how these disciples responded to the unprecedented reader-engagement techniques employed in Whitman’s Leaves of Grass, and how their readings of that book (and of Whitman himself) provided them with new models of identity,

politics, and sexuality, new focuses of desire, and new ways in which to interpret their own lives and experiences.

This historicized reader-response approach, informed by a contextualist understanding of mystical experience, provides an opportunity to study how meaning is created through the interaction of Whitman's poems and his readers' expectations, backgrounds, needs, and desires. It also shows how what has come to be called mystical experience occurs in a human context: how it is formed out of a complicated interaction of text and interpretation (sometimes misinterpretation), experience and desire, context and stimulus.

The dissertation considers each disciple's education and upbringing, intellectual influences, habits of reading, and early religious attitudes as a foreground to the study of his or her initial reaction to Leaves of Grass. Separate chapters on the three figures investigate the crises of identity, vocation, faith, and sexuality that informed their reactions. Each chapter traces the development of the disciples' understanding of Whitman's poetry over a span of years, focusing especially on the complex role mystical experience played in their interpretation of Whitman and his works.

For the Reader.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the support of many people. I'd like to thank Jimmie Killingsworth for keeping me at it and letting me follow it out, William Bedford Clark for teaching me the value of a comma, Jerome Loving for providing his valuable and considered judgment, and Janet McCann for asking the right questions. Thanks also to Michael Hand, for asking some difficult ones. Finally, I'd like to thank Laura Osborne for being around.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Miracle is simply the religious name for event. Every event, even the most natural and usual, becomes a miracle, as soon as the religious view of it can be dominant. To me all is miracle. In your sense the inexpressible and strange is miracle, in mine it is no miracle.

The more religious you are, the more you see miracle everywhere.

– Friederich Schleiermacher, On Religion

Whoever you are, now I place my hand upon you, that you be my poem.

– Walt Whitman, “To You”

Since the beginning of what we might call professional Whitman studies, critics have not known quite what to make of those who preceded them, those admirers and followers who for a variety of reasons were drawn to Whitman in his last years. I mean in particular those for whom Whitman’s works and presence were matters of vital religious or spiritual import, who came to believe that Whitman was as much prophet as poet.

This dissertation follows the style and format of the MLA Handbook.

These readers had not studied Leaves of Grass as a detached object of critical contemplation, but, influenced by Whitman's own complex rhetoric of reading—a rhetoric derived from, but perhaps richer than Ralph Waldo Emerson's own Gnostic theory of response—had attempted to put it to work as a force in their own experience. They had used it, taken it seriously, and attempted to follow its suggestions and dictates. Though they all saw the book according to their own lights, they also changed as they thought it prescribed them to change. Among them were two writers who would prove instrumental in the creation and popularization of the idea of comparative mysticism itself and the basic assumptions and methods of reading that made it possible, Richard Maurice Bucke and Edward Carpenter.

These two men came from very different backgrounds. Bucke was a medical doctor and financial speculator, a materialist involved in the development of late nineteenth-century depth psychology, a warden of the insane who was more than usually cognizant that what we called sanity was “a matter of fashion.” Carpenter was a gay former Anglican priest seeking a new vocation. A socialist radical and reformer educated in the liberal Christianity of his day, Carpenter subsequently became involved in the intellectual currents that fueled the study of Eastern religion and comparative mythology in England. Despite their differences, both modeled their lives and pursuits after their own vision of Whitman, and developed between them an understanding of Whitman's message that they could largely agree on. An earlier disciple, Anne Gilchrist, brought to bear on Whitman's text a sophisticated understanding of the science of her day, an impassioned heart, a desire for spiritual progress as strong and less cautiously expressed

than her desire for the social progress of her gender, and an eloquence that made her one of Whitman's most important early champions.

These three were not alone in their reading of Whitman's writings as a religious force—Horace Traubel, socialist agitator, editor, and Whitman's most obsessive biographer, frequent companion in his last years, reported a mystical experience he interpreted with Whitman's poetry, as did J. W. Wallace and some of the other members of the "Eagle Street College" of Bolton, England, who formed the closest thing to a "church of Whitman," a sort of radical debate society in which Whitman's works were a central point of discussion.¹ In his seminal study of the human religious impulse, Varieties of Religious Experience, William James treated these disciples as the core of a new religion, which he called "Whitmanism." He wrote that

many persons to-day regard Walt Whitman as the restorer of the eternal natural religion. He has infected them with his own love of comrades, with his own gladness that he and they exist. Societies are actually formed for his cult; a periodical organ exists for its propagation, in which the lines of orthodoxy and heterodoxy are already beginning to be drawn; hymns are written by others in his peculiar prosody; and he is even explicitly compared with the founder of the Christian religion, not altogether to the advantage of the latter. (The Varieties of Religious Experience 84)

James used many of their experiences and theories to help him develop his own project of isolating the root of human spirituality from the structures of institutional power, and

¹ Recently the subject of Harry Cocks' excellent article "Calamus at Bolton."

relocating it in the experience of individual men and women. James had good cause to use the disciples in his study and good cause to regard them as a kind of proto-religion. For this handful of early readers, Leaves of Grass was more than a remarkable work of poetry: it was a dynamic and transformative force with which they changed their lives, developed moral and ethical codes, and refigured their identities and their relationship with nature, man, and the universe. In their readings of Leaves of Grass these readers developed a structure, a method, and a habit of mind with which to read and give meaning to their own experiences—experiences of nature, friendship, and love, as well as those rarer and more difficult to pin down experiences that we might classify as mystical.

Disciples and Critics

The work of these early writers has often been banished to the critical hinterlands by later scholars who felt themselves to be competing with the enthusiasts for the critical image of the poet. Caught up in the effort to “rescue” Whitman from those who idolized him, even those critics with the most to learn from their forerunners have largely ignored their work. Often those who have been most sympathetic to mystical or religious readings of Whitman have failed to take the disciples into account, thereby ignoring cases that might prove to be the most promising evidence for their own theses. A close attention to the lives, readings, and works of Whitman’s disciples, however, unsettles many of the more common critical assumptions scholars have brought to Whitman’s mysticism.

Since Bliss Perry (who himself considered Whitman a mystic) labeled the disciples “hot little prophets,” most critics have kept a cautious distance from the work of the early Whitmanites. The consensus seems to be that the early followers were useful in keeping Whitman’s reputation alive during the period of critical disinterest that followed quickly on his death, but little else. The work of many of Whitman’s academic critics in the 1940’s-1960’s, particularly those who remembered the heated defenses of Whitman’s reputation and the jealous (and zealous) squabbling over elements of his literary reputation in The Conservator,² tended to play up the discontinuity between the enthusiasts and later critics.³

One of the best general treatments of the disciples, Charles B. Willard’s 1950 Whitman’s American Fame, presents most of the facts about Whitman’s early following. The book is marred, however, by Willard’s dismissive attitude towards his subjects. Few pages pass without a condescending sneer, and he speaks with real disdain about the “the inanities which make ludicrous the events of the years just before and after the poet’s death” (34) including what he calls William Sloane Kennedy’s “ridiculous and blasphemous professions of faith” in Whitman’s status as a prophet. Willard clearly regards his subjects as bumbling credulous fanatics, fooled by what he calls Whitman’s “sense of the theatrical” (37). Behind the sneer at their hero-worship and unconventional religious views is more than a hint of the professional snobbery of an established critic looking down with some embarrassment at what he considered

² Perry himself had been called out in the pages of The Conservator to present his sources for some passages in the first edition of his Walt Whitman, which he refused to do (Perry, Walt Whitman xviii).

³ A good summary of the struggle to define Whitman is Killingsworth’s The Growth of Leaves of Grass, which treats many of these issues.

enthusiastic amateurs. While acknowledging that this group “instituted practically all phases of Whitman study,” Willard notes that these have now been “developed by more competent professional workers” (38). It is hard to ignore the note of relief in his voice when Willard states at the beginning of his chapter on “The Whitman Enthusiasts” that since the last of Whitman’s disciples are gone “the discussion” of the now-canonized poet “is almost entirely on the plane of sane and traditional literary criticism” (32).

The note of disapproval is still evident in Gay Wilson Allen’s characterization in Walt Whitman as Man, Poet, and Legend, when he writes that the “cults” formed in Whitman’s name “gained him ‘disciples and admirers’” but notes that these followers were apt to be “emotionally unstable, of uncertain sexual psychology, or subliterate minds who applied too literally Whitman’s injunctions against literary conventions” (107-108). While conceding that “not all the adherents were ‘crack pots,’” he notes that “most were at least slightly eccentric” (108). Allen in 1961 still seems a little protective of the newly demythologized and critically acceptable image of Whitman as thoroughly human poet. He does not wish to return to a time when defending Whitman was itself “regarded by the arbiters of literary taste as eccentric conduct” (108). In a larger sense, the rejection of Bucke and the others was part of the Modernist struggle in 1940’s and beyond that paralleled the New Critical refocus on texts, and the attempt to jettison the vague and mythical ideas that had emerged out of the work of Bucke and other early popularizers. Criticism had come, as Allen put it, “to concern itself with Whitman’s poetry rather than with the idea of Whitman as it came down in diluted form from the nineteenth century” (153).

Some of the most prominent ideas and projects of the disciples, however, have been regarded sympathetically by later critics. In particular, arguments for Whitman's canonization as a mystical writer have continued, comparing Whitman's works to those of authors from major religious traditions. In the same volume in which he expresses relief at the liberation of Whitman studies from the shadow of Whitman created by the disciples, Gay Wilson Allen endorses Malcolm Cowley's mystical reading of Whitman (presented in his introduction to the reprint of the 1855 edition) as "the most interesting and perhaps fruitful re-evaluation of the present century" (151). Allen's support of the reorientation efforts of Cowley, V. K. Chari, and others is still largely based on a defense of Whitman's image. Their efforts, he writes, "need not be a return to the image the 'hot little prophets' held of Whitman as a 'prophet' and might help prevent his being used as a propaganda symbol or slogan for every sort of 'ism'" (158). Cowley's account of Whitman's mysticism is held to be ideologically acceptable because it is not associated with any current "cause." The disciples themselves had been politically active in a wide variety of progressive and radical causes, and their understanding of Whitman's status as mystic and prophet never made his work lose its political and social radicalism. Scholars of Whitman since have often been placed in the situation of choosing between an image of Whitman as a mystical writer (somehow universalized and taken out of his political context) or a poet who attempted a political and sexual reform of his reader. A re-examination of the disciples and their work challenges and closes the distinction between the spiritual, the sexual, and the political in Whitman's oeuvre.

Cowley contends that “Song of Myself” should be judged not according to its immediate literary context but apart, “as one of the great inspired (and sometimes insane) prophetic works that have appeared at intervals in the Western World” (Cowley xi). This is a part of the recontextualization that Bucke, Carpenter, and Gilchrist had attempted more than fifty years before. Indeed, Cowley mentions ideas from Bucke’s Cosmic Consciousness, and calls him “the most acute of Whitman’s earliest disciples” (vii). V. K. Chari would go further in his influential comparative study Whitman in the Light of Vedantic Mysticism, citing Bucke without cavil as an authority both on Whitman and on “cosmic consciousness.”

The study of Whitman’s mysticism has often been obscured by an inaccurate and reductive model of how mystical inspiration and experience works. Bucke and Carpenter may have played a part in initiating this model, but as we shall see, it is belied by a close study of their own experiences. Their theories as they emerge in the course of their works often hint at a more complex relationship between reading, study, and inspiration. The early disciples wished (as did the poet himself) to downplay Whitman’s relationship to Emerson and other proximate sources, and emphasize the source of the poet’s work in his own authentic spiritual experience. The result was a model of experience that emphasized a sudden, unprepared-for onset of knowledge unknown from any other source.

The hunt for biographical evidence of this sort of sudden enlightenment, begun by Bucke, has proven a difficult endeavor. Much of this difficulty results from the criteria critics have brought to the problem. Since Whitman’s journals, fragments, and

autobiographical writings are not notably more—or less—personal than his poems, both supporters and would-be disputers of claims about Whitman’s mysticism usually have had to resort to some kind of preconceived notion of what a “mystic” should believe, or how one should act, almost always taken from some more ensconced mystical tradition. While Bucke’s Cosmic Consciousness (and other early works by the first generation of Whitman enthusiasts) searches Whitman’s behavior and appearance for signs of sanctity (and sometimes projects these on him), Richard Chase’s refutation of Whitman’s mysticism judges his character in comparison to other, more acceptable (at least to Chase) “mystics”:

As we have noted before there is no evidence about Whitman which encourages us to think him capable of any stern, overwhelming, or intense spiritual experience. Except in his poems,⁴ his mind and emotions were not grasping, imperious and rapid like those of St. Paul or Rousseau, nor capable of the disciplined masochism of the Oriental mystic. (Chase 51)

Likewise, T. R. Rajasekharaiah, another critic of the “revelation” thesis, rightly points to Whitman’s early lecture-writing and wide reading as disproving Bucke’s thesis of sudden and unprepared onset, but also finds (as have many others) that the sexual elements in Whitman’s writing are incompatible with the concerns of a genuinely inspired mystic (Rajasekharaiah 24-31). Whitman scholars who have attempted to place his work in a mystical context have too often come to Whitman’s life and work with

⁴ Anyone who has read Whitman’s letters together with his poetry has likely been struck by the apparent contrast between the practical, prosaic, slightly fussy Whitman present in the former and the spiritual pioneer presented in the latter. Even Bucke, who was familiar with both sides of the poet will note this, though he will counter it with a theory of the “duality” of personality.

models of mysticism that have reified theological or ideological positions as essential to some schematized “real mysticism.” These early frameworks for understanding mystical experience often stemmed from an ecumenical purpose, enabling the appropriation of texts and the conversion of believers from other cultural and religious traditions, or served prophetic purposes, creating their own meta-religious “inner” traditions.

Sometimes these models (whose validity and usefulness are now questioned in their own disciplines) have restricted the usefulness of the readings of those literary critics who employ them. These tools have proven inadequate, concealing as much as they reveal.

One of the earliest, most cited, and most influential of studies on Whitman’s mysticism provides the best example of these difficulties. In his “‘Song of Myself’ as Inverted Mystical Experience,” James E. Miller calls Whitman’s poem a “dramatic representation” of a mystical experience, thus sidestepping the issue of Whitman’s personal experiences or lack of them, and allowing Miller to distance the text of the poem from Whitman’s mythologized image. Miller works from a normative model of the progress of a typical mystic presented in Evelyn Underhill’s 1911 Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness. Working from a wide if selective collection of mystics, but basing her normative schema largely on neo-Platonic-influenced Christian assumptions, Underhill had synthesized a tremendously influential schema for the “Mystic Way.” The stages she offers correspond roughly to those of developed by the 16th Century Spanish Mystic St. John of the Cross

in his prose works on the subject.⁵ Underhill's scheme continues stage by stage (in her chapter titles) from "Awakening," through "Purification," "Illumination," "Voices and Visions," "Introversion," "Ecstasy," "The Dark Night of the Soul," and concludes in "The Unitive Life." While for Underhill, these stages were a process that would likely occur over many years, Miller proposes that in Whitman's "dramatic representation" of mystical experience, all of them are represented together as following immediately each on the heels of the previous.

Miller's reading is sometimes very convincing, though at other times his model forces him to make questionable critical moves—the chief of them to decide that Whitman's emphasis on the body and acceptance of the world disqualifies him from proper mysticism—and must make his practice "inverted." What is finally proven is that Whitman doesn't fit well into Underhill's framework because of the predominately Catholic (if somewhat unorthodox), monastic, and ascetic mystical sources that provided her core examples. Other studies since have found more congenial grounds of comparison among the spiritual practices, doctrines, and experiences represented in the writings of other religious traditions. Models derived from Quakerism, Sufism, Zen, along with multiple varieties of Indian mysticism and religious practice, have all been brought to bear on Whitman, sometimes with quite convincing results.

Sometimes even the most unusual parallels have proven unusually fruitful, as in George Hutchinson's The Ecstatic Whitman: Literary Shamanism and the Crisis of

⁵ Underhill's work not only fueled a popular reawakening of practical interest in mysticism among the British and American public, but also proved tremendously influential on the spiritual beliefs and poetic practice of a young T. S. Eliot.

Union. Hutchinson uses the anthropological model of shamanism to explain Whitman's poetry and his conception of his own career. The model of shamanism was developed largely from the study of Siberian tribal roles and expanded to general application. It includes an idea of communal performance and a role in social regeneration that ideas of strictly Christian mysticism tend to lack, and allows Hutchinson to highlight the transactional and performative nature of Whitman's ecstatic practice. Still, the model occasionally leads Hutchinson to strained readings, most notably perhaps in his coverage of Whitman's shamanic relationship with animals.

The very ease with which we may find these parallels from a bewilderingly wide range of mystical traditions should make us suspicious. Frederik Schyberg, in the midst of a wide-ranging comparison between Whitman and more widely accepted mystics, finds that:

in [Whitman's] book we can find the typical characteristics of absolutely all the various mystic doctrines. Without [his] having read them, or heard of them, they arose naturally out of his own temperament, and he has developed characteristic mystic tenets, often even more striking and paradoxical than those of his predecessors. (Schyberg 251).

Schyberg, though he works from an assumption of common "mystical temperament," cautions against false parallels, writing that "the pantheistic note characteristic of all mystic temperaments can be especially misleading and cause us to trace connecting lines where there is no real connection" (Schyberg 250). As we shall see, many of the definitions of the common elements of a "mystic" temperament includes were first

negotiated by those under Whitman's direct influence, and continued by those reacting to the universalizing, individualizing, modernizing, and synthesizing religious project of which he was a part.

In order to deal with Whitman's mysticism, it may be more valuable to look not for causes, but for effects: to shift the emphasis from Whitman's own alleged mystical experiences (which have been as closely sought, as suggestive, and as finally elusive as hard evidences of Whitman's sexual experiences), to the experiences of his early readers, which were clearly influenced by their readings of Leaves of Grass.

Reevaluation

Safely distanced from early battles about Whitman's identity, some Whitman critics have begun to pay more sympathetic attention to the early disciples. Carmen Sarracino's "Redrawing Whitman's Circle" has called for a critical re-evaluation of the work of Whitman's disciples. As a balm to those who have balked at the hero-worship that the disciples displayed, he offers as a model the master-disciple or guru-student relationships more common in Eastern spiritual traditions. Artem Lozynsky's publication in the late 1970s of Bucke's letters to Whitman has provided scholars with invaluable, if under-used material. Sound biographies of Richard Maurice Bucke and Anne Gilchrist have appeared in the last ten years. Marion Walker Alcaro's Walt Whitman's Mrs. G. shows Gilchrist as a woman worthy of study in her own right, while Peter Rechnittzer's biography of Bucke gathers together in a readable form the disparate

parts of a fascinating life.⁶ Meanwhile, the Bolton Whitmanites and Edward Carpenter have provided fertile ground for scholarship focusing on the history of sexuality and radical politics in Britain.⁷

However, these figures may prove most valuable in studying Whitman's religion. So far, they have been underused in that area. David Kuebrich argues in Minor Prophecy, his attempt to recreate what he calls "Walt Whitman's American religion," that Whitman's disciples "deserve a more sympathetic evaluation" and notes that they "most clearly perceived the nature and purpose of the poet's labors," but claims that their writings were "insufficiently exegetical" (2). He largely ignores the exegeses that they did make. Particularly conspicuous by its absence is a significant mention of Bucke's work on Whitman, which often anticipates Kuebrich's own argument that Whitman's spirituality is "a special transhistorical mode of consciousness that gives rise to certain recurring religious values and beliefs" (3). Kuebrich's reconstruction of the religion that he thinks Whitman intended to inspire is hampered by its lack of focus on the religion that Whitman did inspire.

The further we examine the disciples and their output: letters, recorded conversations, books on Whitman and on other topics, the more we must see that these disciples were, in their way, remarkably good readers of Whitman. If their work could be (and largely has been) neglected by most modern academic critics, it is because the

⁶ Rechnittzer is a Canadian medical doctor, and his 1994 biography, R. M. Bucke: Journey to Cosmic Consciousness, written outside the influence of Whitman scholarship, like Shortt's 1986 study of Bucke's medical and psychiatric practice, Victorian Lunacy: Richard M. Bucke and the Practice of Late Nineteenth-Century Psychiatry, has received little notice.

⁷ See Harry Cocks' 2001 "Calamus at Bolton," Paul Salvesson's 1984 "Loving Comrades: Lancashire's Links to Walt Whitman," and Andrew Elfenbein's article on "Whitman and the English Clerisy."

two groups read Whitman for radically different purposes, and with very different assumptions and methods.

The account of reading I propose to give will deal not only with the needs, drives, and intellectual and religious backgrounds of the readers. It will also deal with their technique. As in the reading techniques used by mystic orders within the Catholic Church, or of some groups of Jewish Kabbalists, the reading practices of some of Whitman's disciples weren't intended to help them understand Whitman's poems as objects of detached critical attention. Instead, the aim was incorporation, intuition, or transformation. Their approach necessitated a change of the self or one's experience of or relationship to the world, by concentration on and careful application of Whitman's poetry. If the disciples seem to have read Leaves of Grass in the middle of personal crises, we must remember that Whitman himself represented his poems as navigational aids to those "ships puzzled at sea." The disciples' strengths as readers of Whitman may lay precisely in those characteristics—passion, partiality, need, identification, and personal application of Whitman's words—which disqualify them as competent objective critics of a modern stripe. The disciples are not so much "subliterary minds," as Allen would have it, as "unliterary minds" who took Whitman very nearly as he intended to be taken—not as a literary figure but as a prophet. The purpose of the reading methods the disciples developed was not critical knowledge, but personal change.

And it is in the study of the disciples as readers, interpreters, and mystics in their own right that we may find much of value. Of course, no one expects modern critics to

accept the beliefs of these early writers at face value. The more excessive of Bucke's attempts at myth making, for example, have been largely demolished by generations of less-biased and more sober-minded biographers. But what led Bucke to make those unrealistic pronouncements should be of vital interest to Whitman scholars today. If his methods are not critical, they still may lead us to something very interesting: a particular mix of experience and reading method that leads to an impassioned and mystical reading of Whitman's poems. Critics interested in reception must take into account the possibility that some of our most cherished (and often most useful) modern critical assumptions act as a kind of bar between us and certain ways of appreciating and participating in Whitman's poetry.

In order to study the particular mysticism of Whitman's poems, particularly as it pertains to his readers, we will need a model both of reading and of mysticism that allows us to focus on the particulars of the interaction between reading methods, writings, and experience. We may find what we need in recent developments in the study of comparative mysticism, combined with elements from reader-response literary criticism.

Mysticism and Method

Early writings on mysticism were too often informed by assumptions about the unanimity and ineffability of mystical experience, and about its relationship to language and culture, that discouraged close examination of the historical, biographical, and methodological context of that experience.

Early writers on comparative mysticism, including Bucke, William James, Evelyn Underhill, and Aldous Huxley, have been called “perennialists.” The central assumption of their work is that behind the apparent diversity of world religion there lies a more or less common core of experience, though they differ in their beliefs whether or not that experience is an authentic intuition of some transcendental reality and what that reality might be. These authors write from different positions, but tend to share certain broadly similar ways of thinking about the relationship between mystical experience, previous belief, and language. Following a model that might be called post-romantic, perennialists tend to posit a kind of transcendental experience that is both ineffable and essentially the same regardless of cultural and individual differences. Underneath the patina of dogma and theology, they hold, there is a single experience, which, though differently interpreted, is the real heart of significant human religious experience.⁸ Often participating in Romantic assumptions about the primacy of individual experience and intuition, they tend to devalue everything but the moment of experience itself. These writers, when reading “mystical” texts, often focus on the hunt for descriptions of experience that can be classified or evaluated. Even in these descriptions, they often disregard elements that they think belongs to the province of belief, dogma, or cultural background rather than individual experience.

⁸ Later and more philosophically sophisticated perennialists, like W. T. Stace, often divided mysticism into two or three basic types, Stace’s scheme includes both “extrovertive” and “introvertive” mysticism, to differ between the structures of experiences that emphasized a higher unity apprehended in the exterior world and those which dealt with a dissolution of self, a “transcendence of the duality of subject and object” (*Mysticism and Philosophy* 105).

The perennialist account of mystical experience has also tended to treat mystical literature as though its purpose were primarily descriptive, and to emphasize a more or less radical discontinuity between an ineffable experience (or an ineffable object of experience) and the language that attempts more or less futilely to describe it. Likewise, a sharp distinction has often been made between the mystical experience itself and the ideas about it. It has been common to write of mystical experience as if it were universal, unconditioned, and unaffected at the moment of experience by the language, beliefs, and behavior in the context out of which it developed.

Since the early 1970's, however, a loosely-affiliated group of scholars, publishing in a series of essay collections edited by Steven Katz, have proposed a theoretical shift that changes the focus of study and questions many of the assumptions and ideological commitments of earlier studies.⁹ This group, called variously the "contextualist" or "constructivist" camp, tends to emphasize the role that specific language use, belief, and tradition play in provoking and shaping the character of mystical experience.

While earlier scholars had often held that mystical experience was everywhere and always much the same and that variations in the reports were due to after-the-fact projections of cultural baggage onto what would have been a "pure" experience,¹⁰ Katz and the other authors in his volumes propose a more complex view of the situation, holding that language and cultural ideals are a factor before experience as much as after,

⁹ See Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis, Mysticism and Language, Mysticism and Religious Tradition, and Mysticism and Sacred Texts.

¹⁰ We shall see, of course, that the seeds of this debate are already present in Bucke's readings of Whitman and others possessing "cosmic consciousness."

and that these elements, often de-emphasized by perennialist scholars, may actually be instrumental in making experience possible or shaping its nature as felt by the mystic.¹¹ While the underlying assumption behind Katz's position—that there are no completely unmediated or direct experiences—has been challenged by Robert Forman in a series of counterpoint books reasserting a kind of chastened perennialism focusing on the possibility of PCE or “pure consciousness experience,” the point has been made. The PCE theory, regardless of its merits, only applies to a small portion of what earlier authors would have labeled as universal mystical experience. Contextualist criticism has been a useful corrective to a kind of scholarship and a kind of reading that tended for a variety of ideological or ecumenical reasons to ignore or minimize differences between traditions and individual mystics in favor of unifying elements.¹²

One such difference that we must take into account is “the initial and generating problems” of both the tradition, and I would add, the individual mystic. As Katz writes in “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism”:

The Sufi and Christian mystic begin with the ‘problems’ of finitude, sin, and distance from God, while the Buddhist begins with the problem of suffering and anitya or impermanence and, again, the Taoist starts from a positive appreciation of the self and world and seeks to protract spiritual life by the victory of the yang over the yen. (62)

“The respective ‘generating’ problems at the heart of each tradition,” Katz concludes:

¹¹ See in particular Katz's introductory article in Mysticism and Language.

¹² Katz takes the label “perennialist” from Aldous Huxley's The Perennial Philosophy, which attempts to find a common doctrine and experiential core that form a kind of hidden tradition inside of and inspiring all the major religions.

suggest their respective alternative answers involving as they do, differing mental and epistemological constructs, ontological commitments, and metaphysical superstructures which order experience in differing ways. The mind can be seen to contribute both the problem and the means of its overcoming: it defines the origin, the way, and the goal, shaping experience accordingly. (62)

The generating problems that Whitman's early readers brought to his poems are many, and sometimes substantially different from what other devotees of mystical traditions were seeking. Chief among the problems of the disciples were alienation from and disillusion with traditional religion. They desired a spirituality that matched the scientific and intellectual discourses of the day. They longed for a common ground beyond social barriers (Whitman's followers were almost all progressive or radical in politics). They felt themselves unable to freely express deeply held emotion. Most felt that the dualities inherent in traditional religion—virtue and sin, good and evil, reward and punishment—did not adequately describe the human moral condition. They sought an alternative way of knowing—a way more satisfying than the rationalism then gaining ascendancy. They longed to close a gap—to do away with what they felt to be a false opposition between the physical and spiritual, between the human and divine. Whitman's writing, like much of Emerson's rhetoric in "The American Scholar" address, is intended to deal with the problem of being born late. Many of Whitman's spiritual promises presume and work to correct a sense of inferiority and alienation among his readers. The contemporary readers he addresses may feel inferior to and less authentic than the great minds of former generations. They may feel alienated from the source of the "classics" of

literature and religion. His readers, often frustrated by religious scriptures that conflicted with their social and ethical ideas, chose instead of jettisoning what they admired in those scriptures, to attempt to find in their own experience the spiritual realities that had produced them. While many of Whitman's techniques may prove to be similar to those employed in other mystical traditions, the particular personal and societal problems that his flavor of mysticism was designed to remedy are products of his time and society.

The most useful aspect of contextualist theory for the study of Whitman and other "mystical" writers resides in its ability to make sense of the transformative intention of many writings and language practices within mystical traditions. In "Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning," Katz argues against then-dominant ideas of ineffability and linguistic inadequacy:

Language creates, when used by the mystical adept—the guru in the training of his disciple, or the mekkubbal or Sufi in their meditative practices—the operative process through which the essential epistemic channels that permit mystical forms of knowing and being are made accessible. An indispensable part of this process is the recognition that language is multiform, that it is more than a series of nouns, more than a series of ostensive definitions, more than a correspondence theory of truth What language as employed here seeks to accomplish is to effect a transformation of awareness, thus enabling us to understand / experience that which presently transcends our understanding / experience. In this sense, such special employment of language moves us from consciousness A (ordinary awareness) to consciousness B (mystical awareness). (8)

Frederick Streng discusses this “transformative function.” Rather than describing an experience, he argues, the claims made by mystical writings often are “evocative” and “serve as a catalyst for release” (150). Streng identifies Buddhist texts as attempting to “recondition the thing-feeling mechanism of [their] readers” (160) and accomplish a “de-conditioning or re-conditioning of a person’s consciousness about oneself and the world” (164). While all mystical expression, Streng concludes, “seeks to get beyond the conventional use of concepts or everyday perceptions, the language used to express this itself has assumptions about its capacity to partially describe or evoke a trans-conceptual awareness” (166). Many of his disciples used Whitman’s writing for this kind of re-conditioning.

Another scholar, Wayne Proudfoot, has gone further. In his book Religious Experience, Proudfoot argues that the way in which mystical experiences have been described (or the ways in which description has been forbidden) “often serve . . . to constitute an experience rather than to describe, express, or analyze it. They are conditions for the identification of an experience as mystical” (125). According to this approach, “a mysterious and ineffable experience” might be created “by manipulating conditions in such a way that a subject would have no determinate label for what was happening to him, or so the object of his attention would be emptied of its ordinary meanings until it served as a placeholder” (134). These “placeholders” are names for experiences or objects of contemplation that are forbidden “all determinate labels, and thus all demystification” (132). Under this theory, when Whitman attempts to impart a feeling of the mysteriousness and importance of aspects of his worldview and experience

while refusing them definition, he creates a sort of blank place in which a reader may fit his or her own experience.

The idea that ineffability may do something more than describe something has been further argued by Ben-Ami Sharfstein (who uses Proudfoot's theories extensively). In Ineffability, Sharfstein notes the many rhetorical effects accomplished by refusals to describe an experience or entity. Early perennialist theorists tended to conflate (as Bucke had) all religious, spiritual, or biographical writings that emphasize paradox or ineffability into one category: descriptions of a universal mystical experience. Sharfstein shows that claims of ineffability can serve many purposes, and may describe experiences or entities that prove quite different. He also notes the rhetorical and practical effects of claims of ineffability:

The term ineffable is used to protect certain cherished experiences from being explained or, rather, explained away. So used, the term is a declaration that one judges other things in the light of these cherished experiences and not the opposite. The ineffable is then the experiential criterion that one refuses to judge in terms that one feels are alien to it and contradict its finality. (185)

He provides another insight that may help us understand Whitman's treatment of identity, arguing that "The ideal of the ineffable self-conscious unity is a reflection of one's conscious relationship to oneself, to the unique intimacy in plurality in which one thinks of and experiences oneself" (186). Finally, Scharfstein notes the relative nature of claims of ineffability: how some things which are ineffable in some languages or symbol

sets, or between some sets of communicators, may be expressed with relative ease by others.

As perennialist writers attempted to pare down “mysticism” to its core element, trying to strip conceptual “baggage” from an essential experience, contextualist theorists argue that the mystic’s ideas about the cause or source of an experience are an inextricable part of that experience itself. Indeed, an experience identified as “mystical” may have a wide variety of physiological, psychological, and sociological causes. For a particular sort of experience to be meaningful, an interpretative system which allows a kind of experience to be a source of privileged knowledge is necessary. Without the means of interpretation, the experiences that are classified as mystical might merely be considered anomalous or pathological.

Mystical experience and practices have often coexisted with mystical interpretations of scriptures and other texts. In his study of the word’s history, Louis Bouyer shows that, in the works of the early theologian Origen, the “mystical” experience of reading scripture—interpreting the obscure passages, looking past the word to find or construct its spirit—is at times indivisible and indistinguishable from accounts of that other sort of mystical experience: the experimental knowledge of God (50). Certainly Walt Whitman’s works frequently exploit a similar ambiguity. In those works the experience of reading and mystical experience are paralleled each other and with experiences of sex, love, and nature. The essays in Mysticism and the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture further explore the close relationship between textual exegesis and spiritual experience. In Steven Katz’s introduction to that volume, he writes

that in many traditions “The effort to understand scripture is . . . not merely a literary or intellectual exercise, but also a highly charged spiritual encounter” (15), and notes the common striving in mystical exegetical traditions to “uncover an inner meaning, an essential verity, that can only be revealed by strenuous and unusual intellectual and religious activity” (32). Whitman’s disciples certainly would have agreed with both points.

Real and Imaginary Readers

Theorists of mysticism have increasingly come to appreciate the ways in which language and conceptual structure can act not only to attempt to describe “mystical” experiences, but also to encourage them, make them possible, and help determine what they “mean” to an individual. However, they often remain relatively unsophisticated in their models of how the individual and the text might interact to make that possible. We will need more complete models in order to understand the way in which Whitman’s disciples were affected by Leaves of Grass. We may fill some of the gaps with a body of theory developed to study the interpretation of literary works.

Reader-response criticism was the work of a diverse group of critics gathered under that name, mostly working in the 1970’s and early 1980’s. This group had little in common but a broad conviction that in order to understand how a text means, a better account of the way that readers and texts interact had to be devised. These critics attempted to understand the process of reading, the interaction of the text and the self or selves of the reader in making meaning. They had to take into account the purposes of

readers, the social contexts in which he or she read, the “rules” of reading that they followed, and the background of knowledge and technique through which they viewed the text. Individual theories of reader-response often prove limiting or lead to uncomfortably broad or inflexible claims. However if we are to gain an understanding of reading sufficient to show how Whitman’s enthusiastic early readers interacted with Leaves of Grass, we will have to use the tools available.

A few theories seem to hold particular promise. Norman Holland’s psychological approach focuses on “identity themes.” These themes are habitual styles of reaction or adaptive mechanisms that can, according to Holland, be extracted from observed human behavior much in the same way as themes gesturing towards a textual unity could be extracted from a literary work. These identity themes transform the world of experience and memory, but also determine how various readers will “create from the fantasy seemingly ‘in’ the work fantasies to suit their several character structures” (“Unity Identity Text Self”126). Holland’s theory is not without its flaws. His “identity themes” are treated as invariant in adults. As he doesn’t adequately explain how contact with a text can shape habits of perception and experience, Holland’s model of reading is an unconvincingly one-way process. If we correct for these shortcomings, Holland’s theories hold many attractions for the biographer interested in reading. If Holland’s claims that these essential themes can be read from a person’s behavior might seem exaggerated, they also offer a tantalizing hope. Whitman’s early readers often reshaped the text to fit their own personalities and preoccupations. However, their own “identity themes” seem to have been shaped by an engagement with Whitman’s writings.

Despite the subjectivist extremes it is (perhaps a little unjustly) associated with, reader-response criticism remains an important tool for modeling the realization of texts. The more careful works of reader-response theory do not give unlimited latitude to the reader or wholly discard the useful notion of a text that both restrains and enables interpretative activity. Another reader response critic, Wolfgang Iser, had a more complex and satisfying theory of the text. While in Holland the text becomes a mirror-medium, almost wholly subjective, Iser respects the ability of a text to frustrate or change expectations. In Iser's theories, the rhetorical structures in the text are able to limit and guide the reader's recreation of the work. One of the focuses of Iser's work was the interaction between the role of the reader that exists as a structural feature of a text (in the same way that the image of a narrator is formed in a work), and an actual reader who would have to either assume this role (partially or wholly) or deny it. Whitman's work creates a quite detailed complex of roles for his reader, as we shall see, and the early readers of Whitman adapted to these roles or rejected them in interesting ways.

For Iser, reading works through the reader's attempts to fill in "gaps" in the text, a process by which the expectations a reader brings with him or her or develops through earlier readings are continually manipulated, foiled, and reconstructed as the process of reading continues, the text refuses assimilation, and the reader's context and circumstances change. Iser allows for re-reading, and for reading as an endless process. A study of Whitman's disciples, whose interpretations of Whitman's poetry often

changed and developed in interesting ways throughout their lives, depends upon such a process conception of how meaning is made.

The concept of “interpretative communities” is also useful in studying Whitman’s reception by his early readers. Stanley Fish focused not on texts or individual predilections in determining meaning, but on how social groups negotiated meaning together, in what he called “interpretative communities.” Fish’s claims for these communities are uncomfortably monolithic and inflexible. In his most influential works, he takes no notice of the ability of an individual to be influenced simultaneously by many interpretative communities, or the way in which elements from multiple communities may be combined in the reading practices of the individual. If we can take into account, however, the fact that interpretative communities are negotiated and formed by individuals capable of resisting and modifying their dictates, the theory is tremendously useful in studying the works of the disciples. The disciples of Whitman were keenly interested in each other’s works, and their interactions negotiated a kind of critical consensus and a fostered the development of “approved” reading methods or styles. Their letters back and forth often show them judging one another’s spiritual progress or acuity on the basis of their readings of Whitman’s poetry.

Taken as a group, the works of the reader-response critics present the critic of Whitman with a wide variety of heterogeneous but useful ideas. These are tools that might serve to help understand Whitman’s unprecedented manipulation of his readers and of the process of reading—how his poems created images of the reader as well as of the author, and encouraged his readers to project themselves into the poems and realize

their meaning for themselves. Of course, Whitman scholarship has engaged these questions before. Several critics have worked with Whitman's reader-directed rhetoric: C. Carroll Hollis, in his Language and Style in *Leaves of Grass* employs speech-act theory to deal with Whitman's questionings, commands, and direct addresses. Gayle Smith's "Reading 'Song of Myself': Assuming What Whitman Assumes" deals with the reader's "assumption" of the poet's "role." Likewise, V. K. Chari's "Whitman and the Reader" analyzes Whitman's attempts to get the reader to "realize" his poems (32). Hutchinson, in his Ecstatic Whitman, touches on Whitman's relationship with his audience when dealing with the ability of the shaman-poet to model and induce ecstasy, and Lewis Hyde, in his study of Whitman based on anthropological ideas of gift economy, The Gift, deals eloquently with the dynamics of spiritual exchange between reader and author. The most ambitious study of Whitman's conception of his audience and his formulation of his reader is Ezra Greenspan's Walt Whitman and the American Reader. Greenspan writes that the greatest hope that Whitman could allow himself, given his concept of his audience, was "a myriad of separate instances of readers going forth into the pages of Leaves of Grass, each to discover individually his or her separate identity" (Greenspan 235). It is certain of these separate instances, in their complexity, that we will study here.

The difficulty as well as the promise of this reader-response criticism lies in its conception of the reader. An Iserian approach, treating the reader's negotiation with the roles of the reader projected by the text, showing the way a reader might fill in the "gaps" in meaning that Whitman leaves open, and focusing on the complex changes in

and layers of meaning that accumulate after multiple readings, would be promising, but structurally difficult to present. To put this project into a coherent piece of writing—which would necessarily take the form of so many possibilities, suggestive vacancies, and layers stacked in such a disconnected fashion that no one could or would wade through them—would result in an end product that inspires more confusion and uncertainty than the poems by themselves at their most perplexing.

Many of Whitman's lines take on different shadings of meaning depending on how (with what assumptions, motives, and relationships to the text) the reader approaches them. These lines will support a wide (if not wild) variety of interpretation. Edward Gosse is perhaps the first to articulate this effect. He wrote in 1894 that "the critic who touches Whitman is immediately confronted with his own image stamped upon that viscid and tenacious surface. He finds, not what Whitman has to give, but what he himself has brought. And when, in quite another mood, he comes again to Whitman, he finds that other self his own stamped upon the provoking protoplasm (Perelman, Folsom, and Champion 99). We may see it now as a key element of Whitman's rhetoric and, no doubt, one of the explanations for the attraction Whitman's writing still holds for critics of widely differing critical approaches. Anyone who will read in Edwin Haviland Miller's fascinating "Mosaic of Interpretations" of the 1855 "Song of Myself" may see a portion of the range of the play of reading that Whitman's work allows.

Add to this the fact that more than one of these layers of meaning is always present to the experienced reader of Whitman, and we must conclude that it would be difficult to indicate this complexity with one critical image of a reader. Given the

complexity of the audience that Whitman addressed and the ambitious nature of his project, Whitman might not have one “implied reader” or even one “implied mystical reader.” The method and effect of his work might be better indicated by supposing several possible readers.¹³

Despite such convenient critical fictions as the mock reader, the implied reader, the virtual reader, and the ideal reader, at the end the reader-response critic can often only speak authoritatively about his or her own reading, which is granted the appearance of objectivity by generalizing that a general conception of “the reader” will respond in the way that the specific critic responded. Otherwise, the project of reader-response criticism might turn into an exercise in fiction and role-playing, and depend on the critic’s ability to pretend to read as someone he or she is not.¹⁴

To engage the poems, it would be necessary to take into account several kinds of implied reader. Each would have to be affected by Whitman the way that Whitman seemed to want to affect his reader. Someone like myself, perhaps, but with a little more faith, a little less detachment, a little more love of his or her fellow man, a stronger desire for self-transformation. Ideally, there would be little or no detachment—

Whitman’s emphasis on emotional and personal response indicates that he intends his

¹³ The term “implied reader” comes from Wolfgang Iser’s book of the same name. An implied reader is the set of roles and expectations “in” the text, a model of a reader who would act as the author intended.

¹⁴ As a writer, I have my own history of enthusiasms and disillusionments, engagements and entanglements with the Whitman and his poetry that I might use, and I have considered giving an account of it. While such an account, if it were to be complete, might do very nicely by way of an autobiography, but might also, I decided, bore and irritate even the most charitable and patient reader. I also realized early that I might not be the kind of audience Whitman seems to call for. I felt resistant to his wiles, wrapped in a modern skepticism. I did not especially love my fellow man, particularly in any of the several possible Whitmanian senses. I instinctively and nearly constantly maintained the kind of critical distance that Whitman’s writings seemed calculated to dispel. An account strictly of my reading, therefore, would not suffice for this project.

readers to be people with an emotional investment in the writings, to whom they would mean life and death. Perhaps someone from Whitman's own time, who could catch the nuances of nineteenth-century life, might be preferable—though given Whitman's often-stated longing for a posthumous audience, that might not be necessary at all. Above all, Whitman seemed to want to teach his reader a whole different way of looking at the world: the reader-response critic of Whitman needed to imagine readers who were motivated to learn and capable of learning that lesson. Finally, in order to make model readers that could help us understand the relationship between Whitman's poetry and mystical experience, we might need to make what might prove to be irresponsible assumptions about this relationship.

Fortunately, we do not have to create these readers as convenient fictions. The disciples themselves provide all that is necessary. All three of them had produced at least some criticism of Whitman as well as other documents that show the progress and nature of their readings. They often speculated in some depth on the nature of reading and of Whitman's influence on them. Their readings of other books and their writings about the questions of their day can tell us a great deal about their interests and preoccupations, their methods of reading and thinking—can hint towards something that resembles what Holland called “identity themes.” There is certainly evidence enough to see again and again how readings developed from one book, or how habits acquired from some experience, precondition the experience of the next, and how context, text, experience, and interpretation constantly interconnect. The lives and writings of Whitman's disciples also provide uniquely suggestive evidence that suggests the

complexity of the epistemic relationship between reading, belief, and the interpretation of mystical experience. Anne Gilchrist, Richard Maurice Bucke and Edward Carpenter had all been intense and perceptive readers of Whitman and all of them had produced writings that dealt with their religious or spiritual experience in relationship to reading the works of the poet.

What follows, then, are stories of reading. As any such stories must, they involve not just the writings to be read, but the personal habits and drives of the readers, their previous reading, and their social and intellectual climate. I am aware, of course, that recovering the readings of others is as much an interpretive activity as recovering my own. When I have been conscious of erring in my method, I have attempted to err on the side of completeness, and when it was possible I have let the disciples' own words (often more precise and impassioned than any paraphrase) speak for them.

These readers and their readings all have several things in common. They show a profound belief in progress not just in the scientific and social worlds but in ideas, beliefs, and religious practices. All of these disciples of Whitman believed in the need for a fundamental change in human emotions and relationships, a progressive change in religion that matched the evolution of life. More specifically, most of them had found themselves, by their scientific beliefs, social convictions, or sexual and emotional needs, alienated from the mainstream religions of their society, while still retaining the need for wonder, emotional engagement, and religious experience that romantic elements in their upbringing urged on them.

William James writes in his Varieties of Religious Experience about what he calls “The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness.” The healthy-minded, in James’s parlance, are those who are able to accept the universe as a whole as good. It seemed to James, writing in the first years of the twentieth century, that people of this temperament were developing a new religion:

[I]n the “theory of evolution” which, gathering momentum for a century, has within the past twenty-five years swept so rapidly over Europe and America, we see the ground laid for a new sort of religion of Nature which has entirely displaced Christianity from the thought of a large part of our generation. The idea of a universal evolution lends itself to a doctrine of general meliorism and progress which fits the religious needs of the healthy-minded so well that it seems almost as if it might have been created for their use. Accordingly we find “evolutionism” interpreted thus optimistically and embraced as a substitute for the religion they were born in, by a multitude of our contemporaries who have either been trained scientifically, or been fond of reading popular science, and who had already begun to be inwardly dissatisfied with what seemed to them the harshness and irrationality of the orthodox Christian scheme. (90)

James’s account of “The Religion of Healthy Mindedness” is colored by his opinion of the man he considers its prophet, Walt Whitman. That opinion is largely shaped by James’s readings of the works of Whitman’s early disciples.

These disciples all considered Whitman (as Whitman asked to be considered) as the inaugurator of a new way of looking at the world, a modern prophet (or prophet

suitable to Modernity) who could give them a transfigured faith they could live with. They may have considered him variously as a role model, a demigod, a guru, an instantiation of the absolute, or a potential lover. But above all, perhaps, they took Whitman seriously. When Whitman dropped hints about the effect of his book and the way it should be read, they attempted to follow his instructions.

A recovery and study of Whitman's disciples, and an account of the ways in which Whitman's poetry became a part of their lives serves several purposes. It aids our understanding of the ways in which words, lives, and significant experiences intermix and mingle, offering an example of the way that interpretation of a given poem might affect one's interpretation of inner states and perceptions of phenomena. It sheds light on the forces (personal, intellectual, and social) that began the study of comparative mysticism in the late nineteenth and very early twentieth centuries and uncovers some of the assumptions that inform it. It shows variations on a type of personal transformative and spiritually directed ways of reading, thinking about, feeling and incorporating texts that, while differing sharply from our current critical methods, may be in fact more in line with what Whitman intended.

An important aspect of Whitman's project was to change the terms in which great literature is to be evaluated. He wrote in Democratic Vistas about the best way to judge a book:

'The true question to ask,' says the librarian of Congress in a paper read before the Social Science Convention at New York, October, 1869, 'The true question to ask respecting a book, is, has it help'd any human soul?' This is the hint,

statement, not only of the great literatus, his book, but of every great artist. It may be that all works of art are to be first tried by their art qualities, their image-forming talent, and their dramatic, pictorial, plot-constructing, euphonious and other talents. Then, whenever claiming to be first-class works, they are to be strictly and sternly tried by their foundation in, and radiation, in the highest sense, and always indirectly, of the ethic principles, and eligibility to free, arouse, dilate. (Complete Poetry and Prose 987)

A close examination of the readings and experiences of Whitman's early disciples goes a long way towards applying these standards to Leaves of Grass.

A Précis of Chapters

In the first chapter, I will deal with Anne Gilchrist, one the most eloquent of early writers on Whitman, and one of the most emotionally involved with his work. Gilchrist's writings stand testament to one of the most remarkable relationships in literature: the one she shared with the image of Whitman projected in his books. Previous accounts of Gilchrist's life and writings have often belittled and sneered at her credulity and painted her as a comic-tragic would-be romantic heroine. The truth is more complex and more compelling. Gilchrist's reaction to Whitman's works comes out of her scientific training, her spiritual seeking, and the relationships she had formed in the past, both with books and men. That reaction, coming with the force of conversion, gives her the strength to pursue the life (and the spiritual and literary goals) she had largely laid aside to assume the role of perfect Victorian mother.

Next, I explore the life and reading of Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke, an autodidact son of a minister, for whom Whitman's works meant enlightenment and moral transformation. Bucke's ideas about "Cosmic Consciousness," which foreshadowed and influenced the comparative study of mystical experience outside of a traditional religious framework, developed alongside of and in response to his readings of Whitman and his attempts to understand his own life-altering mystical experiences. Whitman provided the catalyst by which Bucke could reconcile a positive outlook on the universe with the scientific training and skepticism towards traditional religion that he had obtained in his youth. Bucke's obsessions—with the "hidden" messages in Whitman's poetry, the explanation of mystical experience, and, later, the ciphers of Shakespeare—show an inventive and unconventional reader, propelled by a love of mystery and a need for explaining narrative.

The last study is of Whitman's most famous British disciple, Edward Carpenter. Coming across Whitman's poetry in the depths of a series of crises of identity and faith, Carpenter found in the Whitman of Leaves of Grass a role model that enabled him to lead an unconventional (and for many young British radicals and literary men, an exemplary) life dedicated to social and intellectual change. Carpenter brought an already well-developed mystical temperament nurtured on Christian Romanticism, an interest in world religion, and a temperament that made Whitman's "love of comrades" gospel into a social and personal imperative. Carpenter's reading of nature, of fellowship, of his own mystical experiences and of other mystical writings all bore Whitman's influence and changed Carpenter's understanding of the poet.

In my conclusion, I sum up the common elements in Whitman's disciples, and gesture briefly towards two other relevant cases: James William Wallace and Horace Traubel. J. W. Wallace, another disciple with mystical experiences he linked to Whitman, understood the poet's work as a prophetic gospel. Traubel too had a mystical experience related to Whitman's poetry, and attempted, as had Carpenter and Wallace, to live the work that Whitman had initiated.

CHAPTER II

“A WOMAN WAITS FOR ME”: ANNE GILCHRIST AND LEAVES OF GRASS

I draw you closer to me, you women,
 I cannot let you go, I would do you good,
 I am for you, and you are for me, not only for our own sake, but
 for others' sakes,
 Enveloped in you sleep greater heroes and bards,
 They refuse to awake at the touch of any man but me.

—Walt Whitman, “A Woman Waits for Me”

The story of the curious courtship of the poet Walt Whitman by Anne Gilchrist is already well known. This most extraordinary romance has been recounted in some detail, from a number of viewpoints, in a variety of sources, biographical and critical.¹ There is another story here, even more remarkable. It can open up for us the complex of issues that confront any student of Whitman's mysticism—the intersection of

¹ I refer readers to the well-balanced treatment in Jerome Loving's Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself, to Marion Walker Alcaro's admirably complete biography of Gilchrist, Walt Whitman's Mrs. G., and to Thomas B. Harned's edition of The Letters of Anne Gilchrist and Walt Whitman (hereafter Letters). Elizabeth Porter Gould's Anne Gilchrist and Walt Whitman and Herbert Gilchrist's uneven and patchwork Anne Gilchrist: Her Life and Writings (hereafter Anne Gilchrist) are both valuable sources, but, written without access to the letters in the Harned edition, (which Whitman had refused H. Gilchrist as “too sacred”), they necessarily show only a portion of the relationship.

interpretation and fantasy, sex and religion, author and reader. It can help us understand how a strong reader can realize on the page not just an image of the author, but a new image of herself. It is the story of not just of a remarkable love, but of a remarkable reading.

When Anne Gilchrist first read William Michael Rossetti's selection of poems from Leaves of Grass, she was forty-one, the mother of four children, and the widow of Alexander Gilchrist, a biographer and art critic. She was a woman of not inconsiderable accomplishments. She had assisted throughout the composition of her husband's monumental biography of William Blake, and, following his untimely death from scarlet fever, had seen the manuscript through the difficult process of completion, revision, fact-checking, and printing. Later, she published several articles of her own that explained current scientific theories and discoveries to a general magazine audience. Alexander Gilchrist's skillful pursuit, first the paintings, writings, and plates needed for his Blake biography, then of other rare books needed by his literary friends, had led the couple to a close and abiding friendship with some of the foremost British literary and artistic figures of the day, including Tennyson and the Rossettis. They maintained an amiable acquaintance with still more. Despite a strong instinct for intellectual independence and a deep commonsense rejection of empty conventionality, Anne was a devoted Victorian mother who had temporarily sacrificed the literary goals that were so important to her in order to raise her children as a single parent. Hers was a life that demanded work and direction. In an 1863 letter, Anne calls the Blake biography, which she had recently completed, her "beloved task" which had "kept [her] head above water in the deep sea of

affliction” after her husband’s death. “Now that it is ended,” she writes, “I sometimes feel like to sink –to sink that is, into pining discontent—and a relaxing of the hold upon all high aims. I find it so hard to get on at anything beyond the inevitable daily routine, deprived of that beloved and genial Presence, which so benignantly and tenderly fostered all good, strengthening the hands, cheering the heart, quickening the intellect, even” (Anne Gilchrist 52). During such a becalmed and discontent period, Anne Gilchrist made the acquaintance of Walt Whitman: first the Walt Whitman who projected himself so strongly from the poems in Rossetti’s selection, then, months later, the Walt Whitman manifested more completely in the unexpurgated 1867 edition of Leaves of Grass lent to her by Rossetti himself.

This chance meeting led to a love-affair of sorts between the brilliant, lonely, progressive Englishwoman, and the book which was, it insisted, not just a book, but a man. Like most remarkable love-affairs, it involved mind, body, and soul, past hopes and future dreams, and left everything changed in its wake. We could speak of it as an intellectual revolution, a spiritual illumination, a physical arousal, a personal passion. In this case, it might be sophistry to attempt to separate them. Whitman wrote often of his readers as latencies, potentials activated, “thrilled” in sympathy with his work. That work certainly acted as a catalyst in the life of Anne Gilchrist—allowing her to realize, after a lengthy dormant period, tendencies that had been long in developing, with roots that stretched deep into her past.

Most accounts of this remarkable relationship focus on the final disparity between the virile, vigorous, all-accepting Whitman projected from the book and the

flesh-and-blood Whitman whom Gilchrist would eventually meet—old, generally infirm, largely disabled by his stroke of 1873, and (as critics have become increasingly aware throughout the twentieth century) uninterested in conventionally romantic relations with women.² E. H. Miller summed up the prevailing critical response to the correspondence between Whitman and Gilchrist (“the most extraordinary . . . in the language” as Miller calls the letters) and the first meeting between the two in 1876. He calls the correspondence “an amazing spectacle, the stuff of tragedy for some writers, of comedy to others” (The Correspondence of Walt Whitman 2:2). But Anne Gilchrist, and of her relationship with Whitman, has since received a more sympathetic and considered reevaluation.³ Paul Ferlazzo pointed out that “What caused such a total response to the man, was the total response of Mrs. Gilchrist to his poetry. She understood the poetry, as Whitman himself had admitted, ‘better and fuller and clearer than anyone else’” (Ferlazzo 64). In her biography of Gilchrist, Marion Walker Alcaro dismisses some of the more conventionally tragic or romantic narratives that had been imposed on the relationship. Alcaro opens up the study of Gilchrist as a strong figure in her own right. While some earlier critics paint Gilchrist as a hapless or ridiculous figure in the grip of a delusion, Alcaro emphasizes the poise, graciousness, and inner courage with which

² Early critics had a variety of theories to account for the failure of a romantic relationship to develop between the two. Thomas Harned, in his preface to The Letters of Anne Gilchrist and Walt Whitman, follows Emory Holloway in claiming that the problem was that Whitman’s heart was “so far as attachments of that sort were concerned, already bestowed elsewhere,” namely to a “certain woman” to whom Whitman had written “Out of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd” (xxxii).

³ Louisa Van Velsor Whitman may be counted among those who recognized Gilchrist’s critical acuity. She read Anne’s “A Woman’s Estimate of Walt Whitman,” and wrote to him “i got the 2 radicals [The Radical—the magazine in which Gilchrist’s essay was published] and the other the next i set right down and read it that Lady seems to understand your writing better than ever anyone did before as if she could see right through you she must be a highly educated woman” (qtd in Ceniza 25-26).

Gilchrist accepted, after she had crossed the ocean to be closer to Whitman, that her dreams of romantic union were not going to be fulfilled. Despite earlier narratives that emphasized Gilchrist's disillusion and despondency after meeting the poet, Alcaro shows that Gilchrist in fact engaged in a close, loving friendship with Whitman that was no less intimate for not being romantic, and lasted for the rest of her life.

For the purposes of this account, however, I wish to focus not on the way in which Gilchrist lost the fever of her initial response to Whitman's book and became such a valuable and intimate friend of Whitman the man. Neither will I focus on the way that Gilchrist's early letters about Whitman, published as "A Woman's Estimate of Walt Whitman" served to bolster Whitman's reputation when it was in considerable need of reinforcement.⁴ Instead, I want to explore the details of that first burning enthusiasm awakened Gilchrist from years of a life that, though "busy & content, practical, earnest," had been deadening to her intellect, stifling to her spirit, and repressive to body and heart (Letters 78). Conversion is not precisely the right word, but perhaps no other will do so well. The change triggered by her interaction with Whitman's book, which Gilchrist called a "new birth," gave her hope for the future (her personal future, that of women in general, and that of humanity), brought her across the Atlantic, and gave her the impetus to resume a project of philosophical, religious, and literary inquiry that she had put aside in favor of domestic duties (Gilchrist 59). Romance is too light a word for this sort of

⁴ "A Woman's Estimate of Walt Whitman," an edited selection of Gilchrist's early letters concerning Whitman to William Michael Rossetti, was published in the Boston Unitarian magazine, The Radical, in May 1870. It was later republished under the name "An Englishwoman's Estimate of Walt Whitman" in Herbert Gilchrist's collection of his mother's writings, Anne Gilchrist: Her Life and Writings (hereafter, Anne Gilchrist). I use the first title here to refer to both versions, which are substantially the same.

reading. It involves, and any explanation of it must call upon, not only a text and a need, but the whole history of the life that the encounter invoked and reoriented: habits of mind and reading, webs of belief and inquiry.

In the very first letter that is preserved from the then Annie Burrows, we find her a schoolgirl of seventeen and an avid reader, who already sometimes preferred the depth of literary experience to the relative poverty of first-hand encounters—what Whitman might have called looking “through the eyes of the dead” or feeding “on the specters in books” (LoG 27). In a letter to a school friend, she ponders the possibility of travel to see the great vistas of Europe, but concludes:

I sometimes think I derive more pleasure in reading description of lovely scenery by authors I very much admire. You see it, as it were, through the medium of their brilliant imaginations, and a tide of interesting, of beautiful associations, invest it with a thousand charms, which, if I gazed on it myself, my dull intellect would fail to supply. (Anne Gilchrist 23)

Her formal schooling had been tolerable by the standards of female education of the time. Until the age of seventeen, she received from “the misses Cahusac’s” (proprietors of an evangelical school for girls at Highgate) rather more than the usual narrow course of deportment and “accomplishments”: picking up not only how to walk prettily and play the piano, but “at least a modicum of instruction in mathematics, literature, possibly history, and probably French” (Alcaro 37). She was a brilliant student from the start, and showed extraordinary powers of recall. A school friend recalls that during the course of one lesson “a page from Boileau’s Satires had to be learnt within the space of

ten minutes”: not only was Anne able to complete the exercise perfectly, but still could repeat the page verbatim some twenty years later (Anne Gilchrist 20). Given the choice, she always preferred reading to needlework (that most common and often most despised of Nineteenth-Century middle-class women’s labors). The girls of the school were required to sew for two hours a week “for the poor,” “a task which was enlivened with reading aloud.” When the governess asked who would like to do the reading, Anne always spoke up—and on those occasions when she was kept from reading, she kept to a simple stitch, to keep her mind free. In the 19th Century, this kind of communal reading during labor was not an uncommon entertainment. From this distance, we can’t tell what words young Anne is mouthing, though we may be sure the books were carefully chosen for their improving character. Reading books aloud in this way, as the essayist Alberto Manguel has it, “both enrich[es] and diminish[es] the act of reading” (123). While the presence of an audience encourages an attentiveness and thoroughness of reading in the reader, it likewise removed his or her intimacy with the book, and much of the freedom of the reader to choose which passages to read or re-read. It became impossible to linger over a passage in order to understand it.

The bulk of Anne’s real education was owing to an impressive self-imposed program of reading in science, literature, and philosophy. We see her in letters of 1848 reading in what she considered the “opposite poles” of mysticism and materialism (poles she would later attempt to reconcile), studying “Emerson, as a sort of balance to my usual studies in Comte” (29). She explains:

Comte and Emerson are the two opposite poles of the present intellectual world. Comte is essentially a materialist. Emerson's writings are treated with a good deal of contempt and ridicule now,⁵ but I think the next generation will call him a great man. If people would have the patience to study him, in spite of his apparent affectation and mysticism, they would, perhaps, find him a profound thinker. (Anne Gilchrist: Her Life and Writings 29)⁶

Patience was something the largely self-educating Anne Gilchrist had a great deal of. Like Bucke, and others who eventually fell under Whitman's spell, she also had an independent and unconventional habit of reading, staying current with modern scientific thought and pursuing new ideas without timidity (readers of less liberal and less flexible habits could hardly be expected to embrace Whitman's style or his message, and few did). As a reader, we might say, Gilchrist was something of an explorer, continually widening her sphere of sympathy, reading to be challenged, to grow and change.

In the most revealing moments from her biography, we often see her with a book. Once, young Anne was reading Rousseau's Confessions in Highgate cemetery, near her school. Absorbed in the book, she scarcely noticed when a local vicar accosted her. When the vicar enquired as to the title of her book, she responded truthfully, but "almost inaudibly . . . the last word only caught the parson's ear." The confused vicar assumed she meant St. Augustine's Confessions, and responded "Ah! Good reading; a very good

⁵ Emerson's reputation was at an ebb in England at the time, largely the result of his English lectures of 1840's, which criticized British social problems.

⁶ Hereafter referred to as Anne Gilchrist.

book, my dear” (Anne Gilchrist 22). She did not trouble herself to correct him. She shows herself in this incident, as elsewhere, fearless, independent, but always tactful.

This attitude extended to her religious opinions. One of the friends of her youth noted that at the age of fifteen Anne had already begun to show “a love for freedom for herself in theology . . . combined [with] an anxiety not to unnecessarily shock those who thought orthodoxy essential” (Anne Gilchrist 22). In an 1848 letter to a school friend, Julia Newton, Anne explains her position at some length. Newton had apparently expressed concerns about Anne’s unorthodox religious views in an earlier letter. Anne responded tactfully but unapologetically:

I feel gratified by the warm, true affection that prompts your anxiety about my views of religion. May I speak freely, dearest? It seems to me such anxiety betrays a want of confidence in the power of truth and in the goodness of God. Can you believe that one who earnestly and humbly seeks the truth, would be permitted to embrace vital error? (25)

This mixture of belief in the vital importance of free inquiry and final faith in the goodness of the universe would later enable her to accept Whitman’s radical but optimistic faith as what William James might have called a “live option”—a belief system that it was possible for her to live in. Likewise, Gilchrist often plays down the importance of religion as rule or dogma, in favor of a conception of religion as a profound experience that unfolds over time:

I cannot help thinking you attach too much importance to creeds and doctrines. They are mere definitions, after all, and definitions are better calculated to

circumscribe truth, and bring it down to the narrow level of our half-awakened understandings, than to raise our minds to deep, elevated, life-giving comprehension of it; and this I feel persuaded, is not bestowed upon us at once by the creator but is to be earned slowly, by years of labour, by struggling resolutely to crush the evil and develop the good that is in us. (25)

The outward show of faith was not adequate to Anne, nor was faith to be taken lightly or considered as the solution to an intellectual puzzle: the search for religious truth was central to mankind, and to be carried out by immersion in life, by taking risks, with work:

To me, I confess, it seems a very considerable thing to believe in God; difficult indeed to avoid honestly, but not easy to accomplish worthily, and impossible to compass to perfection—A thing not lightly to be professed, but rather humbly to be sought; not to be found at the end of any syllogism, but in the inmost fountains of purity and affection; not the sudden gift of intellect, but to be earned by a loving and brave life. It is, indeed, the greatest thing allowed to mankind, the germ of every lesser greatness. The greatest thing allowed to mankind. Oh, this is so true! The soul pants to worship God. Could it but catch a glimpse of its Creator, it would at once be filled with awe and deep humility, with love to man, with divine energy, and with the thirst for perfection.

Finally, she shows her sympathy with Romantic and Transcendentalist writers by emphasizing religious experience in life and development of the potentials of the individual human self rather than some hypothesized reward after death:

But to me it seems, that our great aim should be to fulfill the ends for which we were created; that is to say, develop to the utmost the nature which God has given us; and I cannot think of Heaven as a place, but as a state of Being. (26-27)

In a later letter to the same friend, Anne professes another trait that might be called typically Emersonian or Romantic in her reading—a deep eclecticism, and a belief in the necessary role of a sympathetic reader to glean the fragments of a greater truth out of diverse sources. “After all,” she writes, “eclecticism is a fine thing. Truth is to be found complete in no man’s system, but a portion of it in all systems. It is for the reader to collect it, and reconcile apparent contradictions” (30).

Reading for Gilchrist was never passive or unaffecting, never a matter of reception without corresponding action. Years later, after the death of her husband, Anne writes to her friend William Haines, defending her choice to continue writing scientific articles “in the teeth of all my difficulties and limitations within and without, of time and opportunity and ability.” She must continue to try to write, she says, “else I should slowly gravitate downwards into entire absorption in busy, bustling, contriving working-day material life—weakly and barely giving up all attempt to fulfil dear Alec’s hopes of me” (151). “For after all,” she writes “when youth and growing time are left behind and ripening time comes—if there be anything to ripen—reading is not enough. Prose reading becomes either oppressive or useless unless the mind rouses itself to take a more active part than that of being the bucket pumped into” (151). Reading calls for work in

response, both work and response have spiritual value in the development of the self, and the best reading rouses the mind to its own activity.

Gilchrist had a scientific mind⁷ and her philosophical position by the late 1860's was an attitude she called "materialist" but which emphasized an underlying and immortal informing force in all things. Walking with Tennyson in the countryside, she had a conversation on the subject, which she notes in a letter to a friend:

Spoke of materialism. I ventured to say that it was a term of reproach chiefly because people had so inadequate and false an idea of matter, that matter was wholly a manifestation of force and power; he agreed, said something I cant exactly remember, and then added, 'You mean that we have a little bit of God in the middle of us:' to which I cordially assented. Spoke of the futility of mere argument about immortality and such topics, it being wholly a matter of instinct and unprovable; I said conservation of Force went a great way toward actual proof. (170)

Like so many spiritual questers of the time (Whitman included), Anne Gilchrist was attempting on her own a reconciliation between an imperative to religious faith, a need for a sacramental or mysterious view of the world, and the intellectual demands of the discourse of the positivist science that was gaining popularity and authority at the time. The law of conservation of force which she cited to Tennyson as possible proof of (or indication of) immortality had been the subject of the last and longest of her several

⁷ Whitman would call her his "science-friend" in the poem written to her memory, "Going Somewhere" (LoG 441).

scientific articles, “The Indestructibility of Force,” which had appeared in Macmillan’s Magazine in 1862.

The article, full of scholarly citation of scientific articles and arguments, wrestles mainly with the spiritual discomfort occasioned by the nineteenth-century disproof of the idea of an unchanging nature. While the uneducated and naïve “savage” could gain solace in the idea that, “though her children perish, Nature herself is unchangeable; though storms and wintry change may ruffle her countenance, the features are as imperishable as the solid framework of the globe itself,” the burgeoning discipline of geology had proven that the world was constantly changing: that “rivers do not flow on for ever: between the granite rock and the cloud it is but a question of time” (337). Gilchrist treats the observable facts of nature in an Emersonian way—they are signs that indicate the nature and future of the soul. The effect of nineteenth-century science had merely pushed back these types of immortality from the visible realm of objects into an invisible atomic realm: “the fact that underlies this universal destruction is, Indestructibility. The atoms with which these ever-changing forms are built up are absolutely changeless” (337). Gilchrist searches for the eternal within a seemingly Heraclitan world of change, and finds it in the then-current doctrine of forces, which were considered exchangeable but indestructible. She traces this idea, quoting Faraday, into “one common origin” in that they are all “manifestations of one fundamental ‘Power’” (342). Speculation as to a further unity, the “mysterious and indissoluble connexion, perhaps identity . . . between matter and force” may, she writes, be in vain. However, it is a

gain worth all the toil to recognize vividly that there is a deep mystery not only in that which lives and grows, but in the very stocks and stones. No longer mistaking our own shallow conceptions for complete and absolute truth, our minds become as a clear unclouded mirror, where in dim and shadowed grandeur some suggestions of this far-off absolute truth will perhaps be reflected. (344)

Here she proposes as the proper prelude to scientific and philosophical inquiry a sort of secular version of the via negativa. If the scientist would reflect reality, he or she must first discard worn-out and inaccurate conceptions that will get in the way. If the subject matter here is scientific, the method and language—the representation of minds as mirrors, the ineffable absolute truth—are common elements in some forms of mysticism. For Gilchrist, as for Whitman, the two will not necessarily be at odds.

As Gilchrist wrote years earlier, the reader's job is to "reconcile apparent contradictions." In the second half of the nineteenth century, after the groundbreaking works of geology and biology had set up a view of the earth's history quite contrary to that found in the book of Genesis, science and religion were producing contradictions. Gilchrist wrote that it would be cowardice in religious thinkers to shrink from

face-to-face encounter with some of the facts of nature, and the inevitable deductions from them. Conflicting opinions among the wisest there may be, conflicting truths there cannot. If, therefore, science bring to light facts which seem to militated against that which we hold as high and sacred truth, we may rest calmly assured that a fuller knowledge of such facts, a deeper insight into their true bearings, will dispel the appearance of antagonism. But then we must

go boldly on to reach this higher stage, not turn back and basely seek the dark shelter of ignorance. (344)

Romantic nostalgia, the longing for a more innocent time or some hypothesized golden age, was clearly not an option for Anne Gilchrist. At the end of this same article, she attacks another common aspect of British Romanticism: “a tone, not of open hostility, but of covert contempt for science.” She quotes Wordsworth’s “memorably unjust lines” that scientists would “Peep and botanize upon their mother’s grave.” Wonder is not a fragile sort of thing, requiring a protective coat of ignorance: “The beauty, the mystery” of the physical world, she protests, “are not of such flimsy, shallow kind, as to vanish beneath an earnest questioning gaze.” The answer is to be found in the “tendency at the present day . . . to exalt and spiritualize our idea of matter, and, far from destroying, to enhance our sense of mystery” (344). Anne Gilchrist shares with Whitman and Emerson the conviction that scientific inquiry would not remove the wonder at or our sacramental consciousness of the material world—it would deepen them, and extend our knowledge of the divine.

This thoroughgoing refusal of nostalgia and this forward-looking attitude are, she implies, traits she shares with a larger female readership. She writes to William Michael Rossetti in 1870 about her distaste for literature that looks back towards an idealized past (in this case, Swinburne’s Medievalism):

I fancy too, you would find in all women, whatever their bent of mind, a sort of averseness or at any rate an absence of enthusiasm towards literature that transports itself into the Past in that absolute way: owing to the very subtle but

deep and real sense they have of the starved and barren heritage in life of women in that old world: except that fleeting year or two when they were man's delight.

. . . To-day is but a dawning time for them, I am persuaded—hints of an undreamt of beauty and greatness just beginning to disclose themselves, by and by to unfold into a Life Poem that will beggar all words.

Anne has already by this time adopted as congenial to her own views Whitman's idea of life itself as poetry, an enacted poetry equal to or more important than poetry that consists of words on the page. Later, in a letter to Whitman, explaining why women should take part, not just in needlework, but in the "rough bodily work" needed in maintaining a household, she writes,

just as the Poem Nature is made up half of rude, rough realities and homely materials & processes, so it is necessary for women to construct their Poem, Home, on a groundwork of homeliest details & occupations, providing for the bodily wants & comforts of their household, and that without putting their own hands to this, their Poem will lack the vital, fresh, growing nature-like quality that alone endures, and that of this soul will grow, with fitting preparation & culture, noble & more vigorous intellectual life in women, fit to embody itself in wider spheres afterwards—if the call comes.⁸ (Letters 110)

Domestic work is for Gilchrist (at least after reading Whitman) both a sort of gymnastics and a form of self-expression. Instead of rejecting the role of domestic helpmeet, of "angel in the house," Gilchrist personalizes it and makes the role something

⁸ "If the call comes" has a double meaning here—while she anticipates a future expanded role for women, she is also waiting a more personal call to action: a response from Whitman.

heroic and forward-looking, making herself by analogy a poet (the author of a “life-poem”) in that she will shape the development of her children and the life of her husband and herself.⁹ By all accounts, Gilchrist herself was a canny and practical master of domestic matters. In 1865 she wrote an article, “A Neglected Art,” which criticized the Victorian practice of late marriage among her class—the idea current then being that “‘Home’ has become too costly an institution to be maintained by those who have not reached the top of the hill” (“A Neglected Art” 494). Gilchrist, who had married young for the time, and who was widowed after her husband had begun to make his reputation but before he made much money, sympathized with the young, unprepared widows that the custom of late marriages created. In order to make more balanced marriages possible, she recommended economy. In her article, Gilchrist emphasized to young gentlewomen the importance of learning to manage their household. In order to manage the domestic servants, a woman would need to know all of their tasks and understand nutrition and economy. In this article, Gilchrist sees the mastery of traditional roles via “masculine efficiency and thoroughness” as a precondition or a first step towards seeking a wider role for women (Alcaro 102-108; “A Neglected Art” 501).

Searching for types, the finding of shadows of later events in former ones, is an important practice not only in theology but in attempting to understand a life. Prior loves, as prior books, leave one with expectations, empty shapes into which later lovers

⁹ In the preface to Herbert Gilchrist’s memoir of Anne, William Michael Rossetti sums up Anne’s character thus: “hers was a life of earnest, warm, and unfrittered simplicity, holding an even and sensitive balance between the claims of family-affection and those of intellectual activity. To make the home a centre of mental as well as family vital energy may perhaps have been her ideal; it was, at any rate—so far as I may be permitted to form an opinion—her lifelong practice” (*Anne Gilchrist* xv-xvi).

and literary experience will fit. Anne Gilchrist's work with her husband on the Blake biography, it seems likely, provided not one but two "gaps" that would, as Anne wrote years later, seem to adumbrate the coming of Whitman into her life. From Blake (or from Emerson, Carlyle or any number of the Romantics who flavored the intellectual atmosphere in which she lived and grew), she adopted the idea of a poet as prophet, as mystic, as creator (or would-be creator) of national myth, and of literature as the proper vehicle for social and personal change. At the same time, through her marriage to Alexander Gilchrist (as often from its deficiencies as from its strong points), she was building a model of a kind of relationship that she would later "recognize" in Leaves of Grass and which she would offer to Walt Whitman.

In an 1848 letter to her friend Julia Newton, the future Mrs. Gilchrist (writing in the third person) announces her engagement to Alexander. She describes the young writer as

one who can fulfill her aspirations, realize her ideal of a true marriage, one who is her friend and helper, as well as her lover. . . . he is altogether, both in intellect and heart, great, noble, and beautiful. (Anne Gilchrist 30)

However, by the time, almost twenty years later, of her first private letters to Walt Whitman, Anne would tell a different story of the relationship and its aftermath, one that she would call "a death struggle."

Alexander Gilchrist asked Anne to marry him three times. The first time, she said she "liked him well as my friend, but could not love him as a wife should love & felt deeply convinced that I never should." Alexander "was not turned aside, but went

on the same as if that conversation had never passed.” A year later, he asked again, and Anne, “deeply moved by and grateful for his steady love, and so sorry for him,” assented. “But next day, terrified at what I had done and painfully conscious of the dreary absence from my heart of any faintest gleam of true, tender, wifely love, said no again.” He asked once more, a few months later, and the third time was successful—in a way. Anne’s reaction was hardly romantic, in a conventional sense. “I prayed very earnestly,” she writes,

and it seemed to me that I should continue to mar & thwart his life so was not right, if he was content to accept what I could give. I knew I could lead a good and wholesome life beside him—his aims were noble—his heart a deep, beautiful, true Poet’s heart; but he had not the Poet’s great brain. His path was a very arduous one, and I knew I could smooth it for him—cheer him along it. It seemed to me God’s will that I should marry him. So I told him the whole truth, and he said that he would rather have me on those terms than not have me at all.

(Letters 59)

Her aspirations all along, it seems, were literary, intellectual, and spiritual. The path she chooses here after much introspection, the path which seems to her to be “God’s will,” is one of encouragement—the role of a help-meet. This was a role she would serve for her other literary friends and later offer to Whitman. Looking back, however, she sees that, despite their uneven arrangement, Alexander had the better part of the relationship:

He said to me many times “Ah, Annie, it is not you who are so loved that is rich; it is I who so love.” And I knew this was true, felt as if my nature were poor &

barren beside his. But it was not so, it was only slumbering—undeveloped. For, my dear Friend, my soul was so passionately aspiring—it so thirsted & pined for light, it had not the power to reach alone and he could not help me on my way. (Letters 58)

What Anne Gilchrist called “the reward and crown of the day” was essentially a congress over books. Alexander would read aloud “earnest books” to Anne, who was “working (with the needle) all the while” (Anne Gilchrist 36). At the same time, she “‘read’ music to him.” Anne’s account of this scene of domestic bliss is interrupted by a catalogue of the books they had read together.

Anne reports that Herbert Spencer’s then newly published Social Statics “has taken great hold of us.” In this early and influential volume, Spencer argues for the inevitable progress of humankind towards an ideal moral state. This evolution of society, however, is contingent on the exercise of human freedom of action, thought, and speech. In this early volume, so embraced by the Gilchrists, Spencer makes his case in terms of “the Divine will.” He argues that human happiness only comes from free exercise of the faculties of the individual, and that “the exercise of the faculties is God’s will and man’s duty” (68). Social Statics calls for the reform of human character and human society so that each person will be able to exercise his or her faculties without impeding the happiness of others. Spencer’s book calls for sweeping reforms including universal suffrage and equal rights for women. It argues that the relationship between the sexes was changing too, marriage rapidly evolving towards an ideal of mutual concession, where “self-sacrifice will be the ruling principle” on both sides and “Committing a

trespass will be the thing feared, and not the being trespassed against” (150). This change will result, Spencer argues, in a “higher harmony than any we yet know.”

The couple also read poetry by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, which Anne says “elevates my notions of women’s capabilities in verse,” and Carlyle’s Life of Sterling, about which she gushes in what appears to be a sort of literary crush:

it is a book to vivify one’s very heart, revealing as it does the tender, gentle, beautiful, loving, and lovable nature of him [Carlyle], the great, stern, earnest thinker, before whose burning intensity, like that of an old Hebrew prophet, as it has been said, we almost tremble. Surely never before was there in any man the union of such Titan strength and keenest insight, with soft, tenderest, pitying gentleness. Never surely a man who so had the power of winning deep, reverent heart’s love from his readers. Do you remember his interpretation, so to speak, of Giotto’s portrait of Dante in ‘Hero Worship?’ It might stand word for word as a description of himself. (Anne Gilchrist 36-37)

Gilchrist’s reaction to Carlyle—who she considers a kind of tender prophet, whose writing at once makes one tremble and creates an image of gentleness in the reader, inspiring love—foreshadows her much more intense and lasting response to Whitman.¹⁰ She shows a well-developed tendency here to extrapolate an image of an author from his work and to enter into emotional sympathy with that image.

¹⁰ Carlyle’s 1851 The Life of John Sterling is an attempt by Carlyle to rescue the reputation of his friend from theological criticism Sterling had received after his death. Carlyle, as Sterling’s literary executor, shows him as a noble, lovable, sympathetic, and tragic figure. If Carlyle can be said to be “tender” in any work, it is this one.

By the time Alexander Gilchrist died—carried off unexpectedly by a bout of scarlet fever—Anne Gilchrist had developed ideas about relationships that contained an emotional and intellectual component, but also partook of Emerson’s views of friendship and Spencer’s progressive social theories. These ideas focused on the ability of the friend to facilitate an individual’s spiritual and moral development. If Anne’s reaction to Whitman proved extreme, it is because in him she saw someone who, unlike poor Alexander, has both the heart and the brain of a great poet, someone who seems more suited than any to further her spiritual development: a potential lover and a sort of guru or spiritual guide combined. Yet the poet as she saw him, plagued by misreading and vilified by many critics, and later suffering from the effects of his stroke, also inspired her to a role of selfless help-meet. It was a role she had often played.

Horace E. Scudder, who had met Anne in Boston,¹¹ wrote in a brief essay that she was “always herself, but then her self was a nature which obeyed the great paradoxical law of finding life through the loss of it” (Scudder 194).¹² This tendency to self-sacrifice, shown best in her marriage to a man with whom she was not entirely in love, showed itself throughout her life in other places. In 1867, she supervised the furnishing and repairs at Grayshott, a house near her residence that the Tennysons had let, writing in a letter, “I have put my hero worship into some very practical shape this

¹¹ Gilchrist met Scudder, the editor of the Riverside Literature Series and, at a later point, The Atlantic Monthly, along with Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Charles Eliot Norton, and a number of other Boston literati, on the strength of Rossetti’s letters of introduction (Alcaro 195, Gould 45).

¹² Scudder’s essay is largely an appreciation of her personality. It has moments of considerable insight, noting for instance how Anne “uses [Whitman] as a whole to carry forward her thought, to enlarge her conceptions of human life, and to solidify and define floating notions of science and religion which had long been forming in her mind” (111).

winter, and done some real hard work for Tennyson” (Anne Gilchrist 165). Her literary friends and her own family received alike Anne’s unstinting labor. Her next-door neighbor Jane Carlyle is reported to have said of her that Anne would “skin, and bury herself alive for the benefit of her children” (115).

To understand the effect that Leaves of Grass had on Anne Gilchrist, we must understand how she read it. Like many of the other “Whitmaniacs,” Gilchrist took Whitman’s claims for the effects of his book and his instructions on how it was to be read quite seriously. She understood as well as any of his early critics the way in which Whitman’s poems provided their own interpretive structure and context. Paul Ferlazzo argues that Gilchrist has “a perception and poetic understanding unmatched” in her time “in sensitivity and accuracy” (64). That perception and understanding are put to work not in judging Whitman’s work against an external standard, but in the service of reading Whitman as she thinks he wishes to be read. To many, Gilchrist’s reactions to Whitman’s work will seem uncritical, and they are. However, Gilchrist’s lack of critical distance and her rejection of a conventionally “literary” interpretive framework may prove just how acute a reader of Whitman she was. Whitman more than other poets attempted to provide a set of procedures for reading his work, attempting to abolish distance and distinction between the reader, the author, and the book, and Gilchrist responded to that attempt with an unusually keen receptivity.

First and perhaps most important, Gilchrist did not read Whitman inside the frame of “literature,” narrowly construed. John Burroughs, one of Whitman’s earlier disciples, had proposed that Whitman’s acceptance would require a change in the criteria

applied to poetry.¹³ Throughout his career Whitman had tried to effect this change to a more Emersonian model—of the poet not as *littérateur* merely, but as representative man, effusing his influence through culture and history. The later disciples all recognized the need for this change, and each attempted to put it into practice. Like Bucke, Carpenter, and the Bolton Whitmanites, Anne Gilchrist considers Whitman’s chief area of influence to be in the area of religion: providing a new religious model, a new consciousness of the universe which in time would eventually revolutionize society and human relations. In an 1870 letter to William Michael Rossetti, she writes, “Whitman is, I believe, far more closely akin to Christ than to either Homer or Shakspeare or any other poet” (Anne Gilchrist 203). She backs up this extraordinary confidence by paraphrasing Whitman’s 1855 preface in her letter: “I may say this to you, because I know you hold with me, that ‘the whole theory of the supernatural departs as a dream.’ And this is what I meant when I said ‘Poetry must accept him, &c. or stand aside’” (204).

For both Gilchrist and (she assumes) Rossetti,¹⁴ the religious and the poetic are not entirely separate or separable fields. In her letter Anne closes the spheres still further. She can write of the parallels between Whitman and Christ, but obviously not because she believes Whitman to be a supernatural figure. As we have seen and will see, the supernatural is not a valid category for her at all—all the action, no matter how rare or

¹³ See Loving’s Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself, 220.

¹⁴ Rossetti, ever-tactful, answered Gilchrist’s letter with a delicate touch, saying “I very much like and sympathize with (broadly considered) what you say of Whitman and Christ; it is really the gist of the matter, and ought by rights have been included in what was printed,” but also defending Homer and Shakespeare, along with a less-restricted view of what makes a poet (Rossetti 61).

extraordinary, of the soul, mind, and the body are compact and conceived of as natural. Instead, she believes Christ, as the originator of a vast current of thought and feeling, to be the greatest sort of poet:

Surely we must regard as ‘greatest, divinest,’ those human suns who send out their waves of light and impulse through the longest and widest stretches of time and space, vitalizing most germs; kindling and vivifying most hearts and brains? If the poet type is still to be accepted as the highest type (as I think it will) the boundaries must be enlarged to include Christ who never wrote a line: it must be entirely a question of the thing uttered and not at all of the ‘the mode of utterance;’ and many names that have stood very high on the roll must go down to the rank of ‘sweet singers’ only. (Anne Gilchrist 204)

In making this classification, Gilchrist borrows directly from Whitman’s own distinction between poet and “singer,” developed most explicitly in the second section of “Song of the Answerer,” which was called “The Indications” in the editions between 1860 and 1881. “The singers do not beget, only the Poet begets,” writes Whitman. The “maker of poems,” the poet in the greater sense that Gilchrist uses here “settles justice, reality, immortality, / His insight and power encircle things and the human race, / He is the glory and extract thus far of things and the human race” (LoG 143). Message and reception—the originality, scope, and fitness for the future of what is said, and how deeply the poet’s words touch and create a world for his or her audience—are to be considered more important than matters of poetic form in judging who is a poet in this larger sense.

She felt a kinship between Christ and Whitman earlier than this, if we are to trust the account of Edward Carpenter. He writes in his Days with Walt Whitman that Gilchrist told him several times how when opening for the first time “the volume, [of the Rossetti selection] . . . her eye fell upon the fine nearly full-length engraving (taken from a daguerrotype[sic]) of the author, she exclaimed: ‘Here at last is the face of Christ, which the painters have so long sought for’; she always maintained that the reading of the book itself did but confirm and deepen that first impression” (Carpenter, Days With Walt Whitman 16-17). The image which Gilchrist had identified Whitman’s image as Christ’s was a smaller re-engraved version (head and chest only) of the famous composite engraving that had formed the frontispiece of the 1855 edition.¹⁵

The force of Whitman’s words to remake a world and induce something like a religious conversion or a revolution in consciousness was something Gilchrist herself had felt. In her letters to Whitman, she gives an account of her experience of reading in explicitly religious terms. Writing about a section of Leaves of Grass she tells Whitman, “I respond to that as one to whom it means the life of her Soul. It comforts me very much” (Letters 83). Gilchrist finds in Whitman’s own account of writing Leaves a justification for the life-changing power that the book has had over her:

You speak in the Preface of the imperious & resistless command from within out of which “Leaves of Grass” issued. This carried with it no doubt the secret of a corresponding resistless power over the reader wholly unprecedented,

¹⁵ Ed Folsom’s 2004 Lewis Lecture at Texas A&M University shows the interesting history of this image. The re-engraved image seems to have a slightly curlier beard than the “original” of the 1855.

unapproached in literature, as I believe, & to be compared only with that of Christ.¹⁶

Her account of her own reading of the book shares many of the characteristics of mysticism, while it rejects just such supernatural-tainted labels as inadequate to what she now conceives of as the natural experience behind it:

I speak out of my own experience when I say that no myth, no “miracle” embodying the notion of a direct communication between God & a human creature, goes beyond the effect, soul & body, of those Poems on me: & that were I to put into Oriental forms of speech what I experienced it would read like one of those old “miracles” or myths. Thus of many things that used to appear to me incomprehensible lies, I now perceive the germ of truth & understand that what was called the supernatural was merely an inadequate & too timid way of conceiving the natural. (83)

The experience that has given her insight into the “myths and miracles”—the stories of mysticism that modeled divine communication—was precisely the experience of reading Leaves: the interpenetration of book, soul, and body.

That Walt Whitman’s views were an advance on current religious stances, Anne Gilchrist was certain. Like many of Whitman’s early readers (particularly those writing in the period after the American Civil and before the First World War), she focuses on Whitman’s evolutionary, dynamic outlook and his enlightened treatment of the problem of evil:

¹⁶ She also gives as a possible source of this power Whitman’s suffering in the Civil War hospitals, and the sacrifice of his health for his message.

What I, in my heart, believe of Whitman is, that he takes up the thread where Christ left it; that he inaugurates, in his own person, a new phase of religion; a religion which casts out utterly the abjectness of fear; sees the ‘nimbus round every head,’ knowing that evil, like its prototype darkness, is not a thing, an existence at all but the absence of a thing—of light; of balanced and proportionate development—activities not having found their right outlet—or not yet subordinated by the higher ones that will by and by unfold—impulses that have not yet opened their eyes to the beautiful daylight provided for them, but work in a kind of darkness as before birth, the soul remaining so much longer an embryo than the body—how often even when the hair is grey! So then is laid to rest the phantom of a Devil—of some ‘power or being contending against God.’
 (Anne Gilchrist 204)

Like many proponents of a more liberal and universal religion—including Bucke, Huxley, Carpenter, and Wallace—she regards much of “what is called Christianity” as not of Christ’s making at all, but . . . the idea of Him, of His teaching, life and death passed to us through the darkening medium of infinitely less developed, less great and beautiful natures than His own—minds which clung with passionate tenacity to the traditions of their past—to the notions of a vindictive angry God to be propitiated by sacrifices and atonements; which seem to belong as inevitably to the early life of races as the belief in and dread of something cruel and terrible, ghost or demon lurking in the dark, does to childhood. (205)

The acceptance (which she saw as inevitable, despite Rossetti's cautionary comments) of Whitman's new vision would not only replace "Christianity," but would restore Christ's true message, by removing the superstructure of "system" which for Gilchrist is external and alien to it. Whitman's poetry would demolish, then,

the childish and outgrown absurdities, the moral baseness in the idea God interwoven (shaped on the pattern of an Eastern despot) with the memories of Christ's beautiful life and teaching and death into a system. . . . [A]nd that demolition will happen now gently and quickly—now that there is once more a kindred human soul to Christ's on the earth—one filled with the same radiant glowing consciousness (it is a consciousness, not a belief) of the divine and immortal nature of the human soul—the same fearless, trusting, loving attitude towards God, as of a son, the same actual close embracing shape in what new and rich developments through the lips of this Poet! . . . Now Christianity will go—and Christ be better understood and loved than He has been since those early times when His great personal influence yet vibrated in the world, and the darkness of His expounders had not begun to work adversely to the growing lights of succeeding times. (205-206)

Religion, rightly conceived, then, is not for Gilchrist a matter of belief, but of consciousness: Whitman and Christ both see the immortality of the soul, and effuse it by their "great personal influence." And for Gilchrist, it is this influence, this power to effect personal change that Leaves of Grass contains and effuses. She speaks of it in terms of potential force that are reminiscent of her earlier writings on science. Indeed,

Gilchrist sees Whitman's book as the answer to poetic acceptance of science whose need she had predicted years before:

whoever takes up Walt Whitman's book as a student of Poetry alone, will not rightly understand it: many and many a line and passage will appear to him common, insignificant as a drop of water—has like that drop of water latent within it, power enough to furnish forth a flash of lightning and a peal of thunder if only it be taken up where the right conditions for liberating that force are present. I think he will one day win as ardent adhesion from men of science and philosophers, as from lovers of art, and they need him most of all. (206)

In Gilchrist's letters, the effect of something like the release of this latent force—physically stirring, consciousness-altering, but at the same time barely containable, possibly dangerous, always a test of physical constitution—is a constant refrain. In the letters to Rossetti that would become "A Woman's Estimate of Walt Whitman," she writes that, "I had not dreamed that words could cease to be words, and become electric streams like these," and that "strong" as she was, she felt "sometimes as if I had not bodily strength to read many of these poems" (Letters 3).

This might be easily dismissed, as much of Gilchrist's commentary on reading Whitman can and has been, as simple rhetorical overstatement, or the self-deprecating histrionics of a Victorian lady overwhelmed, but I suggest that Anne Gilchrist is doing something which Whitman's poetry suggests, which mystics of a certain sort everywhere

have done, and what she seems to have had a peculiarly strong ability to do: she is reading the text with her body.¹⁷ In her view, it very nearly killed her.

Late in the year of 1870, as she was with waiting increasing impatience for a direct response from Whitman about her freshly-published “Estimate,” Anne Gilchrist was taken to bed with a strange illness. For months she languished, getting weaker and weaker, until it seemed to those around her that she would die. Biographers and critics have implied that the illness was nervous or psychosomatic, a crushing emotional effect of Whitman’s seeming indifference to her critical-romantic overture.¹⁸ However, Gilchrist’s own interpretation of the illness is recounted in terms of her conception of the “miracle” of the effect of “Leaves of Grass”: “Had I died the following year” [after reading the book], she writes, “it would have been the simple truth to say I died of joy.” The doctor’s diagnosis had been “nervous exhaustion falling with tremendous violence on the heart which ‘seemed to have been strained’” (83). Gilchrist writes that she left the bewildered doctor “in his puzzle—but it was none to me. How could such a dazzling radiance of light flooding the soul, suddenly, kindling it to such intense life, but put a tremendous strain on the vital organs? how could the muscles of the heart suddenly grow adequate to such new work?” (83). The “strain” on the heart was, as Gilchrist interpreted

¹⁷ Paul Ferlazzo writes of this bodily knowing that “Whitman’s sensual response to life has been transmitted through his poetry to Mrs. Gilchrist. That is, she accepts—seriously—the command that these poems enter your bloodstream and give your self awareness of your body’s life. Such a process is absurd and unfathomable unless it be mystical” (Ferlazzo 75-76).

¹⁸ Jerome Loving notes that the symptoms sound like “‘neurasthenia,’ a nervous disorder Victorian-era women frequently experienced” and this is certainly the case (Loving 330). This underlines the importance of attribution of causes to the way we understand (or “have”) our experience. We could find a common cause: “love-sickness” for Gilchrist’s reaction, or a Freudian one (repressed sexuality), or very possibly a medical one. Had Gilchrist believed this diagnosis, the effect would have been different: instead, she attributed her feelings to a more spiritual source, and made them less a medical or mental problem than a stage in her sudden and violent emotional and spiritual evolution.

it for Whitman, the result of “yearnings . . . that I might repay with all my life & soul & body this debt—that I might give joy to him who filled me with such joy, that I might make his outward life sweeter & more beautiful who made my inner life so divinely sweet and beautiful”(83). If this is lovesickness, it is lovesickness of a very peculiar kind. This prostration was the consequence of something like the mystic’s dark night of the soul (and body) that ended the first and most fervent blush of a spiritual enthusiasm. Afterward, in a letter to Whitman, she would look back upon this first passion with nostalgia and wistfulness:

Ah, shall I ever attain to the Ideal that burst upon me with such splendour of light & joy in those poems of 1869—so filling, so possessing me, I seemed as if I had by one bound attained to that ideal—as if I were already a very twin of the soul from whom they emanated. But now I know that divine foretaste indicated what was possible for me, not what was accomplished—I know the slow growth—the standstill winters that follow the growing joyous springs & ripening summers. I believe it will take more lives than this one to reach that mountain on which I was transfigured again, never to descend more, but to start thence for new heights, fresh glories. Ah, dear friend, will you be able to have patience with me, for me?” (125)

How the individual reader inserts himself or herself into a text, how the text contains or creates with the reader’s collusion “roles” which the reader may choose to accept or resist, has become the object of critical attention only relatively recently. Wolfgang Iser called his version of the theory the “implied reader.” Anne Gilchrist

perceived just such a role in Whitman's works, particularly those like "the series headed 'Calamus,' for instance, . . . some of the 'Songs of Parting,' the 'Voice out of the Sea,' the poem beginning, 'Tears, Tears,' & c.," in which, she said "there is such a weight of emotion, such a tension of the heart, that I am obliged to lay the book down for a while" (83). Marion Alcaro writes that Anne initiates a myth of Whitman as "the solitary singer searching for the perfect mate" but also rightly notes that "no one so mythologized Whitman as Whitman himself" (Alcaro 121).¹⁹

In her first letter directly to Whitman, Gilchrist announces: "In May, 1869, came the voice over the Atlantic to me—O, the voice of my Mate" (Letters 61). This bold statement both complexly echoes the situation and wording of "The Word Out of the Sea" and accepts without cavil or reservation the role which she had felt "called" to by Whitman's poems (61).²⁰ In "The Word Out of the Sea," the poem that would later be retitled "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," the poet's persona recalls a childhood encounter in May, when "the Fifth-month grass was growing," when he heard the voice of a mocking-bird calling in vain across the sea to his lost mate. Gilchrist's reference here is remarkable: it shows that she has imagined the poem not as a only as a meditation on the boy's reaction to the call of the forlorn mocking-bird. Instead, the function of the poem echoed, for Gilchrist, the mocking bird's call for the lost mate. Anne identified not

¹⁹ In fact, almost all of Whitman's disciples took part in the myth-making and perpetuating process that constructed Whitman's public image. W. D. O'Connor's The Good Gray Poet and "The Carpenter," along with the works of Bucke and Burroughs provide many examples.

²⁰ Jerome Loving, in his Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself, links Anne's use of this language to "Out of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd," which fits Anne's situation quite well, but seems less a "call" and does not use either the date or the "mate" in the way that Anne uses in her letters. In any event, Gilchrist's role comes certainly not from a single poem, but from a complex synthesis of many.

with the boy, or with the singing bird, but with the lost mate. When the lovelorn mocking-bird sang: “With this just-sustain’d note I announce myself to you, / This gentle call is for you my love, for you” (LoG 210), Anne Gilchrist heard the voice of Whitman calling to her across the sea, and responded.

The surprising directness of Whitman’s poems, with their confidential whispers, their challenges and seductions of the reader, their urgings to union with text, poet, and soul, had done their work on Anne Gilchrist, with her own participation. Her response was as complete and as deep as any of Whitman’s contemporary readers.

The role which Anne Gilchrist read from the poems, modified in the course of reading, and assumed was a complex one. In Whitman’s poetry, perhaps most notably in the poems of the “Calamus” sequence, the language of reading, of religious discipleship, of intimate friendship, of romantic or sexual attraction, and of the union of souls is almost inextricably entangled—one implies the rest, and the whole complex is susceptible of being read in terms of any one of them. Unlike Richard Maurice Bucke’s interpretation, which almost unfailingly converts the sexual into metaphoric accounts of cosmic consciousness, the reading implied in Gilchrist’s criticism and letters, the understanding that Whitman called “better and fuller and clearer” than others, is a response to each of these levels of meaning. Very few of Gilchrist’s most seemingly shocking overtures or responses cannot be traced to particular poems in Leaves of Grass.

Whitman’s poetry, particularly the “Calamus” sequence, asks for and constructs its own ideal readers—who will feel the poems in their bodies, who will follow Whitman as both lover, companion, and spiritual mentor, who will reciprocate Whitman’s

feelings, who will eventually draw themselves level with him and partake of his thoughts and feelings as if they were their own. Gilchrist confides to Whitman that as she read his book she felt “all folded round in thy love,” that she felt “as if thou was pleading so passionately for the love of the woman that can understand thee,” and that she did not know “how to bear the yearning answering tenderness that fills my breast” (66). She is responding to a reader-directed structure in Whitman’s poems which expresses a longing for a communion of understanding and emotional involvement with the reader.

In the “Calamus” poem, “Among the Multitude,” Whitman sets up such a relationship. The poem, like so many, addresses a reader who considers him-or herself as a prospective “*élève*,”²¹ student, or lover of Whitman and his book. It depends on and reinforces something like the pride of interpretation and a sense of sympathy and creates, in the reader who accepts the role it offers, a sense of being chosen by the poet. The subject and addressee of the poem is a “lover and perfect equal” whom Whitman’s speaker, playing the voyeur of the reading process “perceives . . . picking me out by secret and divine signs, / Acknowledging none else, not parent, wife, husband, brother, child, any nearer than I am” (LoG 115). The poem sets up the seeker as “knowing” Whitman through all his indirections, while other readers are “baffled,” unable to pick their way through the signs that reveal as well as obfuscate him. Gilchrist here must have felt a privileged interpreter, knowing as she did from the Rossetti preface the poor

²¹ This is Whitman’s term, which in French simply means “Student” but which takes on a complex coloration of apprentice, initiate, would-be lover, and spiritual seeker throughout his use of it.

critical estimate that Whitman had received in the years before.²² When Whitman states in the last stanza that “I meant that you should discover me by so faint indirections, / And I when I meet you mean to discover you by the like in you,” he reaffirms his intention and sets up the expectation of reciprocity of feeling and an opening between a courtship by book and by look that Gilchrist eagerly seizes (115). She clearly considered herself a perfect reader of Leaves and said as much, writing that

with the blue sky opening to me & a soft breeze blowing in & the Book that is so dear-my life-giving treasure—open on my lap, I have very happy times. No one hundreds of years hence will find deeper joy in these poems than I—breathe the fresh, sweet, exhilarating air of them, bathe in it, drink in what nourishes & delights the whole being, body, intellect, & soul, more than I. Nor could you, when writing them, have desired to come nearer to a human being & be more to them forever & forever than you are & will be to me. (112)

The courtship of the reader in Whitman has another element, however, which seems to agree with Gilchrist’s conception of spiritual love, the rhetoric of which pervades her letters to Whitman. It is the idea of the lover or comrade as a fragment of the self or the soul, and the corollary conception of the book as the medium of interaction or a stand-in for the soul of the lover. In her first letter to Whitman, Gilchrist writes that

²² And indeed, Whitman and the American disciples were very glad indeed to have Gilchrist’s “Estimate.” As the opinion of a British woman—respectable, well-educated, a mother—Gilchrist’s writings undercut many of the more scurrilous accusations made about the unsuitability of Whitman’s poetry for decent women.

a woman is so made that she cannot give the tender passionate devotion of her whole nature save to the great conquering soul, stronger in its powers, though not in its aspirations, than her own, that can lead her forever & forever up and on. It is for her soul exactly as it is for her body. The strong divine soul of the man embracing hers with passionate love—so alone the precious germs within her soul can be quickened into life. And the time will come when man will understand that a woman's soul is as dear and needful to his and as different from his as her body to his body. That was what happened to me when I had read for a few days, nay, hours, in your books. It was the divine soul embracing mine. I never before dreamed what love meant: not what life meant. Never was alive before—no words but those of “new birth” can hint the meaning of what then happened to me. (59)

Gilchrist's first metaphor for reading here is literally one of enlightenment—of light coming forth from the soul of the poet and brightening the soul of the reader. It is repeated throughout her letters. The other metaphor for reading or influence will also underlie much of what she writes to Whitman—the image of the intercourse of the souls of author and reader, fertilizing the soul into a “new birth.” This congress of souls may have underlying it a reading of section five of “Song of Myself.”

Gilchrist seems to understand Whitman's procreative and germinal imagery (in poems like the “Children of Adam” sequence) in a spiritual or imaginative sense here—the embrace of the poet brings the seeds inside to life. The magnetic soul of the poet attracts the student/lover soul, and brings it closer and closer to being fit for union.

Gilchrist writes to Whitman that if she were to die, she would want him to be able to say that

This woman has grown to be a very part of me. My soul must have her loving companionship everywhere & in all things. I alone & she alone are not complete identities—it is I and she together in a new divine, perfect union that form the one complete identity. (Letters 66).

But the possibility that there is a carnal union or a more tangible conception desired is in the background—expressed in her hint in the same letter that “I am young enough to bear thee children . . . if God should so bless me” (66). The begetting of “perfect children” in the “Children of Adam” sequence may be a literary metaphor for influence and spiritual fertilization, or may be a literal desire. Gilchrist takes account of both meanings and attempts to show her acceptance of the one and her willingness for the other.

It is one of the Calamus lyrics, however, which Gilchrist relates most to her own process of courting Whitman. She writes that “in moods of pain and discouragement, dear Friend, I turn to the Poem beginning, ‘Whoever you are holding me now in hand,’ and I don’t know but that one revives and strengthens me more than any. For there is not a line nor a word in it at which my spirit does not ride up instinct and fearlessly say—‘So be it’” (66).

A close examination of the poem shows the elements of Gilchrist’s relationship with Whitman. In “Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand,” Whitman melds the language of discipleship, reading, and furtive sexual intimacy. It is one of a number of

poems that act to encourage or discourage Whitman's devoted reader / lover / disciple / student, or to shift the "elevation's" perceptions of what their task is about. The title of the poem evokes both the image of Whitman and the reader holding hands in intimacy and the reader holding the physical book which here stands in for and represents itself as Whitman.

In Whitman, the image of handholding represents the poet's intimate friendship with the reader as well as his intention to lead in a spirit of mutual affection, to outstretch a hand of friendship and aid. Not only in "Whoever You Are Holding me Now in Hand" but also in "To You," Whitman urges the reader to come with him: "Let us twain walk aside from the rest," he writes (LoG 526). He urges the reader to "Tell me what you would not tell your brother, wife, husband, or physician" (LoG 526). In "Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances," the image takes on an almost mystical weight; the beloved's hand in the speaker's hand imparts "the sense that words and reason hold not" and charges him with "untold and untellable wisdom" (103). The motif is common to many of the other reader-focused and companion-focused lyrics. Gilchrist neatly appropriates this image, and uses it in her letters, writing that she often delights "to touch, to press to me the beloved books—like a child holding some hand in the dark—it knows not whose—but it knows it is enough—knows it is a dear, strong, comforting hand" (Letters 66). When she reads Whitman's poems, she tells him, she is "not groping then, but hand in hand with you, breathing the air you breathe, with eyes ardently fixed in the same direction as your eyes look, heart beating strong with the same hopes, aspirations, yours beats with" (115). Her acceptance and willingness to be led is shown

in another use, where she writes to Whitman that she takes “the hand you stretch out each day—I put mine into it with a sense of utter fulfillment: ask nothing more of time and of eternity but to live and grow to that companionship that includes all” (111).

“Whoever You Are” is a flirtation, a cryptic hint, a playful discouragement, an incitement to union both mystical and carnal, and an exploration of the act of reading. “Without one thing,” Whitman states, opening the first of several secrets into which the reader must enter, “All will be useless . . . I am not what you supposed, but far different.” One of the great difficulties in trying to pin Whitman to one meaning here is to imagine what he is expecting from his reader’s initial presuppositions: is the book not a book, or is the voice of Whitman not really a separate man? Is Whitman saying that he is not the persona he has created? As we shall see later, Gilchrist is quick to identify Whitman with his book, and wary of accepting that the Whitman she finds in the book is illusion. Whitman here unsettles meaning, creates a place for the reader to work, stirs up questions, makes distinctions ambiguous, creates a place of mystery. We cannot know, when Gilchrist said “So be it” what precisely she was “assuming.”

Reader-response critics are always interested in how the poem inscribes the ideal reader, and creates a role for the real reader to accept, modify, or reject. Like “Among the Multitude,” “Whoever You Are” asks the reader to include himself or herself in a sort of elite cadre of readers. When Whitman asks, “Who would sign himself a candidate for my affections,” the reader here is clearly intended to include himself or herself in the list—Gilchrist certainly did. To read the poem is to be given an offer, to be challenged to vie for a privileged place, to contract oneself as an aspirant.

The gender of the person addressed is ambiguous in the poem, though not so carefully left open as some others. Whitman frequently takes care to speak to both men and women and alternate his pronouns. Here, however, he speaks of the reader signing “himself.” The implication that the intended reader is male is of course undercut or complicated by Whitman’s assertion that he is “the new husband” –who would receive “the new husband’s kiss.” Gilchrist, despite her critical acuity, never seems to have seen a homosexual subtext in Calamus (though of course very few did at the time). Instead, the sequence, like the “Children of Adam” poems, is a spiritual, physical, and emotional courtship open to her as a woman.²³

Whitman implies that to meet the demands of the text the reader must also be a non-conformist, unheeding of the opinion of society, eager for adventure and willing to change, must “give up all else” and abandon “the whole past theory of your life and all conformity to the lives around you,”²⁴ though the result may be “uncertain, perhaps destructive.” In Gilchrist’s letters, she displays always a fearless desire to prove her devotion to Whitman, to qualify herself in this sense. In that first letter to Whitman, she writes “I can wait—any time, a lifetime, many lifetimes—I can suffer, I can dare, I can learn, grow, toil” (61). She even expresses her willingness to die with Whitman, if it were called for, writing, “If God were to say to me, “See—he that you love you shall not be given to in this life—he is going to set sail on the unknown sea—will you go with

²³ Edward Carpenter’s whole social ethic, on the other hand, as well as his utopian idealism will turn on a reading of Calamus as passing a mystical experience on to a sort of homosexual cosmic brotherhood.

²⁴ See Michael Sowder’s “Walt Whitman the Apostle”—Sowder treats “Whoever You Are” and Leaves in general as examples of conversion-producing rhetoric. Sowder notes that conversion, or the adoption of a new model of the self requires this sort of abandonment, or “unraveling of identity” (209).

him?" never yet has bride sprung into her husband's arms with the joy with which I would take thy hand & spring from the shore" (61). Clearly she was not daunted by Whitman's warning that his eleve's "novitiate would be long and exhausting."

The reader, proceeding through the poem, is offered a sort of test of devotion. "Therefore release me now before troubling yourself any further, let go your hand from my shoulders," says Whitman, speaking as the book itself, "Put me down and depart on your way." Now that the cowardly and conforming have, we are to imagine, stopped reading, Whitman continues, more intimate with his confirmed novice, suggesting a tryst that reminds one again of Whitman's demand that his audience read alone, and out of doors.²⁵ Gilchrist follows this injunction, writing to Whitman a number of times describing the situation of her reading—sometimes enlivening her domestic chores with Whitman's verse, but most often reading outdoors, as when she writes that she sat "in a beautiful garden (the old Priory garden) with my beloved Poems and the dew-laden flowers and liquid light and sweet, fresh air; & the sparkling of the pond & delicious greenness of the meadows beyond & rustling trees, and had a joyful time with you, my Darling" (115).

Isolated in nature, alone, having abandoned the formal setting, the "roof'd room" or "company," with all the nervous secrecy of lovers,²⁶ the book / body / soul of Whitman and the reader may know one another:

²⁵ For instance Whitman's claim in "Song of Myself" that "I will never again mention love or death inside a house, / And I swear I will never translate myself at all, only to him or her who privately stays with me in the open air."

²⁶ One is reminded of "The youngster and the red-faced girl" on the "bushy hill" which Whitman's speaker "peeringly" views in "Song of Myself."

Here to put your lips upon mine I permit you,
 With the comrade's long-dwelling kiss or the new husband's kiss,
 For I am the new husband and I am the comrade.

This tryst and exchange of affections recalls and is echoed by (or prefigures an understanding of) section five of "Song of Myself," which takes on further implications when read together with this and other moments of reader-address and sensual abandon in Leaves.

The kiss upon the lips may be construed as an image of reading aloud: Whitman, in the act of reading, has penetrated the reader, and forced his or her lips—the embodied word moves through them like air. Gilchrist writes that when she reads Whitman's poems, she is "breathing the same air" that he breathes (Letters 115).

The affection the reader is expected to yield is clearly returned, as the book desires to be carried "Where I may feel the throbs of your heart or . . . rest upon your hip." Whitman, who has already made claims to be watching from afar, now feels a magnetic attraction to the body of his reader.

But while it may be safe to carry the book, it is not necessarily safe to attempt to understand them. "These leaves conning," Whitman writes, the reader "cons at peril." Whitman again dissuades, taunts, reveals concealment:

For these leaves and me you will not understand,
 They will certainly elude you at first and still more afterward, I will certainly
 elude you,

Even while you should think you had unquestionably caught me, behold!

Already you see I have escaped from you.

In this extraordinary passage, Whitman plays a disappearing-trick with the act of reading. “Behold!” Whitman, who seemed so close, as close as the voice in one’s head, the words on the lips, is now gone in the pause between lines. The embodied word, the inspiring breath moves out of the mouth and disappears into the empty air. The text remains. The voice has escaped.

“For it is not what I have put into it that I have written this book,” Whitman writes—which is certainly true at one level: it is for the reform of the reader, for the possibility of rapport, for the creation of future generations of personalities. “Nor is it by reading it you will acquire it” as he says: it is by pursuing your own flight in the same air, by having corresponding thoughts, by making inquiries, by watching yourself, perhaps. Whitman once again acknowledges the danger of change, and the unproved nature of the endeavor the reader is contemplating, the task he or she signs up for by reading Whitman: “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”:

Whitman again teases with a classic rhetorical gesture of those who would keep people looking for a secret: he denies their ability to find it. This is a classic use of what I will call Whitman’s rhetoric of the open secret. By merely suggesting a secret, he keeps the reader reading, and drives him or her back to read or re-read the other poems. Perhaps, as in a Zen koan, the answer is not so important as is the effort, and the arousal of the sense of significance. In the presence of a mystery, everything stands as a possible clue.

Another of the Calamus poems seems to raise themes central to the issue of Anne's reading, though, perhaps unsurprisingly, it is one she never mentions. In "Are You the New Person Drawn to Me?" Whitman apparently seeks to check or modify the conceptions of those of his readers who would take his persona either too lightly or too literally. "To begin with take warning," Whitman admonishes his enthusiastic reader, "I am surely far different from what you suppose" (105). Though this again begs the question of preliminary suppositions, the questions Whitman asks afterwards clarify what he expects here:

Do you suppose you will find in me your ideal?
 Do you think it so easy to have me become your lover?
 Do you think the friendship of me would be unalloy'd satisfaction?
 Do you think I am trusty and faithful?
 Do you see no further than this façade, this smooth and tolerant manner of me?
 Do you suppose yourself advancing on real ground towards a real heroic man?
 Have you no thought O dreamer that it may be all maya, illusion? (LoG 106)

Nonetheless, the complete identification which Gilchrist made between the book Leaves of Grass and its author is suggested and encouraged in a number of his poems, perhaps most notably in "So Long," which assumed the important final position in both Rossetti's selection and the 1860 edition of Leaves. In that poem, Whitman announces,

Camerado, this is no book,
 Who touches this touches a man,

(Is it night? are we here alone?)

It is I you hold and who holds you,

I spring from the pages into your arms . . . (LoG 424).

After the first of Gilchrist's letters Whitman apologized for not writing a longer reply and confirmed her reading by pointing her back to his book, which was, he said "my best letter, my response, my truest explanation of all. In it I have put my body and spirit" (Letters 67). However, by March of 1872, Whitman felt the need to caution Gilchrist:

Dear friend, let me warn you somewhat about myself—& yourself also. You must not construct such an unauthorized & imaginary ideal Figure, & call it W. W. and so devotedly invest your loving nature in it. The actual W. W. is a very plain personage, & entirely unworthy such devotion. (Correspondence 2: 170)²⁷

Gilchrist's response to this warning is defensive, and grounded in her understanding of Whitman's poems:

If it seems to you there must needs be something unreal, illusive, in a love that has grown up entirely without the basis of personal intercourse, dear Friend, then you do not yourself realize your own power nor understand the full meaning of your own words, "whoso touches this, touches a man"—"I have put my Soul & Body into these poems." Real effects imply real causes. Do you suppose that an ideal figure conjured up by her own fancy could, in a perfectly sound, healthy woman of my age, so happy in her children, so busy & content, practical, earnest, produce such real & tremendous effect—saturating her whole life, coloring every

²⁷ Interestingly, this letter is omitted from the exchange in The Letters of Anne Gilchrist and Walt Whitman.

waking moment—filling her with such joys, such pains that the strain of them has been well nigh too much even for a strong frame, coming as it does, after twenty years of hard work?²⁸

Gilchrist, however, did tone down some of the excesses of the first letters, and Whitman did not “warn” her in the same way again. The relationship continued, with occasional ardors and occasional distancings on one side or another, until finally Anne and Walt met.

Emerson’s essay on “Friendship,” with which both Gilchrist and Whitman must have been familiar, has some interesting things to say about friendships like the one between them. In the beginning of the essay, Emerson notes the thrill of the soul that happens when first meeting a stranger who

stands to us for humanity. He is what we wish. Having imagined and invested him, we ask how we should stand related in conversation and action with such a man, and are uneasy with fear. The same idea exalts conversation with him. We talk better than we are wont. We have the nimblest fancy, a richer memory, and our dumb devil has taken leave for the time. For long hours we can continue a series of sincere, graceful, rich communications, drawn from the oldest, secretest experience. . . .(342)

²⁸ This is of course not the first or last time that Whitman would be chided by a disciple for not maintaining in life the persona that he had built in Leaves. Both Richard Maurice Bucke and Horace Traubel had many such conflicts with Whitman—recorded mostly in With Walt Whitman in Camden.

Emerson goes on to mourn the inevitable loss of this first thrill and frisson, this loss of the stranger, the universal gap that brings out our own best. But later in the essay, Emerson comes to the idea that

Friendship, like the immortality of the soul, is too good to be believed. The lover, beholding his maiden, half knows that she is not verily that which he worships; and in the golden hour of friendship, we are surprised with shades of suspicion and unbelief. We doubt that we bestow on our hero the virtues in which he shines, and afterwards worship the form to which we have ascribed this divine inhabitation. In strictness, the soul does not respect men as it respects itself. (344)

But Whitman's book, in providing an ideal personality and model intended for ages and audiences to come, also provided, for Anne Gilchrist, a friend and lover who could—and was made to—be invested with her own sympathizing nature. Whitman as reflected in the book is both an intimate and a permanent stranger: the Walt Whitman whom Gilchrist would meet, no matter how charming, friendly, sympathetic, great-souled, could play this role only imperfectly—especially as the role Gilchrist responded to was by that time quite different from the “Good Gray Poet” role he was currently engaged in. On one level at least, the Whitman that Gilchrist fell in love with was a reflection of herself. Emerson writes of the new friend that “Our own thought sounds new and larger from his mouth” (“Friendship” 343). This parallels what he writes of books of genius; in them “we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty” (“Self-Reliance” 259).

Gilchrist's last work on Whitman is justly called "A Confession of Faith"—it was written after she had met Whitman, lived in close proximity to him for a number of years, and then gone back to live in England. She had since continued her literary labors, writing a short but important and sympathetic biography of Mary Lamb, the brilliant sister of the Romantic poet Charles. Anne's life had since been touched by a tragedy—the death of her daughter Beatrice (Walt's favorite) by suicide.²⁹ She was much troubled by emphysema, and in 1881 she had found that she had incurable cancer of the breast. "A Confession of Faith" is consciously her final word on the subject.

It is less a work of enthusiasm than her "A Woman's Estimate of Walt Whitman," written some fifteen years earlier. Unlike the earlier work with its attempts to defend Whitman's style and material against then-current critical attacks, Gilchrist's last essay on Whitman focuses on explaining how Leaves should be approached. The purpose of the essay is to "indicate the scope and source of power in Walt Whitman's writings, starting from no wider ground than their effect upon an individual mind," and to "suggest such trains of thought, such experience of life as having served to put me en rapport with this poet may haply find here and there a reader who is thereby helped to the same end" (Letters 25). It begins with a long quotation from William Wordsworth:

'Of Genius in the Fine Arts,' wrote Wordsworth, 'The only infallible sign is the widening [of] the sphere of human sensibility for the delight, honour, and benefit

²⁹ Beatrice had been studying medicine in Berne, Switzerland, had come home after some traumatic event, and then gone to Edinburgh to be an assistant to a female doctor and resume her studies. Her body was found in a field outside of the city, badly decomposed. Anne hid the real cause of death in letters to friends (including Walt), saying that Beatrice had been killed by accidental exposure to too much ether (Alcaro 210-213).

of human nature, Genius is the introduction of a new element into the intellectual universe, or, if that be not allowed, it is the application of powers to objects on which they had not before been exercised, or the employment of them in such a manner as to produce effects hitherto unknown. What is all this but an advance or conquest made by the soul of the poet? Is it to be supposed that the reader can make progress of this kind like an Indian prince or general stretched on his palanquin and borne by slaves? No; he is invigorated and inspirited by his leader in order that he may exert himself, for he cannot proceed in quiescence, he cannot be carried like dead weight. Therefore to create taste is to call forth and bestow power.' (23)

“A great poet, then,” writes Gilchrist, “is a ‘challenge and a summons.’” The question is not “whether we like or dislike him, but whether we are capable of meeting that challenge, of stepping out of our habitual selves to answer that summons.” A poet “makes greater demands upon his reader than any other man. For it is not a question of swallowing his ideas or admiring his handiwork merely, but of seeing, feeling, enjoying, as he sees, feels, enjoys” (23-24). Explaining Whitman’s attempt to “give scope and elevation and beauty to the changed and changing events, aspirations, conditions of modern life,” she calls on the reader to recognize that with “new aims [come] new methods.” In order to let Whitman’s poems work properly, she enjoins the reader not to “approach these poems as a judge, comparing, testing, measuring by what has gone before, but as a willing learner, an unprejudiced seeker for whatever may delight and

nourish and exalt the soul” (25). She is obviously speaking from her own method, her own attitudes, her own experience of the poems. As she quotes:

“The messages of great poems to each man and woman are,” says Walt Whitman, “come to us on equal terms, only then can you understand us. We are no better than you; what we enclose you enclose, what we enjoy you may enjoy’ – no better than you potentially, that is; but if you would understand us the potential must become the actual, the dormant sympathies must awaken and broaden, the dulled perceptions clear themselves and let in undreamed of delights, the wonder-working imagination must respond, the ear attune itself, the languid soul inhale large draughts of love and hope and courage, those ‘empyreal airs’ that vitalize the poet’s world.” (24-25)

Gilchrist did her best to respond to the call of these poems, and it is clear that, regardless of her changing relationship with Whitman the person, she remained certain of the beneficial effects of Leaves.

Those writers who have commented on the relationship between Gilchrist and Whitman have frequently focused on the one-sidedness of their correspondence. Anne Gilchrist, though, wrote that she had envied the first husband who had loved her with a fervor she could not requite. She believed it more beneficial to be the lover than the beloved. No matter how one-sided, loving relations in the right spirit, with the right people, led to spiritual progress. Emerson would not have disagreed. In “Friendship,” he wrote of just such apparently one-sided correspondences:

It is thought a disgrace to love unrequited. But the great will see that true love cannot be unrequited. True love transcends the unworthy object, and dwells and broods on the eternal, and when the poor interposed mask crumbles, it is not sad, but feels rid of so much earth, and feels its independency the surer. Yet these things may hardly be said without a sort of treachery to the relation. The essence of friendship is entireness, a total magnanimity and trust. It must not surmise or provide for infirmity. It treats its object as a god, that it may deify both. (354)

If the most passionate love was not returned in kind, still something very important was. Whitman and Gilchrist became close friends. Whitman the man stayed under Gilchrist's roof, befriended her children, talked with her endlessly, and came to greatly admire her. After her death, he often spoke of her emotionally to the other disciples. He composed for her the "memory-leaf" "'Going Somewhere,'" eulogizing her as his "science friend," his "noblest woman-friend . . . Now buried in an English grave." "'Going Somewhere'" seems a typically Whitmanian poem in many ways, and it is easy to find it unremarkable until one notices that the burden of the poem, the assertion of endless progress, endless growth, endless travel towards some unknown but sure and fitting end, is presented as a quotation from Gilchrist's conversation. When Whitman has spoken with other voices, he has assumed them. In Gilchrist's case, he gives her the unprecedented honor of presenting his poem as her quoted words. It is a fitting tribute, I think, for the woman who had used Whitman's poems to find her own voice again.

CHAPTER III

“SO SACRED—THE EXPLICATING NOTE”: DOCTOR RICHARD MAURICE BUCKE READING “COSMIC CONSCIOUSNESS”

What are you doing young man?

Are you so earnest, so given up to literature, science, art, amours?

These ostensible realities, politics, points?

Your ambition or business whatever it may be?

It is well- against such I say not a word, I am their poet also,

But behold! such swiftly subside, burnt up for religion's sake,

For not all matter is fuel to heat, impalpable flame, the essential

life of the earth,

Any more than such are to religion.

-Walt Whitman, “Starting From Paumanok”

In an argument in the pages of the Conservator, Bliss Perry dismissed Whitman’s early disciples as “hot little prophets,” painting them equally in tones of mania, crankishness, and hero worship. The intervening years of scholarship have failed to wholly erode this conception. None of this group of early followers—a group as a

whole given to enthusiasms—was more enthusiastic than Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke. While Bucke's claims for Whitman's prophetic status were in many ways similar to those made by Whitman's other disciple, Edward Carpenter (with whom he corresponded), the fervor and boldness with which he pronounced them find no match in Whitman's circle. Indeed, several times Bucke's enthusiasm and missionary zeal, along with his devotion to his evolutionary, physiological, and mystical theories seem to have irritated and exasperated the poet. And yet Bucke has become perhaps the most influential of Whitman's disciples. As the long-term Medical Superintendent of the Asylum for the Insane at London, Ontario, he was among the pioneers of new humane practices in the treatment of mental illness (and of many doubtful ones as well).¹ He proved an endless dynamo of energy, selflessly helping his friends and serving the public. However, most of his fame came from his posthumously published magnum opus, Cosmic Consciousness, one of the first attempts to treat mystical experience in scientific terms. Bucke's work (and his own mystical experiences recounted in it) played a prominent role in William James' seminal treatment of the experiential side of human spirituality, The Varieties of Religious Experience. While lacking the long-lasting academic following James's work has attracted, Cosmic Consciousness has remained a cornerstone of mystical thought in America and throughout the world, staying in print continuously since 1900, and becoming a cult book among a shifting

¹ S. E. D. Shortt's fascinating Victorian Lunacy: Richard M. Bucke and the Practice of Late Nineteenth-Century Psychiatry, published in 1986, details Bucke's theories and innovations, and places his professional work in the context of the medical practices and scientific trends of the time. A significant proportion of books and articles on Bucke are dedicated to his role as a pioneering Canadian medical man, independent of his connection to Whitman. While previous writers on Bucke focus only on his many humanitarian reforms, Shortt details Bucke's flawed experiments in gynecological surgery and his abortive measures intended to eliminate masturbation among the male inmates.

audience of syncretic religious thinkers. The book can now be found selling well alongside the volumes of New Age spirituality that often cite it reverently.

Bucke lived a remarkable life—his early years full of adventure and physical hardship, his later with more intellectual labors he pursued with the same restless energy. Perhaps even more remarkable than what he did was the mind that developed in the doing of it—by turns scientific and religious, perceptive and blind, practical and idealistic. Bucke's life and work offers the student of mystical experience a fine example of the entanglement between methods of reading and experience, between letter and life. Studying Bucke, we see evidence that mysticism is, despite Bucke's own claims, not a simple matter of an uncommon sense or a single, sudden, unusual experience. Instead, we find mysticism in Bucke's life to be an inter-related tangle of interpretative method, experience, and intellectual context: a complex process of self-transformation and a struggle to create a new framework in terms of which he could explain his own experiences and those he found among his circle of acquaintances and among the great works of religion, philosophy, and literature.

Bucke's methods of interpretation will prove to be characteristic of early studies in comparative mysticism (and some more recent ones): their weaknesses and strengths, their selective vision and excesses are often his. His view of Whitman's work provided him a framework for interpreting his own experience; his experience and his later reading in the literature of mysticism gave him a model for interpreting Leaves of Grass. His background in the discourse of the science of the day helped him understand both in materialist and evolutionary terms uncommon for mystical thinkers.

Although Bucke's readings may seem uncritical or even credulous to some modern scholars, and Bucke's interpretations have what to many recent readers seem dazzling omissions and unfounded inclusions, Bucke's methodology, his assumptions, and his interpretive methods have a great deal to tell us about Whitman's poetry and the way it affected his most fervent readers. Even his most radical ideas become more explicable when placed into the context of a 19th-century scientific discourse. Despite its materialism and apparent grounds in reason, it presented itself, with its faith in growth and development and in its apocalyptic and utopian overtones, as a viable alternative to and successor of the Christianity then current. Bucke's life's work was to attempt to fit into this kind of totalizing and appropriating discourse the mystical element of Whitman's writings, as he understood it through his own experience and through the more straightforwardly syncretic-mystical reading developing in the works of Edward Carpenter and others at the time.

There Was a Child Went Forth

Richard Maurice Bucke was born the seventh of ten children of his father, the Rev. Horatio Walpole Bucke, in his father's parish in Methwold, England. The family was cultured, educated, and had been relatively well-off financially.² It was also intensely literate: Bucke's father was a Cambridge-educated curate of the Church of England, and read seven languages. During his stay at Cambridge, he had been a

² Bucke's father was a direct descendant of Robert Walpole, a Prime Minister of England, and a great-nephew of Horace Walpole (Coyne 11). Bucke describes his family as "good middle class English stock" (*Cosmic Consciousness* 8). Rechnitzer, Bucke's most recent, careful, and complete biographer, speculates that the Buckes' move to Canada was a result of financial difficulties (Rechnitzer 12).

“sizar”—a student granted a reduction in fees for acting as a part-time valet for other students. In this capacity, Horatio Bucke met and was impressed and influenced by Tennyson and Arthur Henry Hallam, his fellow students (Rechnitzer 12). The elder Bucke was devotedly literary: he wrote poetry (though he never published any of it),³ and when it came time for the family to emigrate to the small town of London, Ontario, he brought with him a library of over a thousand volumes.⁴ Books even played a large part in the Buckes’ decision to emigrate: the family was drawn to settle on their large farm some miles outside of London, Ontario, Canada, by the rapturous written accounts of the area that were “extensively circulated in the British Islands” (Coyne 12).⁵ Richard Maurice was one year old at the time of the move (a sister and twin brothers would be born in Canada) and grew up enjoying free range of both the surrounding countryside and his father’s library. He describes his chores about the farm: tending animals, working in the hay fields, driving oxen and horses. His “pleasures,” he writes, were “as simple as his labors. An occasional visit to the neighboring small town, a game of ball, bathing in the creek that ran through his father’s farm, the making and sailing of mimic

³ The family, however, kept a manuscript book of poetry. Horace’s poems are all love poems, some addressed to his future second wife (Elizabeth O’Reilly). After her death, Rev. Bucke wrote a number of other poems to women he admired. See Rechnitzer 13-16 for the text of several of these verses. It is clear that Maurice read his father’s poems, as he later used the same book to record his own verse.

⁴ The best early general biographies of Bucke, both drawing heavily on Bucke’s autobiographical writings together with his letters, are Edwin Seaborn’s entry on Bucke in his 1944 The March of Medicine in Western Ontario and James H. Coyne’s Richard Maurice Bucke: A Sketch, published first in the Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada in 1906 and then republished with some revisions in 1923 as a small volume. The biographical portions of Artem Lozynsky’s 1977 Richard Maurice Bucke, Medical Mystic provide a fine introduction to Bucke, though the real value of the book is in its presentation of Bucke’s letters. Most recently, Peter A. Rechnitzer’s 1994 R.M. Bucke: Journey to Cosmic Consciousness presents an admirably complete treatment of Bucke’s life, making more extensive use of Bucke’s manuscripts and presenting a more balanced picture than any earlier efforts.

⁵ Edwin Seaborn writes that Creek Farm, the Bucke home, “bespoke ease and culture, a small correct Old Country estate transplanted into the dense Canadian forest” (291).

ships, the search for bird's eggs and flowers in the spring and for wild fruits on the summer and fall" (Bucke, Cosmic Consciousness 8).

Bucke writes in his autobiographical snippets that he was raised "almost without education," but in Coyne's account, it becomes apparent that he was rather designedly allowed to educate himself. Bucke's father taught each of his sons to read in English and at least one additional language (Bucke got Latin) and then "left them to shift for themselves" (Coyne 13). However, in Bucke's own words, he and his brothers "were born with the desire to know, and with the instinct to find out" –a desire which would define Bucke's intellectual life.

We know little about the elder Bucke's religious views. He never apparently sought or received a parish in Canada, and those of his literary productions which have been published are exclusively amatory. Given Maurice's childhood opinions, we may assume that the Reverend Bucke's theology was either quite liberal, or indifferently inculcated in his son.⁶ In any event, Maurice was raised without much respect for organized religion: he "never, even as a child," he tells us, "accepted the doctrines of the Christian Church" (Bucke, CC 8). If belief in God was lacking at an early age, the desire to understand was strong. The boy was unusually curious about the larger theological and philosophical problems—God's nature and man's end. From a very early age, he writes, he dwelt "on these and similar topics far more than anyone would suppose," being as he tells us in his third-person autobiographical sketch, "subject at times to a sort of ecstasy of curiosity and hope. As on one special occasion when about

⁶ Bucke went by his middle name, Maurice, among his friends.

ten years old he earnestly longed to die that the secrets of the beyond, if there was any beyond, might be revealed to him” (Bucke, CC 8). Aside from his anxieties about the survival of the personality after death (he concluded early that “it was doubtful, or more than doubtful, whether conscious identity would be preserved”), Bucke’s childhood religious convictions were in keeping with the more liberal, naturalistic, and optimistic strain of spirituality of the time. He believed, he tells us, “that Jesus was a man—great and good, no doubt, but a man. That no one would ever be condemned to everlasting pain,” and “That if a conscious God existed he was the supreme master and meant well in the end” (8).

Bucke’s youthful reading was extensive. He focused, he tells us, on “books dealing with outdoor nature and human life,” including the novels of Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, and Captain Frederick Marryat, an author of adventure stories, former naval officer, and traveler who had been a neighbor of the Buckes in England and whose account of Canada had likely influenced the family to move. Marryat’s novels, written in a chatty style rather like that of Dumas, are full of adventures and of stories of orphans or youngest sons rising in the world to fame and fortune. Bucke wrote that he read these “over and over,” along with Byron’s poetry. He applied his reading to his life. In a posthumously published essay, “Books That Have Influenced Me,” he recalls how he “surprised some members of the family by quoting, being then 10 or 12 years old, a line from Don Juan, apropos of something which was then under discussion.”

Early on Bucke evinced a strong, almost overwhelming emotional reaction to what he read. Around the age of ten, reading a gothic adaptation of Faust by George W.

M. Reynolds and “being near its end one sunny afternoon, he laid it down utterly unable to continue its perusal, and went out into the sunshine to recover from the horror . . . which had seized him” (Cosmic Consciousness 8). The impression made by this intrusion of book-borne horror into the context of common life stayed with him: Bucke wrote that the incident was still fresh in his memory “after more than fifty years” (8).

In his course of self-education, Bucke also read the popular science of the day, and its effect was more long-lasting and profound than the momentary emotional upheaval caused by Reynolds’ Faust. Bucke was early inoculated with evolutionary assumptions. He read at sixteen Robert Chambers’ then-controversial Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation (Shortt 5).⁷ It was the first book, he would later write, to have a “deep effect” on his world-view:

It seemed to me to give a meaning to the little I knew about the world, and my thoughts have ever since flowed in the channel then first traced. Later when I read the incomparably greater works of Darwin, he only seemed to enlarge and deepen an impression already made, rather than to teach me anything new or to sway me in a direction different from that already entered upon. (Bucke, “Books That Have Influenced Me”)

From that early reading onward, Chambers’ Lamarckian conceptions of evolution would form the basis of Bucke’s thought. Though Bucke would eventually read Darwin, his evolutionary thought never adapted completely to Darwin’s exclusive focus on natural

⁷ This anonymously-published, immensely popular, and controversial work explained the development of the earth and of life on a developmental model according to natural law. It may have been Bucke’s first exposure to the evolutionary ideas that would mark much of his later thought.

selection by fitness for reproduction. He responded to the vitalism and optimism of Lamarckian thought—what drew Whitman to it, as well as Henri Bergson and many others who would combine evolutionary conceptions with an inward spiritual necessity.

In Chambers, Bucke probably found the germ of his future belief in the inevitable future progress of human evolution. Chambers wrote that “There may then [when the environment has grown “serener”] be occasion for a nobler type of humanity, which shall complete the zoological circle on this planet, and realize some of the dreams of the purest spirits of the present race” (Chambers 276). Also in Chambers, Bucke likely picked up his first taste of the theory of human racial evolution so prevalent at the time and prominent in Bucke’s later works. Chambers held that, as the human embryo ascended through the evolutionary forms before birth, so the Caucasian fetus and young baby “passes through the characters in which it appears, in the Negro, Malay, [Native] American, and Mongolian nations, and finally is Caucasian” (306).

Into the Wilderness

Bucke’s idyllic childhood among nature and books became a young manhood marked by restless grief, wanderlust, and the kinds of adventures that easily matched those in the boys’ novels he had read with so much interest. In his accounts of his departure from the family home, Bucke shows for the first time a pronounced tendency to ignore or edit inconvenient facts. As Rechnitzer notes, Bucke’s accounts of this leave-taking are uniformly inaccurate (Rechnitzer 13, 16, 17). In both of his autobiographical sketches (in Cosmic Consciousness and in a published account of his

early adventures in the west), Bucke presents himself as a recent orphan upon his departure for America. In Cosmic Consciousness, he writes (in the third person) that his mother died when he was only a few years old, and his father shortly afterwards. The outward circumstances of his life in some respects became more unhappy than can readily be told. At sixteen the boy left home to live or die as might happen. (8)

In the parallel account, he has it that

When only a few years old I lost my mother and shortly afterwards my father. Affairs at home went badly for me. I was ill-treated and early in '53 being then sixteen years old, I made up my mind that I would live elsewhere. (qtd. in Rechnitzer 13)

Bucke's mother Clarissa died in 1844 when Bucke was seven,⁸ and a stepmother, Elizabeth, died in 1847. His father's death, however, which Bucke always places in his biographies as occurring before he left home, actually did not take place until 1856, three years after the time of Bucke's departure. There are several possible explanations for this change of dates. One is simply that it makes a better story. In the romanticized novels of adventure that Bucke read as a child and absorbed so eagerly, the heroes were often orphans or otherwise disadvantaged young men who struck out for adventure in order to gain their fortune. Whether Bucke is consciously crafting his story or whether his impression of his own past has been altered (whether the story is one he has told himself) is not something we can know. The real cause of his departure is a mystery as

⁸ Seaborn says that following the death of Bucke's mother "the fortunes of the family declined" (291).

well. Rechnitzer suggests that Bucke might have been irritated by his father's continued romantic dalliances (which are clearly suggested in Rev. Bucke's poetry from the period). The break seems to have been precipitated when Bucke's oldest brother, George Walpole Bucke, sold "Creek Farm" and moved the family to a farm near Sarnia, sixty miles away (Rechnitzer 16-17). It seems fairly likely that Bucke was chafing under his elder brother's control of the family or the other stresses of being a younger son in a large family struggling with reduced means. There's some hint that there may have been some antagonism between Bucke and other members of the family. Years later, when Bucke wrote home (probably to his brother), attempting to get three hundred dollars to return home to Canada, he received no help.

No matter what the cause, Richard Maurice Bucke left Canada a desperate young man, determined "to live or die as might happen," (CC 8). He walked twenty-five miles to Port Stanley to take a boat into Ohio. Bucke's peregrinations across the North American continent seem a close match to Whitman's more imaginary travels for variety of occupations and scenery. He worked "on farms, on railways, on steamboats, and in the placer mines of Western Nevada." He worked as a fireman on a steamboat, served as a stave-maker in the swamps of Louisiana (where suffered a season-long bout of diarrhea), and tended an ox-train of merchant goods in a five-month odyssey 1200 miles across the Great Plains to Salt Lake City (Coyne 16-17). In his words, he "several times . . . nearly suffered shipwreck by sickness, starvation, freezing, and once on the banks of the Humboldt River, in Utah, fought for his life half a day with the Shoshone Indians" who attempted to rob him and his party of their supplies (Bucke, CC 9). During that

running battle, Bucke exchanged fire with the Shoshone band, who were lightly armed with bows and a few long guns. He reported wounding and possibly killing one personally, while two members of his party were injured, one seriously (Bucke, Twenty-Five Years Ago). His group had run out of water the morning of the skirmish, and the dehydration caused by the exertion of battle on the march was as desperate as the fighting itself. After escaping the Shoshone and finding water, the group pushed across the wilderness, eating nothing but a thin mixture of flour and water for six days before arriving at their destination.

After a year of unsuccessful mining in Gold Canyon, in the part of the Utah Territory that is now Nevada, Bucke met up with a pair of brothers from Pennsylvania, Allan and Hosea Grosh. The Grosh brothers had found traces of silver in the Canyon earlier and were certain that a large deposit was to be found nearby. However, their mining enterprises had been plagued by a long run of accidents and bad luck—one partner abandoning them, another shot and killed by emigrants from Arkansas, who accused him of allowing Indians to steal their horses. Before the brothers could return to their claims, Hosea pierced his foot with a pick in a mining accident and died of the consequent infection. Bucke helped Allan bury his brother and then took his place in an expedition to California (Bucke, “Twenty-five Years Ago” 554). Throughout his life, Bucke remained a financial optimist—always expecting to become a millionaire, whether by mining, speculation, or investment. Despite the universal failure (or indifferent success) of these proposed ventures, whether mining, ranching, or water-

meter manufacturing, Bucke always seems to have maintained his belief in impending fortune—remaining certain that his ventures would turn out for the best, and soon.

Bucke's expedition with Allan Gosh ran true to form: it was a disaster. The two had intended to take a sinuous and poorly marked one-hundred mile trail across the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Their donkey escaped several times, and they lost the trail more than once. The delays proved fatal: they could not get across the mountains in time. The November rain soon turned to snow, and they were caught in a blizzard in Squaw Valley for more than a week. They ran low on provisions and were forced to eat the troublesome donkey and abandon their equipment. An empty cabin where Bucke guided the party, hoping for food, proved to have had its store of hidden provisions looted by opportunistic Native Americans foragers some time before. Eventually, lost and blinded by the snow, Bucke and Gosh were forced to crawl and stagger down the mountain. At one point, weak from hunger and exposure, Bucke faced the prospect of his own death, suggesting to his companion that they should "make up our bed for the last time" in the snow, "for we shall never leave this place." Gosh was able to convince him to continue walking (Bucke, "Twenty-Five Years Ago" 559). They continued on down the mountain on frozen feet, and reached a mining camp, imagining themselves to be saved. But Gosh died unexpectedly before two weeks were out, and Bucke had one foot and the toes from the other amputated, causing a wound that, according to Coyne, "did not thoroughly heal for more than forty years" (29). Bucke would walk with the aid of prosthetics for the rest of his life. In a speech he gave about the adventure shortly before his death, Bucke said, "I have been born again . . . It has cost me my feet—yet it

was worth the price” (qtd.in Coyne 29). Grosh’s death may also have cost him a fortune. Allan had been the last person to know the location of all of the veins of silver he and his brother had found, and had not shared the most valuable information with his junior partner. No one knew anything more specific than that silver had been found in the general area. Miners following the rumor of the Grosh’s discovery would later come across the deposits that formed the famous Comstock Lode.⁹

Bucke, like the young men on the frontier who made up such a substantial portion of Whitman’s imagined audience, had seen with his own eyes the geography of much of the continent, had tried many professions, and had had his share of adventure. He had become well-acquainted with death by violence, misadventure, and illness, and had probably killed a man. He had faced his own death and been permanently maimed in the process. He was not yet twenty-one.

The crippled Bucke was sent to San Francisco by means of a charitable collection among the miners, who pulled together and donated gold dust and nuggets to support one of their own. Finding that he had come into a moderate inheritance from his mother, Bucke returned to Canada. Upon his return he wrote a poem in the family volume. In the unnamed poem, Bucke recalls when he “once did stand upon Nevada’s peak, / The loftiest height for many miles around.” From the silent and solitary height, he takes in the panoramic scene, looking down on the Sacramento valley that “Smiled like a second Eden lovely, far and sweet” (Rechnitzer 31). He ends with a touch of nostalgia for an unforgettable vision:

⁹ And Bucke would return, to testify as to the approximate location of the brothers’ claim, being rather well paid for his testimony.

Great gift it is to those who thus may stand
 On ancient mounts whose peaks untrod by men
 Look o'er that wild and solitary land
 That prospect vast of varied hill and glen
 Well might he wish to stand there once again
 He who that glorious vision once doth see
 Forgets it not again; or if so then
 Together sinks his life with memory
 Of what while life did last could ne'er forgotten be. (qtd. in Rechnitzer 30-32).

Bucke had come in contact with the natural grandeurs Whitman would sometimes evoke in his poetry—the wonders of a still-wild country, the sweep of a landscape that still seemed unspoiled. He knew rightly he would not see such things from the same vantage point again. Walking only with the aid of prosthetics, he found his days of physical adventuring were over. But he would become fascinated soon enough with another vision. Bucke lost himself, in his own fashion, in a vista of books.

Medicine, Romanticism, and Positivism

Bucke, despite his lack of previous formal education, made up his mind to study medicine at McGill University, at that time the second finest medical school in North America (Shortt 6). It could not have been easy going, but Bucke was a very fast study, and put a great deal of his considerable energy into his reading. Medicine at the time was often mostly a matter of interpreting symptoms and applying a label: Bucke's

surviving clinical notes, Shortt writes, reflect the practice of the time—they emphasize physical diagnosis over speculation about cause, and treatment of symptoms over radical intervention.¹⁰ “Never,” the young medical student reminded himself, “make a diagnosis from the first examination” (9). This cautious, conservative, and restrained training in medical diagnosis seems at odds with what Ramsay Cook calls Bucke’s “penchant for sweeping speculation and leaps of the imagination” (89). Later, he would come to approach the onset of what he called cosmic consciousness as his most challenging problem of diagnosis, developing a list of symptoms from his own case and those he considered to have undergone the same phenomenon. Then, he would be neither cautious nor conservative in his conclusions.

At the same time Bucke was studying medicine, he was filling in the gaps in his education in other areas, reading deeply and systematically in science, philosophy, and literature. Around this time, Bucke read Darwin’s Origin of the Species. He was also reading Henry Thomas Buckle’s History of Civilization in England with “intense enthusiasm.” This two-volume history, he writes, “carried into human affairs the times that had hitherto explained to me the origin of worlds and the evolution upon them of plant and animal life” (Bucke, “Books That Have Influenced Me”). In Buckle, he found not only a naturalistic and evolutionary view of history, but also the assertion that mankind’s conception of religion was due for an important change. “That old theological spirit, which has brought so much misery and ruin on the world,” Buckle

¹⁰ Shortt notes that this was a time when “Neither surgery nor medicine offered routine promise of curative intervention” (10).

wrote, was due for destruction by conflict with science. The religious conception of a jealous and wrathful god was fading: “The ancient superstition,” said Buckle

which was once universal, but is now slowly though surely dying away, represented the Deity as being constantly moved to anger, delighting in seeing His creatures abase and mortify themselves, taking pleasure in their sacrifices and their austerities, and, notwithstanding all they could do, constantly inflicting on them the most grievous punishments, among which the different forms of pestilence were conspicuous. (Buckle 486)

To Bucke, as a doctor, the idea of disease being the judgment of a wrathful and partial God was particularly odious. Buckle believed that science would eliminate this wrathful conception of God by proving that events occurred according to natural law, not divine whim: “Events, which formerly were deemed supernatural visitations, are now shown to depend on natural causes, and to be amenable to natural remedies” (468).

For Buckle (and for Bucke, later), this wholesale replacement of supernaturalism promised a purification and renewal of religion. Buckle makes a distinction between true religion and “theology”—the one being subjective and personal, given to each “according to the inward light with which he is endowed,” while the other claims a universal authority and “seeks to compel [all minds] to a single creed” (468). Once the scientific nature has accustomed the mind to “contemplate all physical phenomena as representing an orderly, uniform, and spontaneous march, and running on in one regular and uninterrupted sequence” Buckle believed, the theological mindset would perish and

a more personal and reasonable religion take its place. Buckle's history, in fact, ends on an apocalyptic note not uncommon in 19th-century scientific discourse:

The signs of the time are all around, and they who list may read. The handwriting is on the wall; the fiat has gone forth; the ancient empire shall be subverted; the dominion of superstition, already decaying, shall break away, and crumble into dust; and new life being breathed into the confused and chaotic mass, it shall be clearly seen, that, from the beginning there has been no discrepancy, no incongruity, no disorder, no interruption, no interference; but that all the events which surround us, even to the furthest limits of the material creation, are but different parts of a single scheme, which is permeated by one glorious principle of universal and undeviating regularity. (472)

Bucke would continue with some deviation the general project of Buckle and other positivists—the replacement of a narrative of divine intervention with a narrative of progress according to comprehensible natural law. It was a vision that Whitman's poetry, with its Emersonian tendency to look for God in the everyday rather than the exceptionally miraculous, would embody and support. Bucke would eventually follow this tendency out to its conclusion—arguing that even the moments most apt to be called visitations of the divine were actually physical, natural, and occurring in accord with an assumed law of upwards progress of the race.

Years later, Bucke would muse about the books that proved persistent influences in his thought:

In order [that] a book should deeply influence it must be read with a passionate interest, such, for instance, as Lucretius excited in the young Victor Hugo. It may not be the best book of the hundreds read that excites this feeling. The interest arises because of some relation existing between the book and the mental status of the reader. Many books read by me that merely touched me, and, so to say, glanced off, might and doubtless have moved others deeply—while those that moved me would produce little or no effect upon them. (Bucke, “Books That Have Influenced Me”)

What it is in Bucke that moved when he read Buckle—what the relationship was—we cannot be certain. Bucke would have been considered an atheist by many, according to the definition operative at the time. He sympathized with Shelley on the one hand and the positivists on the other. He was opposed to organized religion, an opposition which would last many years—his occasionally virulent anti-clerical statements later in life would sometimes draw Whitman’s comment, and often led Whitman to edit Bucke’s written declarations. Bucke had also developed a belief in evolution and a desire for a uniform, universal vision of the world. His life up to that point had been anything but uniform. His aimless wanderings, the death of his friend, his own crippling injury: Bucke felt the need to make all of it made sense in a sweeping and progressive narrative of ages. Bucke had a need for totalizing answers and extreme positions, a taste for passion in his ideas which neither by his medical training nor the rational philosophers he was devouring could wholly satisfy. Eventually, Whitman’s own progressive,

optimistic, evolutionary, and apocalyptic scheme would fit so neatly into Bucke's ideas and needs that it would become the obsession of his life.

We can see Bucke's worries and the emotional and intellectual needs that drove his thought during this period in an uncharacteristically pessimistic letter written to his future wife, Jessie Gurd, in 1859:

Can you wonder dearest Jessie that I should get very sad sometimes, here all alone, when I sit in my room all by myself and think of what has been— what is—and what might have been—much misery upon this earth, what was its beginning why it was ever called into existence we cannot tell—the fact of its existence we know and the reason of that we hope one day to be cleared up—you must forgive me dear Jessie for getting so dull over my letter but I will not offend again, the fact is it is rather hard to keep from complaining sometimes although we all know it never does any good. (qtd. in Rechnitzer 34)

This drive to explain the misery on earth—not only his own loneliness and the events that had left him disabled but also the failings and weaknesses of the human body he had seen first-hand in his medical studies—haunted him. The writers he was studying offered him a vision of the universe that seemed entirely reasonable—in which evil must either have a part in the scheme of good or disappear under the wheels of progress (if there were indeed evil at all worthy of the name). He would find, however, no explanation that sufficed to stop his existential worries until he came upon the writings of Whitman, who showed how an individual human being might play a starring role in

such a grand progressive narrative. And then, the explanations would not be entirely reasonable.

McGill required a terminal thesis, and Bucke's, entitled "The Correlation of the Vital and Physical Forces," was acclaimed the best of the year. It won the Governor's Prize and was published in both journal and pamphlet form. Bucke also won the Professor's Prize in Clinical Medicine for the quality of his case reporting (Lozynsky, Richard Maurice Bucke: Medical Mystic 22).¹¹ Bucke's thesis proposes a correspondence between vital forces within the body and physical forces outside of it. Light or heat is translated into nervous energy or muscle contraction on encountering a cell of the right sort. This correspondence between inner and outer world and this materialism would characterize Bucke's treatment of intellectual and spiritual issues he would explore further in Man's Moral Nature and his articles in the American Journal of Insanity. The theory also accounted for the relationship between the forces implied in life and consciousness and the natural forces—it enabled Bucke to reach toward a consistent, unified vision that might account for and reconcile both inner and outer worlds.

After his graduation, Bucke continued an intense period of study and spiritual questing. "His life," he would write later of this period, "was one passionate note of interrogation, an unappeasable hunger for enlightenment on the basic problems" (Cosmic Consciousness 9). He studied medicine abroad in London and Paris, all the while continuing his self-directed education. He studied contemporary psychology,

¹¹ Hereafter, Medical Mystic.

physiology, and general science and read systematically in the classics, history, and contemporary literature. Bucke's preference was for those poets who, as Coyne writes, "seemed to him free and fearless" (Coyne 31). He began an education in the Romantic and Victorian British poets, reading fairly deeply in Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats, and Browning. Bucke was particularly devoted to Shelley's work, especially Adonais, "Epipsychidion," and Prometheus Unbound. Near the end of his life, Bucke wrote that Shelley "was one of the writers who appealed to me strongly at a certain stage of my mental growth" and was the only poet other than Whitman whom he claimed to have read "with passion." The passion was transient, though. By the end of his life, Bucke would write that Shelley's poems had "lost for me most of the splendor which they used to wear" ("Books That Have Influenced Me").

During this period, Bucke proved capable of prodigious feats of self-education in his literary and intellectual pursuits. He learned French largely to read Comte (and to understand the medical lectures he was attending in Paris), and later German to read Goethe's Faust. During his time in London, Bucke first met with the two brothers, Alfred and Harry Buxton Forman, publishers and literary men who were to become his long-term friends. The three would often gather to read poetry together out loud, and to exchange ideas and literary enthusiasms. Eventually these brothers would play an important role in the development of Bucke's beliefs about Whitman, acting as sounding-boards for his developing ideas.

But Auguste Comte was Bucke's next great enthusiasm. During his Paris period and afterwards Bucke read most of the positivist philosopher's work and much of the

secondary work written about him. Reznitzer points out the influence of Comte on Bucke's still-developing idea of the evolution of the human mind and his faith in the narrative of progress from superstition to truth (which the French philosopher had in common with Buckle and others).

Reznitzer also emphasizes the differences between Comte's reasonable, ordered universe, and the mystical elements of Bucke's later philosophy. Comte's system makes no allowance for the survival of individual personality except in the memory of those who survive, and there is no mystical breakthrough. The system lacks the element of "apocalyptic experience" and "personal transcendent union" that becomes the cornerstone of Bucke's theories in Cosmic Consciousness (Reznitzer 39-41). It was not primarily as a champion of reason that Bucke read Comte, though, but as a possible compromise between reason and the religions urge. The first of Comte's works that Bucke read was his Catechisme Positiviste. In this book, Comte explained the religion of humanity that he espoused as a replacement for Christianity. The Catechisme, which has been translated into English as The Catechism of Positive Religion, consists of a number of dialogues between "The Priest," who is the representative of the new Positivist religion, and "The Woman" whom he is initiating. This late work lost Comte some of his more radical audience at the time of its publication. Like many of the rationalists in nineteenth-century France, Comte believed that "to destroy you must replace," and so his catechism includes a holy calendar with months representing the stages of society and areas of human endeavor, complete with feast-days of Positivist saints (Comte 3). The work is also notable for its dialogue form, which Comte explains in his introduction:

When language is used not merely to assist the investigations of the reason, but to direct the communication of its results, then it requires a fresh shape, specially adapted to this transfer of ideas. Then we must take into account the peculiar state of the listener, and foresee the modifications which the natural course of such exposition will call for. In a word, the simple statement must thus become a real conversation. Nor can its essential conditions be satisfactorily met except by assuming one single and clearly determined interlocutor. But if this type is judiciously chosen, it may, for ordinary use, adequately represent every reader; since indeed it were not possible to vary the mode of exposition to meet the exigencies of each individual, as may be done in actual conversation. (Comte 11)

The particular interlocutor Comte had in mind, however, was a woman who had been his student and very nearly his lover, Madame Clotilde de Vaux. She had died before they could consummate their relationship. Comte used de Vaux in his writings as a type of Beatrice or Laura—a sort of guardian angel and nobler half. Some years, then, before Bucke encountered Whitman, he had encountered in Comte's idiosyncratic rhetoric of catechism the idea of a spiritual teacher addressing a figure who was both lover, other half, and stand-in for every reader. In execution, nothing could be further from Whitman's style. Comte's dialogue is, at least in translation, extremely dry, and whatever sympathy the reader is expected to have with the every-catechumen figure is difficult to grasp. However, the techniques of both authors, the forms of address, both attempt the same end, and attempt to circumvent the same difficulties. Both Comte's

dialogue and Whitman's ambiguous direct address attempt to bypass reader's resistance and inculcate new attitudes.

Bucke's search for new answers to old problems and his belief in the development of humanity primed his enthusiasm for Comte. However, Comte's lack of a well-defined mystical element in accord with Bucke's later experience (and perhaps the lack of an effective emotional appeal in Comte's world-view) would eventually drive the young doctor to find the missing elements in Whitman. That Bucke (as Rechnitzer shows) never mentioned a gap between Comte and Whitman or Bucke's own more mystical philosophy is perhaps a testament to his ability to ignore or transcend seeming conflicts within his own ideas—an ability that his readings of Whitman would illustrate.

Not all of Bucke's reading during this period was philosophical. He also devoured popular novels: Anne Bronte's The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, Sir Walter Scott's Waverly, Goethe's Wilhelm Meister, George Eliot's Mill on the Floss, Adam Bede, and Silas Marner, and James Fennimore Cooper's The Last of the Mohicans (Rechnitzer 41). His enthusiasm towards a particular romanticized adventure novel, Charles Kingsley's Westward Ho!, is remarkable enough to examine in some depth. He wrote of it in his diary, calling it the "very God of Novels." Reading it, Bucke said, he found himself wholly "carried away from the dim east and north once more westward to that most divine land of America, fairly wallowing in the glorious sunshine & rich vegetation of the south and west, the wild grandeur of the western wilderness that I know so well!" (qtd. in Rechnitzer 38). His transports over the descriptions of scenery were tinged with melancholy, however. He knew he must "never more see except in such visions" such

“mighty scenes of mountain river, forest, and lovely valley.” The accounts aroused in him “indescribable longings, regret, exultation & despair—to think to have seen such & never more to see, a cripple, a wreck” (qtd. in Rechnitzer 38). Bucke’s reaction reminds us of the untitled poem he had written in the family album on his return from America—his lament for vistas now closed to him.

Reading can be a key to remembrance. Relatively bare descriptions call up from us complexes of memory and emotion. In Whitman’s poetry a vast variety of natural scenes could be found—what Bucke would call in Walt Whitman “the scenery of a Continent, its rivers, lakes, bays, prairies, mountains, forests, the crags and ravines of Colorado and California, the vast fertile spread of the Prairie States, the snows and wildernesses of the North, the warm bayous and lagoons of the South, the great cities of the east” (Bucke, Walt Whitman 186). Bucke had experienced many of these landscapes in his long travels, and Whitman’s book likely stirred in him a kind of nostalgic recollection of the wonder he had felt in the face of nature. Later, speaking of the different reactions possible to Leaves of Grass, Bucke would write that for some the chief merit lay in its “pictorial suggestions.”¹² Bucke probably responded to Whitman’s descriptions of scenery and catalogues of nature—a nature whose sublimity he had encountered directly years before.

Bucke soon began to think more seriously about poetry. His devotion to the art had led to several attempts to write verse, including a number during his student years.

¹² Or actually, he wrote “pictures and art suggestions”—Whitman struck this inelegant phrase and suggested “pictorial” (Bucke, Walt Whitman: Walt Whitman’s Autograph Revision of the Analysis of Leaves of Grass 112-13).

He had considered none of them wholly successful. After he returned to Canada in 1863 from his studies abroad, Bucke found himself again headed west—this time to testify as a witness in a legal case regarding the location of the Grosh brothers' silver claims. He was supported by a stipend from the company that controlled the Comstock Lode, and testified against the interests of his friend, the Rev. Grosh, the brothers' father. During the period of idleness while waiting to testify, Bucke began to recognize poetry as a structuring force in his own consciousness and began to identify in himself mental states that he considered "poetic." At the same time, however, he was coming to terms with his own lack of the skills necessary to practice the art and craft of poetry:

Music and singing in the parlor in the evening—Someone sang an old song that Fanny P. used to sing when I was in love with her—I was in my room and leaned out the window to hear it—in the mean time looking over the lake—the blending of emotions of the three periods (when I was in California before & saw this lake—when I heard Fanny sing this song, and now) produced a most peculiar state of mind—which could it be well expressed in verse would make a beautiful poem quite in Shellys [sic] style but I am no Shelley and don't think of attempting it—I am feeling myself more & more constrained to give up the notion that there may be possibly some capabilities in me above a fair average of half educated men—the sooner I get entirely rid of such notions, probably the better it will be for me. (qtd. in Lozynsky, *Medical Mystic* 24)

Here we find the intrusion of the practical and self-deprecatory on Bucke's poetic dreams—and his deliberate attempt to disabuse himself of those dreams. He seldom

wrote more verse himself, but the idea that he might possess above-average capabilities reasserted itself in another way. Later, Bucke's experience of cosmic consciousness, along with his belief that the same experience inspired the greatest among the poets of all ages would enable him to feel connected to poetry and poetic tradition without writing verse himself.

"Free, fearless, and romantic" poetry may have distracted Bucke from his own lingering physical and psychological problems. While Bucke was building a medical practice in Sarnia and establishing a family (he married Jessie Gurd in 1865, after an on-again-off-again courtship) he suffered recurring illnesses. These health problems included self-diagnosed dysentery and malaria as well as an "ague" which he diagnosed as typhoid (Shortt 16-21). In a time before masks and aseptic practices were widespread, doctors were at risk for a variety of diseases, and Bucke had contracted typhoid at least once during his service in the Paris hospitals (Coyne 32).¹³ His problems were not strictly physical, however. S. E. D. Shortt, who has made the most extensive study of Bucke's health, has found in Bucke's diaries evidence of "a psychological affliction" that appeared "in various guises" over a fourteen year period (Shortt 21). The various manifestations of this illness included depression, "nervous dyspepsia," and acute panic attacks, as we shall see later (22).

¹³ Coyne reports a story of Dr. W. C. Vanbuskirk, a fellow student of Bucke's at Paris. He recalls seeing Bucke earnestly studying Comte "whilst incapacitated by fever from attending the hospitals" (32).

On First Reading Whitman

Like Anne Gilchrist, Bucke first encountered Walt Whitman in print in the British selection edited by Rossetti. Bucke had heard of Whitman from a friend, Dr. Sterry Hunt, who had quoted him a few lines from Whitman's poetry in 1867. The conversation with Hunt would become charged with the weight of prophecy. Bucke wrote years later that there "came to me at that moment, upon that mere mention of the poet's name, how conveyed or whence I have not the least notion, a conviction, which never afterwards left me, that the man so named was a quite exceptional person, and that a knowledge of him and of his writing was of particular importance to me" (Bucke, "Memories of Walt Whitman: 1"). This impression only grew as Bucke became more acquainted with the poet's writings. By 1869, Bucke had purchased his own copy of the Rossetti edition, and was exchanging letters with Harry Forman, expressing his enthusiasm for Whitman's work. Some of Bucke's germinal perceptions of Leaves were developed during this dialogue. Bucke first mentioned Whitman in a letter of February 14, 1869. He was initially impressed with Whitman's poems as revealing a fascinating personality. "Here is in fact" he wrote, "a master mind in literature—A mind too great to be confined in poems & usages—that makes as it goes ways & forms & usages for generations to come" (Lozynsky, Medical Mystic 25). He found Whitman to be

a mind & heart on a large scale in which there is no littleness, no humbug, no pretense no make believe [,] which receive with themselves the outside world as it is without warp or refraction and which render it back again without warp or

refraction. In fact, if I am not mistaken we have here correct revelation—For this is A man as he reveals himself—. (Lozynsky, Medical Mystic 25)

Throughout his poetry, Whitman encouraged this reading-through from work to man, this divine confusion of self and fiction. Bucke interpreted Whitman according to Whitman's own accounts of his project, and for the most part agreed with Whitman's aggrandizing estimates of himself in his poems and prose.

Forman had noted in a letter of July 14, that “the more you read [Whitman] the more you may, for there is much that at a glance makes appear superficial and trite which seems to assume vast meaning as one becomes familiar with it”—though he also noted Whitman's “bad taste, according to our notions” (Rechnitzer 57).

The efficacy of this kind of progressive reading became an article of faith for Bucke: he wrote in April 1870 that “there is no poem [of Whitman's] that is not a masterpiece and which will prove itself a masterpiece if it is only read in the right spirit and read until understood, or rather felt” (57). He believed that Whitman's poetry did not “appeal to the intellect, or if at all only to a minor degree” but instead to what he considered calling “feelings or emotions,” but later called the “man himself.” Bucke took Whitman's claims for his effects at face value, borrowing concepts and terminology from Whitman's poems that deal with his own effects and work with figures of ineffability. Bucke borrowed from “A Song of the Rolling Earth” in this way, writing that the way in which Whitman's poem so appealed to human nature was via “the inaudible words of the earth” (57). He asked Forman in the same letter about the possible meanings of a line from the same poem:

What do you make of this “I swear I think all merges towards the unspoken meanings of the earth, towards him who sings the songs of the Body and of the truths of the earth; toward him who makes the dictionaries of the words that print cannot touch”, this means something or nothing. If it means something (as I think unquestionably it does) it means considerably more than the same number of words generally do. (57)

It is unsurprising that Bucke would have picked the poem that would become “A Song of the Rolling Earth” as an object for his fascination. Aside from “Song of Myself” (which was omitted from the Rossetti), that poem provides some of the most complex invocations of a language of ineffability in Whitman.¹⁴ It also provided Bucke with his understanding of the effect of Whitman’s poetry (and hence, eventually, his understanding of the function of all “true” poetry).

“Song of the Rolling Earth” presents a complex view of the relationship between the material world and language that both exalts and acknowledges the limits of the possibilities of poetry. It immediately questions the reader’s conception of language: “Were you thinking that those were the words, those upright lines? those curves, angles, dots?” (LoG 184). Whitman answers immediately, “No, those are not the words, the substantial words are in the ground and sea, / They are in the air, they are in you.” By this gesture, Whitman casts into doubt the value of merely human language, but at the same time charges all of the material universe with a semiotic value, making it a language to be read. The human body, with its particular presence, is also a poem,

¹⁴ Bucke’s first encounter with a version of “Song of Myself” came in 1870, when he borrowed Dr. Hunt’s 1855 edition of Leaves.

affective and interpretable: “A healthy presence, a friendly or commanding gesture, are words, sayings, meanings / The charms that go with the mere looks of some men and women, are sayings and meanings also.” Throughout the poem, Whitman seems to say that the poet who emulates the attitude of the earth, which

. . . does not argue,

is not pathetic, has no arrangements,

Does not scream, haste, persuade, threaten, promise,

Makes no discriminations, has no conceivable failures,

Closes nothing, refuses nothing, shuts none out,

Of all the powers, objects, states, it notifies, shuts none out. (LoG 185)

The poet who can emulate this attitude may be able to speak with the same power and authority as the earth speaks through natural objects and bodies, materials and sympathies. All merges towards “the unspoken meanings of the earth, / Toward him who sings the songs of the body and of the truths of the earth, / Toward him who makes the dictionaries of words that print cannot touch” (188).

This poem is the root of many of Bucke’s later beliefs about poetry in general, and Whitman’s poetry in particular. Bucke came to reject the efficacy of argument and logic to make the most profound changes in human life—just as in “A Song of the Rolling Earth” Whitman notes that the soul is made visible not by “reasoning” and that “no proof has establish’d it,” but it has been established by “Undeniable growth.” For Bucke this growth, both racial and personal, was always central. But another pair of lines would prove even more important for Bucke’s philosophy for years to come. They are an

affirmation both of the power of personal transformation and the subjective nature of experience: “I swear the earth shall surely be complete to him or her who shall be complete, / The earth remains jagged and broken only to him or her who remains jagged and broken” (187). Bucke came to believe the same of Whitman’s poetry: what a person read there depended on his or her own spiritual wholeness and development.

It was the indefinable and open character of Whitman’s writings, the poet’s appeals to the ineffable, that tantalized Bucke here: he had found a mystery in Whitman’s promises and evasions that focused his attention and stirred him into creativity. What draws us into a book is often an evocative absence. Bucke never lost the conviction that there was something secret to be found in Whitman’s work. Not just something secret, but something secret addressed to him: “The fixed feeling or conviction,” he would write, “that the writings of this man contained a message for me, never left me, but I could neither discover the message nor find any clue to it” (Bucke, “Memories of Walt Whitman: 1”). That search consumed him. Throughout his life, Bucke was a man fascinated by mysteries, ciphers, and puzzles. That fascination would emerge again in his later obsession with the Shakespeare / Bacon hypothesis. At the same time as he was drawn to sites of textual play, however, he also felt a driving need for certainty and explanation. Between the two tendencies, we have a longing that we might call the “explicating note” in his character (Traubel, WWVIC 2:408).¹⁵ Bucke’s readings of Whitman would allow him to indulge all of these needs: Whitman and his works were to become a veiled disclosure of an infinite, vital, and spiritual secret for

¹⁵ Though when Whitman speaks of this “explicating note” is he speaking of Bucke’s tendency to explicate, or something deeper, an undertone that explained Bucke to him?

Bucke. In his attempt to understand and explain this secret, he would use all of his intellectual and emotional resources—his medical training and his understanding of evolutionary science.

Reading Whitman's poetry in this intense, emotion-centered way permanently shaped Bucke's views about what poetry did, and how it did it. In his 1883 biography of Walt Whitman, Bucke would give this account of his reading:

About eighteen years ago, I began to read it [Leaves of Grass]. For many months I was strongly inclined to believe that there was nothing in it to see. But I could not let it alone; although one day I would throw it down in a sort of rage at its want of meaning, the next day or the day after I would take it up again with just as lively an interest as ever, persuaded that there was something there, and determined to find out what that might be. At first as I read, it seemed to me the writer was always on the point of saying something which he never actually said. Page after page seemed equally barren of any definite statement. Then after a time I found that a few lines here and there were full of suggestion and beauty. Gradually these bright spots, as I may call them, grew larger, more numerous and more brilliant, until at last the whole surface was lit up with an almost unearthly splendor. (Bucke, Walt Whitman: Walt Whitman's Autograph Revision 103; Underlining indicates text changed or inserted by Whitman).

It is worth noting Bucke's use of the trope of illumination in this account; this gradual spreading of splendor across the surface of the poem was be the first in a series of

illuminations. The same kind of language is used to explain his experience of “cosmic consciousness.”

Bucke’s experience of Whitman’s poetry was already beginning to change him. The vistas suggested by his readings of Whitman’s poetry offered Bucke a way of viewing the world that allowed him both to respect the scientific and demonstrable, the reasonable and unified view of the positivist authors he admired, and to admit the importance of the vague and emotional fringes of human nature, the enthusiasms and passions, religious and otherwise, that he had admired in the Romantic poets.

How much of what Bucke read in Whitman was actually Whitman? For almost all of Bucke’s critics and biographers, the Good Gray Poet looms large in Bucke’s intellectual and spiritual development. One author disagrees. S. E. D. Shortt, in his Victorian Lunacy argues that

a close examination of Bucke’s relationship with the poet fails to document a significant influence on the evolution of his thought. Rather, it is clear that Bucke, in the early 1870’s, read into Whitman’s poetry ideas with which he was already familiar, and that, in later years, he personified in the poet values he himself admired. (113)

This is a surprising interpretation, but not without some justice, at least as a corrective to earlier assertions (including Bucke’s own) that Whitman was the fountain of all of Bucke’s ideas. Whitman’s almost apocalyptic influence on Bucke’s character was not due to his poems being a source of novel material, but as an evolution and a reconciliation of what Bucke already knew. They were a ground for Bucke to discover

his faith, or a way in which those ideas could be consolidated within a single person, and where they might be safely adored. Emerson attested to this characteristic of reading—that we are best ready to accept in books ideas that have remained unspoken in us, that in books of genius “we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty” (“Self-Reliance” 259).

Whitman, speaking to Traubel, gives an account of Bucke’s “growth towards him,” saying that it occurred by “perfectly easy and almost measured gradation”:

He was so much given to Oriental studies—mysticality: dived into them deep, oh so deep! —and coming along fresh from that, falling upon me, upon Walt Whitman—the things he had been dreaming about embodied right here in this modern world and in an American—it was a revelation of convincing significance.¹⁶ (WWVIC 2: 407-408).

When Shortt quotes part this passage, he sees a one-sided kind of projection. But Whitman’s next statement adds another dimension to the dynamic between the two. The poet speaks of a

curious likeness between us—between all of us for the matter of that—all of our crowd, who, most all of us, came to our religion, our peculiar faith in America, by a common way. Doctor’s is before all a religious nature, yet is enough concrete too, to be safe against monasticism. (408)

¹⁶ This may be a misapprehension by Whitman. There is very little evidence that Bucke had studied Eastern texts much before meeting with Whitman—later, while doing research for Cosmic Consciousness, he would read in them extensively in translation, and through early European interpretations, however.

Describing Bucke's character, Whitman emphasizes his active nature, how he would not retreat from the world, would not like "the Louis XIV men and women" who "when they got tired of things, when life palled on them, went, the women into the nunneries the men into monasteries."¹⁷ Instead, "Bucke, any man like him, I, you, would find another avenue of escape" (2: 408). Whitman continues, apparently responding to a suggestion by Traubel:

Concrete? That he is, too: serious, deep, fervent, steadfast: he enjoys dinners, travels, sights—but that is not all (indeed is only the surface of all): after that there's an undertone—more than an undertone—oh! so sacred—the explicating note. (2: 408)

Whitman characterizes Bucke's "way of looking at the universe" as "healthy," and finds yet another shared trait between Bucke, Whitman, and the other disciples:

He is impatient of disbelief—the disbelief in ends: in that, too, we find that he comes close to us—again explains why he has joined our clan. He looks at life not from the standpoint of an hour, a day, a month, even a year, but as the creative power itself—over ages, cycles of ages—perceives then that everything is self-explained, self-justified. (2: 408)

If Bucke used Whitman's poetry as a kind of mirror in which his own ideas were transfigured and invested Whitman himself with the characteristics he considered grand and godlike, both poet and work were eminently well suited to receive the charge and act

¹⁷ This tension between contemplation and action is as old as contemplation itself. In the America of the late nineteenth century, obsessed with practical action and in love with the world of work, it was at a high point. Bucke embodied the binding of contemplative habits of mind with practical habits of action.

as a ground for Bucke's personal development. As Whitman noted, the two men shared an outlook and a kind of affinity, regardless of influence. Still, the admixture of old and new, of something unspoken in Bucke and something inscrutably spoken in Whitman, is two-sided: neither the sycophantic hero-worship Whitman's biographers have often marked in Bucke, nor wholly the one-sided projection that Shortt sees. Whitman may have given Bucke a focus, a way to accept his own less-than-divinity, get over his fears and what may have been a paralyzing sense of inadequacy, and still feel that he participated in and was connected to greatness.

Illuminations

By late 1871, Bucke was charged with enthusiasm. He wrote to Harry Buxton Forman about his plans for a book about the relationship between art and religion:

It will be nothing less than a new theory of all art and religion and I am sure a true one. It will furnish a sound basis for poetical and other art criticism, not but that taste and ability will be needed to work on this basis. It will supply a new theory of the universe and of man's relations to the external universe and which being as a religion as positive as positivism and will supply more hope for mankind and will not shut up men's faculties in the known and present in the same way that positivism does. (Rechnitzer 58)

This book would become Man's Moral Nature. The letter to Forman, as Rechnitzer has pointed out, shows Bucke had the project in mind, and some of its outlines, well before the event that he would later claim was its inspiration.

It was during a trip to London to recuperate from a stint of illness that Bucke had the experience that would become the central experience of his life. The way in which he relates what he calls his “real and sole initiation to the new and higher order of ideas” in his book Cosmic Consciousness (10) deserves a close look. Of particular note is the privileged position he gives in his account (writing of himself in third person) to his understanding of Whitman’s poetry. First, he gives a summary of his experience reading Leaves:

At the age of thirty he fell in with “Leaves of Grass,” and at once saw that it contained, in greater measure than any book so far found, what he had so long been looking for. He read the “Leaves” eagerly, even passionately, but for several years derived little from them. The last light broke and there was revealed to him (as far perhaps as such things can be revealed) at least some of the meanings. Then occurred that to which the foregoing is preface.

Bucke considers his readings of Leaves of Grass and his breakthroughs in understanding it to be an important preparation and context for the experience of “illumination” that he narrates:

It was in the early spring, at the beginning of his thirty-sixth year. He and two friends had spent the evening reading Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Browning, and especially Whitman.¹⁸ They parted at midnight, and he had a long drive in a hansom (it was in an English city). His mind, deeply under the

¹⁸ The two English friends could only have been the Forman brothers. As many of Bucke’s biographers have noted, no mention of this event is made in their letters of that period (Rechnitzer 61). In Wallace’s Visits To Walt Whitman, however, Wallace says that Bucke confirmed that the friends in question were the Formans (Wallace and Johnston 27-28).

influence of the ideas, images and emotions called up by the reading and talk of the evening, was calm and peaceful. He was in a state of quiet, almost passive enjoyment. All at once, without warning of any kind, he found himself wrapped around as it were by a flame-colored cloud. For an instant he thought of fire, some sudden conflagration in the great city; the next, he knew that the light was in himself. (10)

Bucke writes that this was immediately followed by a

sense of exaltation, of immense joyousness accompanied or immediately followed by an intellectual illumination quite impossible to describe. Into his brain streamed one momentary lightning-flash of the Brahmic Splendor which has ever since lightened his life; upon his heart fell one drop of Brahmic Bliss, leaving thenceforward for always an aftertaste of heaven. Among other things he did not come to believe, he saw and knew that the Cosmos is not dead matter but a living Presence, that the soul of man is immortal, that the universe is so built and ordered that without any peradventure all things work together for the good of each and all, that the foundation principle of the world is what we call love and that the happiness of every one is in the long run absolutely certain.¹⁹ (10)

The language he uses here appeals to ineffability: it is “quite impossible to describe” his feelings. And he uses a rather unclear construction, “Among other things he did not come to believe,” which seems to be referring to the instantaneous-seeming nature of the

¹⁹ This is the most complete description Bucke gives of the experience, but he revisits it often in his writings. In *Cosmic Consciousness*, most of the descriptions of cosmic consciousness that are not directly tied to another person are in fact echoes of or refigurings of Bucke’s own experience, though they are presented as common and normative.

knowledge and not any later disconfirmation. Otherwise, the language he uses to describe his experience alludes vaguely to other mystical systems. The “drop of Brahmic Bliss,” recalls the contemporary translations of Indian writings that Bucke would read in the years after his experience.²⁰ The “aftertaste of heaven” may be construed generally or in a Christian tradition. And of course, readers of Whitman cannot fail to note the similarity between the noetic content of Bucke’s experience (what he reported that he had learned from his illumination) and the suggestions to be found in Whitman’s “Song of Myself” and other works.

Despite this clear correlation, Bucke’s illumination has been widely used in the literature on mystical experience as an example of spontaneous and unintended mystical experience. Christian Barnard writes that Bucke’s vision is exemplary because, in part, “it came upon him with very little overt preparation” (Barnard 37), and another scholar of mysticism, Jess Hollenbeck, finds it “difficult to imagine how the preternatural illumination that surrounded Bucke and surprised him during this moment of supreme joy could have been fully explicable as a by-product of his cultural milieu, since it was experienced as something completely new and unexpected” (Hollenbeck 15). Both fail completely to note the intense preparation Bucke has shown in his preceding reading of and fascination with Whitman’s work. They also fail to note the fact that Bucke didn’t write of this experience until years later, after a long friendship with Whitman and

²⁰ In R. C. Zaehner’s section on Bucke in his *Concordant Discord*, he attributes Bucke’s use of this phrase to Emerson, since “there is no evidence at all that [Bucke] had any deep acquaintance with the Hindu scriptures from which the term derives” (44). In fact, Bucke read extensively in the translations of his day before writing this—though years after his experience.

various changes in his explanatory framework.²¹ Bucke's first apparent mention of the experience in print is in a letter he wrote to Harry Buxton Forman on the day he had finished writing Man's Moral Nature, in November of 1878:

I think it is somewhat remarkable from the first moment that the central idea flashed across my mind going home from the P. O. that night in the spring of 1871 till now. I have never had to alter a thought that has gone into it, and although I did not see all its parts that night the whole book was revealed to me then, the subsequent process has consisted in unfolding and formulating of this idea, no doubt of the truth of this idea or of its parts has ever troubled me though as a general thing I am not given to too much fixity of opinion.

Reading this account, we notice a few important inconsistencies between this early mention of the experience and Bucke's later full-blown report. First, Bucke has recollected the year differently in this reference—elsewhere he always has it as 1872. But there are more serious questions to be asked here. In the letter to Forman, Bucke mentions nothing about the revelation other than that it formed genesis of his book. Reading Man's Moral Nature we find a great deal that attempts to explain a sudden change of moral/emotional viewpoint. But there is very little mention of any specific revelation about the nature of reality, as there is in the account Bucke gives in Cosmic Consciousness. If that later account shows the experience as a revelation of the truth of

²¹ Some of the problems with these interpretations of Bucke's experience may be accounted for by the authors' reading only the version of the experience presented by William James in Varieties of Religious Experience. It is taken, James tells us, from a pamphlet that preceded Bucke's Cosmic Consciousness. What extant works of Bucke that might fulfill that description, including the 1894 "Cosmic Consciousness: A Paper Read before the American Medico-psychological Association in Philadelphia, 18 May, 1894," do not contain the version of Bucke's experience quoted by James.

views that accord with Whitman's, the book that supposedly proceeded out of the experience at first is just an explanation of how Whitman's work may have influenced Bucke's character. I will argue later that the version of the event given in Cosmic Consciousness constitutes a later reading of this obviously intense moment of insight, change, or inspiration—a reading that “unfolded” along with Bucke's explanatory models.

Despite Bucke's later emphasis on instantaneous illumination, his own case illustrates a more typical pattern in mystical experience: a variety of preparations, “inspired-feeling” readings, ecstatic experiences and emotional disturbances, read as a more or less continuous progression towards a “higher plane.” Equally suggestive (and as equally frequently overlooked) is Bucke's poor health at the time, and his previous susceptibility to nightmarish panic attacks, related to what he called “nervous dyspepsia.” In a paper delivered in 1877, Bucke describes his own symptoms in third person:

Some day, we will suppose in the middle of the afternoon, without any warning or visible cause, one of these attacks of terror come on. The first thing the man feels is a great but vague discomfort. Then he notices that his heart is beating much too violently. At the same time shocks or flashes as of electrical discharges so violent as to be almost painful, and accompanied by a feeling of extreme distress, pass one after another through his body and limbs. Then in a few minutes he falls into a condition of the most intense fear. He is not afraid of anything; he is simply afraid. . . . When the climax of the attack is reached and

passed, there is copious flow of tears, or else a mental condition upon which the person weeps upon the least provocation. (qtd. in Shortt 23).

These attacks apparently continued until 1878, five years after Bucke's illumination experience.

S. E. D. Shortt, the author of Victorian Lunacy, a study of Bucke's practice as a pioneer in psychiatry, suggests that Bucke's mystical illumination "may have been related to his labile emotions and history of anxiety states" (23). In the same period as the illumination experience, Bucke experienced other strong, immediate, apparently objectless emotional states. That Bucke read one sort of experience in a medical context, as "a violent attack of nervous depression from dyspepsia," and sought psychological help for it, while he found in the other a source of solace and an evidence for an evolutionary trend in mankind and a general model of metaphysical speculation, has a great deal to say, I think, about the role of mystical writings and ideas in creating a framework of interpretation for experience.²²

Here we have, in one of the best-attested-to and most-studied mystical experiences of the modern era, an example of the intimate entanglement of poetic text and religious experience, reading and meditative practice, intellectual context and mystical vision. Bucke uses his own experience as the touchstone to test the other experiences he lists in his book. This experience in which he "learned more within the few seconds during which illumination lasted than in previous months or even years of

²² This one-sided focus is common and characteristic. William James, in The Varieties will admit, after characterizing mystical experience as primarily optimistic, that there are perhaps as many experiences with negative outcomes (what he calls a "diabolical mysticism") as positive ones (337).

study . . . learned much that no study could ever have taught” was preceded by what Bucke regarded as a textual breakthrough in reading Whitman,²³ and followed by a theory of reading and the transfer of emotional states that he had already begun to work on. As Rechnittzer notes, “Bucke’s moment of illumination may have served more to confirm than to reveal to him man’s moral nature” (29). Likewise Ramsay Cooke, in his chapter on Bucke in his study of Victorian Canadian reformers, The Regenerators, writes that it is “likely that the experience was only a crystallization of thoughts and intuitions that he had been gathering for many years, perhaps since his youth” (Cooke 92). By the end of his life, Bucke would agree, giving in Cosmic Consciousness a general account of the onset of illumination that emphasizes the preliminary development of years that lays behind the moment of revelation:

The mind becomes overcrowded (as it were) with concepts and these are constantly becoming larger, more numerous and more and more complex; some day (the conditions being all favorable) the fusion, or what might be called the chemical union of several of them and of certain moral elements takes place; the result is an intuition and the establishment of the intuitional mind, or, in other words, cosmic consciousness.

The cosmic vision . . . is thus seen to be simply the complex and union of all prior thoughts and experience—just as self consciousness is the complex and union of all thought and experience prior to it (18).

²³ We will deal later in more depth with Bucke’s report of this textual breakthrough, given in the context of his 1883 biography of Whitman.

Regardless of how it came about, Bucke's experience seems to have had the effect of allowing him entrance in his own experience to a region which previously he'd only known at second-hand. It authorized his speculations on themes of universal import, and made him an "insider"—connected, as we shall see later, with what he would come to see as a great hidden tradition or family of thinkers, poets, and saints. It also gave Bucke a reason to abandon the sense of "unhappy consciousness"—the sense of fear, sin and shame that he had battled with for years.

Bucke's first meeting with Whitman acted as a confirmation of his beliefs. It served as another illumination or moment of great spiritual significance in his progression towards his final unshakeable faith in the poet as something greater than the usual run of human being. Like many of Whitman's other disciples, Bucke's previous reading of Leaves of Grass deeply colored his experience of Whitman's presence in the flesh.

Bucke had written to Whitman hinting of the possibility of a meeting as early as 1870, when he wrote to purchase current copies of Leaves along with "A Passage to India" and Democratic Vistas. He hinted that he would "be in Washington in the course of 1871" (Lozynsky, Medical Mystic 44). Whitman did not often encourage visits from admirers he didn't know, and still less often responded to unsolicited letters. It wasn't until the summer of 1877 during a business trip to Philadelphia that Bucke actually met with Whitman. He arrived unannounced, "to make" as he writes, an "experimental call." Asking for directions to Whitman's Camden house from passers-by, Bucke was surprised to find that they did not know of any such person. He finally stopped in a drug

store, looked up the address in a Camden directory, and went to make his call. Bucke wrote to Harry Buxton Forman in October, recounting the visit:

I hardly know how to tell you about W. W. If I tried to say how he impressed me you would probably put it down to exaggeration. I have never seen any man to compare with him—any man the least like him—he seems more than a man and yet in all his looks and ways entirely commonplace (“Do I contradict myself?”) [.] He is an average man magnified to the dimensions of a god—but this does not give you the least idea of what he is like and I despair of giving you any idea at all however slight—I may say that I experienced what I have heard so much about the extraordinary magnetism of his presence—I not only felt deeply in an indescribable way towards him—but I think that the short interview has altered the attitude of my moral nature to everything—I feel differently, I feel more than I did before—this may be fancy but I do not think it is. (Lozynsky, Medical Mystic 46)

In the introduction to Walt Whitman, Bucke gives substantially the same account, though he writes in the third person and refers to his own experience as that of “a person well known to the present writer” (Bucke, Walt Whitman 50). He also uses analogy to describe the “state of mental exaltation” that set in after his brief conversation with Whitman. It could, he wrote, only be described “by comparing it to slight intoxication by champagne, or to falling in love!” (50).²⁴ Here he makes spiritual claims for the value of

²⁴ Richard Cavell and Peter Dickinson’s “Bucke, Whitman, and the Cross-Border Homosocial” presents one version of Bucke and Whitman’s relationship. One might also note that Bucke’s choices of metaphor (intoxication and love) are both metaphors often used historically to describe ineffable spiritual states.

reading Whitman and reading Leaves of Grass: “this person’s whole life has been changed by that contact (no doubt the previous reading of Leaves of Grass also), his temper, character, entire spiritual being, outer life, conversation, etc.. elevated and purified in an extraordinary degree” (50). He also adds a telling detail about his reaction, “at first he used often to speak to friends and acquaintances of his feeling for Walt Whitman and the Leaves, but after a time he found that he could not make himself understood, and that some even thought his mental balance impaired.”

In a talk he gave to the Walt Whitman fellowship in 1894, Bucke again describes these first impressions:

A sort of spiritual intoxication set in which did not reach it’s [sic] culmination for several weeks, and which, after continuing for some months, very gradually, in the course of the next few years, faded out. While this state of exaltation remained at its height the mental image of the man Walt Whitman underwent within me a sort of glorification (or else a veil was withdrawn and I saw him as he was and is), insomuch that it became impossible for me (I am describing the event just as it occurred, as accurately as possible) to believe that Whitman was a mere man. It seemed to me at that time certain that he was either actually a god or in some sense clearly and entirely preterhuman. Be this as it may, it is certain that the hour spent that day with the poet was the turning point of my life. The upshot was the placing of my spiritual existence on a higher plane. (“Memories of Walt Whitman: 1)

In the introduction to his 1897 edition of Whitman's letters to Peter Doyle, entitled Calamus after Whitman's poetic sequence, Bucke gave yet another account of this initial meeting, which emphasizes more Whitman's physicality, speaking in detail of his features and the physical impression he made, including the "impalpable odor of purity" that he gave off: Almost the dominant initial feeling was: here is a man who is absolutely clean and sweet—and with this came upon me an impression of the man's simple majesty, such as might be produced by an immense handsome tree, or a large, magnificent, beautiful animal (Calamus 10).

Once again, he falls back on the impossibility of describing the effect of Whitman's presence:

Any attempt to convey to another even the faintest notion of the effect upon me of that short and seemingly commonplace interview would be certainly hopeless, probably foolish. Briefly, it would be nothing more than the simple truth to state that I was, by it, lifted to and set upon a higher plane of existence, upon which I have more or less continuously lived ever since—that is, for a period of eighteen years. And my feeling towards the man, Walt Whitman, from that day to the present has been and is that of the deepest affection and reverence. (Calamus 12)

In this account, it is Bucke's experience of Whitman's bodily presence that was most important to his current state, and not his reading or his illumination. "All this, no doubt," he writes, "was supplemented and reinforced by other meetings, by correspondence, and by readings, but equally certainly it derived its initial and essential vitality from that first, almost casual contact" (12).

Though Bucke would later focus on the single apocalyptic moment of illumination, his own case seems to follow a more typical pattern: of reading, writing, and mulling over ideas, a gradual shifting of viewpoint punctuated by moments of crisis and significance. This process of illumination—the change of attitude that Bucke experienced first when reading Whitman, again during the experience of what he would later call cosmic consciousness, and then later during his meeting with Whitman—left Bucke working on a theory that would explain the way in which Whitman had moved him.

Man's Moral Nature

In Man's Moral Nature (1879), Bucke's first book, published in 1879, he lays out the basics of the theory of moral influence and literary effect that he will later elaborate and exemplify in Walt Whitman (1883) and retool in a more explicitly religious sense in Cosmic Consciousness. Bucke first attempts to isolate and argue for an anatomical seat for the moral nature, to be found in the greater sympathetic nervous system.²⁵ Then he traces the evolutionary development of the moral nature through human history, before moving on to study its importance in art and religion. Bucke's idea of "Moral Nature" is easily misunderstood: the phrase might be easier read, as Lozynsky suggests, as "emotional nature" or even, I might propose, "emotional capacity" or "emotional attitude." Moral nature is the predisposition to feel love or hate, faith or fear. Bucke writes:

²⁵ Here Bucke's argument draws on the article "The Great Sympathetic," which he had published in 1878 in the Journal of Insanity.

Faith is the opposite of fear as love is the opposite of hate. It is a purely moral function. It is strangely confounded in the popular mind with belief, which is a purely intellectual function. . . . Faith is almost synonymous with trust, confidence, and courage. (Bucke, Man's Moral Nature 23-24)

Bucke asserts that these four atomistic moral states, when combined together and with various intellectual attitudes, can account for all human emotions. He divides emotional from intellectual content of mental states in an unusual way. Of the confusion of “belief” which is an intellectual concept, with “faith,” the moral state often associated with it, Bucke says “a greater error . . . and . . . a more injurious one to humanity could scarcely be imagined” (27). In Bucke’s schema, faith determines belief, and not the other way around: “savages,” says Bucke, believe in their demon-gods because they feel more fear and hatred than love and faith, whereas

The God of the better samples of Christians is a Being in whom goodness greatly preponderates over evil. The one believes as firmly in his god or gods as does the other, and one has as much and as little evidence upon which to base his belief as the other has. But one has less and the other has more faith. (26)

For Bucke, all beliefs are equally impossible to prove, and the nature of a given belief is simply an “index” of the faith of those drawn to it. In Bucke’s scheme, people who have more faith (who are more prone to a positive world-view) naturally tend towards beliefs that inspire love and trust. Individual human character, in Bucke’s scheme, takes precedence over any system that it might invent or operate within.

For Bucke, the communication of moral states is the foremost concern of the artist. The “poets, artists, orators” are “the high priests of humanity”: they “love more and have more faith” than the general populace. They both “love more” and “love more objects.” Whitman, with his vast catalogues of affirmation, clearly would be a supreme poet under this definition. In poets, Bucke argues, this surfeit of love is usually accompanied by “a proportionate extinction of its opposite, hate” (171). This scheme, by which a great capacity in one emotion lessens a person’s capability to feel its opposite, led to Bucke’s most egregious misreadings of Whitman. The Whitman of Bucke’s biography is essentially faultless. Whitman, however, specifically creates an image of the perfect poet as one who contains everything, who partakes in flaws with the flawed. By placing Whitman on the extreme end of his binary scale of emotions, Bucke undermines Whitman’s attempt at building an all-incorporating persona, just as Bucke’s insistence on placing Whitman at the leading edge of human evolution undercuts the poet’s universal and democratic conceptions.²⁶

Other elements of Bucke’s poetic theory seem to have been derived from Whitman’s own. Bucke’s insistence that poets who “depend more in their compositions on an acute intellect than on the direct inspiration of the heart,” though they be “greatly admired by their contemporaries . . . make no impression upon the great heart of

²⁶ Bucke vacillates on this subject. He could write in *Cosmic Consciousness* that “When I first knew Walt Whitman I used to think he watched himself, and did not allow his tongue to give expression to feelings of fretfulness, antipathy, complaint, and remonstrance,” but eventually he determined that “these mental states” were “absent in him”: “he never spoke in anger, and apparently never was angry. He never exhibited fear, and I do not believe he ever felt it” (CC 225). However, he did give a birthday speech in which he said to the poet “While you are good you are also evil; the godlike in you is offset by passions, instincts, tendencies that unrestrained might well be called devilish; if on the whole you have lived well and done well yet none the less you have had in you . . . the elements of a Cenci or an Attila” (qtd. in Rechnittzer 122).

humanity, and their works soon die,” seems to echo Whitman’s distinction between clever singers and true poets in poems such as “Song of the Answerer” (172).

Likewise, Whitman’s emphasis on his own experiential base for his poems and his emphasis on originality, simplicity, and sincerity influence Bucke’s theory of moral influence, so that to Bucke, Whitman’s poems and other poems that work in the same way must necessarily be sincere:

The person who seeks to act upon the moral nature of another must himself feel the emotion he wishes to excite; then his own intellect and the intellect of the person to be acted upon may be used as a channel to convey from the one moral nature to the other the moral state in question; but this is the only way, or almost the only way, in which the intellect comes into action in the evolution of moral states (169)

Critics and biographers have often noticed with a little disbelief the blindness of Bucke towards that side of Whitman that was a crafty manipulator of language and image. For Bucke, it seems, the effect of a work on the reader was the proof of its origin in a genuine feeling state. There is no room in his scheme of emotional transference to account for calculation, craft, and detachment on the part of the author. From the beginning, Bucke often prefers the earlier versions of Whitman’s poems, as being nearer the personality who wrote them.

Bucke’s scheme of human evolutionary development is as optimistic and as typical of scientific trends in the early and mid-19th Century as those of Chambers or Buckle. He holds that human nature is continually getting better. This is partially a

biological trend; elevated moral natures are preferred “By natural and sexual selection” (169-170). But acting alongside natural selection, there is a second system by which those with the most expanded moral natures, those few “priests of mankind,” are made of benefit to humanity beyond the span and space of their individual lives:

The moral nature of all men . . . possesses this quality—that it can be acted upon, moved, elevated; and there is a mysterious relation, a sympathy, existing among men by which we are all compelled, in spite of ourselves to seek to impress our influence whether for good or evil, upon one another. (170)

The means by which men “of superior moral natures . . . convey to others their moral attitude towards themselves and their surroundings . . . we call by the generic name of art” (170).

In the same way that belief has a relatively loose connection to faith, so in art, “ideas are simply used to assist” in the expression of moral states:

In poetry, oratory, painting, and sculpture, ideas are used in this way or expressed incidentally. In music, no ideas are expressed along with the moral state, and if any ideas are excited by a symphony or sonata, they are excited by the moral state, and are secondary to it. (170)

We can see here the development of Bucke’s understanding of poetry. From his early belief that Whitman’s poetry had very little in the way of ideas to convey to its reader, but instead spoke to the whole man subtly by means of the emotions, Bucke has developed a general theory of the transfer of emotional states and attitudes. This is a far cry from Bucke’s earlier search for saving knowledge in the cult of reason that was

positivism—though Bucke remained in a way a rationalist, maintaining that this transfer belonged not in a Romantic or religious context of souls, but in the context of human evolution, human anatomy, and natural causes.

In Bucke's reading, Whitman's "words that print cannot touch" are the direct manipulations of emotional states. The unspoken connection between reader and author in a poem such as "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" seem to be a sympathy that allows the influence of the reader's moral nature by the author's. Bucke would always believe in a central "secret" to Leaves of Grass. At the time of writing Man's Moral Nature, at least, Bucke's understanding was that the "secret" was not a fact or (yet) an experience, but instead a viewpoint—a moral nature informing and standing behind and inside the text, which itself could directly effect the personality of the reader.

Bucke's proposed new criticism, then, is a spiritualized, evolutionary, radical theory of emotional reader response. The only test of a great work of art in his terms is in the changing of its reader's moral nature: the structure and versification of a text, the ideas in which it is clothed, are contributing factors at best, and completely meaningless at worst.

Man's Moral Nature sold badly; in fact, it barely sold at all. Before that, Bucke had a hard time even placing the manuscript with a publisher. Bucke blamed the American publishing industry, which commonly pirated editions of better-known English authors. When publishers could as easily reprint famous works without paying royalties, Bucke reasoned, they would "not want to publish the work of a man unknown to the public, no odds how good it is" (Lozynsky 54). His publishers blamed the title,

among other things: they understandably complained that “a book called ‘Man’s Moral Nature’ would not pay, no odds how able it was” (54).

In fact, the book was a disjointed collection of seemingly disparate elements—Bucke’s proofs for his evolutionary thesis are detailed and often seem to wander rather widely from his points. The book presents as many difficulties for a modern reader as a contemporary one—though the difficulties are quite different. The simple relationships Bucke draws between physical health and moral quality are difficult for modern readers to take seriously, and his correlation of race and moral development rubs modern sensibilities the wrong way. Bucke argues, for instance, that people of a great moral nature must be tall because the sympathetic nervous system that in his scheme regulates the moral nature also plays a role in nutrition and hence growth. A better moral nature means better health: Bucke uses statistics attesting to the longevity of Jews as proof of the superior development of their moral faculties. These connections between moral and emotional health and physical health were almost universal at the time, however, in both medical and moral discourses. Bucke would have certainly found passages throughout Whitman’s poetry he could construe as support of his beliefs. In poems such as “I Sing The Body Electric,” Whitman makes clear the importance of a healthy body to a healthy soul (LoG 81-87). The few reviewers of Man’s Moral Nature found these connections as unremarkable as they found the book’s social Darwinism and racial hierarchies. Contemporary reviewers were more apt to blame Bucke for his “fanciful” logic, his “stragglings indiscretions of heterodox deviation from current theology,” and his “skepticism” (qtd. in Shortt 91).

Whitman likely didn't read the book through (Rechnitzer 71). This was no great impeachment, however, as the poet often sampled and skimmed books. He would later say to Edward Carpenter, "I thought there was a germinal idea in Bucke's book—the idea that 'Leaves of Grass' was above all an expression of Moral Nature" (Carpenter, Days With Walt Whitman 32). Whitman's other disciples read the book with interest. Carpenter borrowed a copy from Anne Gilchrist during his stay in 1881, and wrote to Bucke in May of that year that he had been "much interested in it," ordering two copies (Colombo Typescripts, Bucke Collection). Later, Dr. John Johnston of Bolton inquired after Man's Moral Nature when visiting Whitman (Visits to Walt Whitman in 1890-1891), and shortly afterwards, in November of that year, Traubel wrote to Bucke saying that he had read the book.²⁷ If Man's Moral Nature had little mainstream influence, it did influence the explanatory models of the "interpretive community" of insiders and enthusiasts reading Whitman.

Man's Moral Nature is certainly a book about Bucke's understanding of Whitman, though Whitman's name figures in it only in the epigraphs of some chapters. This was a matter of purposeful restraint, though as Rechnitzer mentions, Bucke had to be convinced by his friend Forman not to use a portrait of Whitman as the book's frontispiece (Rechnitzer 70). As Lozynsky has noted, the book may be considered a theoretical introduction to a biography of Whitman that Bucke intended to write (Medical Mystic 40).

²⁷ Bucke's response of November 23, 1890 is in Lozynsky, Medical Mystic. Bucke tells Traubel that he is "gratified to hear of you and your friends reading 'Mans [sic] Moral Nature.'" He states that he had "never gone back on that book—think as well of it as I ever did—and I know that there is a true inspiration at the heart of it" (141).

Biography and Exegesis

Bucke began Walt Whitman, in 1878, and finished it in 1883, with extensive help and revision from Whitman. It is a peculiar compromise of a book, containing hagiographical accounts of Whitman's heredity, character, and life, but also serving as a "biography" of the various editions of Leaves of Grass and a collection of the critical notice the book received. Bucke also includes valuable readings of Whitman's poems, particularly "Song of Myself," carefully shaped by Whitman. The hagiographical flavor of the book shows in an astonishing letter which Bucke wrote to Harry Buxton Forman while in the middle of the book, in June of 1880:

I have not made up my mind whether Walt is human or divine—this makes associating with him a little embarrassing at times, however he is so entirely lovable that one is inclined not to care too much whether he is God or not—If one was sure he was a man one could not love him any better—and if one was sure he was a god, one could not respect and esteem him more highly—so you see the matter is simpler than it seems at first sight. (Lozynsky, Medical Mystic 70)

The 1974 publication of Walt Whitman: Walt Whitman's Autograph Revision of the Analysis of *Leaves of Grass* (for Dr. R. M. Bucke's *Walt Whitman*) gives us an invaluable tool for studying both Bucke's interpretative practices and Whitman's attempts to correct them. Like many of the critical works produced by his circle of admirers, the biography was extensively added to and revised by Whitman, who had

more or less unlimited editorial control. As Quentin Anderson points out in the introductory essay to the volume, “Whitman was at pains to single out Richard Maurice Bucke’s Walt Whitman as the book about him” (12). Given Whitman’s control over the content of the book, it remains as close to an authorized contemporary reading of the poems as we have. Gay Wilson Allen, in The Solitary Singer, calls the analysis of the poems “The portion of [the] book of least permanent value,” citing Bucke’s lack of critical skill and his tendency to accept Whitman’s views of himself as a poet (511). I would argue that it is precisely as an astute and intelligent reader who attempts to accept rather than dispute that Bucke is most valuable.

Bucke’s original scheme was to make Walt Whitman a sequel to his Man’s Moral Nature. The life of Whitman, who Bucke considered the most elevated moral nature in history, would stand as a proof and exemplar of Bucke’s theory. While Whitman does occasionally curtail Bucke’s theoretical excesses in his revision, the additions and amplifications he makes are generally quite in keeping with Bucke’s general scheme of interpretation.

Bucke’s method of interpretation favors a multi-layered reading accomplished over the course of a long study, and a progression through the layers of that reading, or a simultaneous “blending” of layers. Of “Song of Myself” he writes that

Its magnitude, its depth and fulness [sic] of meaning make it difficult, indeed impossible, to comment satisfactorily upon. In the first place, it is a celebration or glorification of Walt Whitman, of his body, and of his mind and soul, with all their functions and attributes—and then, by a subtle but inevitable implication, it

becomes equally a song of exultation as sung by any and every individual, man or woman, upon the beauty and perfection of his or her own body and spirit, the material part being treated as equally divined with the immaterial part, and the immaterial part as equally real and godlike with the material. Beyond this it has a third sense, in which it is the chant of cosmical man (the *êtrê supreme* of Comte)—of the whole race considered as one immense and immortal being. From a fourth point of view it is a most sublime hymn of glorification of external Nature. The way these different senses lie in some passages one behind the other, and are in others inextricably blended together, defies comment. (74; underlining indicates words and phrases changed with Whitman's feedback or written by Whitman)

As in his accounts of his reaction to his first meeting of Whitman, Bucke has a relatively speedy recourse to the ineffable—this time to describe not his own personality shift or the force of Whitman's charismatic presence, but the complex layering of meaning over meaning that has resulted from his many years of puzzling over, reading, and re-reading Leaves. How to describe in a single line of commentary the multiple inter-penetrating layers of meaning that he has come to see in a poem like "Song of Myself"? Even given how quickly he resorts to claiming that it "defies comment," to moving that complex multi-layered complex of suggestions back into the realm of the ineffable, his attempt to pick apart the layers of the "I" in Whitman's poem would remain the best account available of the ambiguous and shifting language for decades. Bucke appeals to the ineffable for many purposes—in this case, it seems to be his way of dealing with the

contrast between the simultaneity and complexity of the experience of a suggestive poetic work that has been re-read many times—of the blending of one reading and another, the feeling of being able to turn an interpretation multiple ways—with the flat successiveness of ordinary explanatory prose.

Not only do particular poems have multiple layers of meaning and suggestion, but according to Bucke Leaves of Grass also means different things (and has different things to offer) to different sorts of readers:

Leaves of Grass is curiously a different book to each reader. To some, its merit consists in the keen thought which pierces to the kernel of things—or a perpetual and sunny cheeriness, in which respect it is the synonyme [sic] of pure air and health; to others it is chiefly valuable as being full of pictorial suggestions; to a third class of men, it is a new Gospel containing fresh revelations of divine truth; to a fourth it is charged with ideas and suggestions in practical life and manners; to some its large, sweet, clear, animal physiology is its especial charm; to some, the strange abysses of its fervid emotions. Upon still others (on whom it produces its full effect), it exerts an irresistible and divine power, strengthening and elevating their lives unspeakably, driving from them all meanness and toward all good, giving them no rest, but compelling them to watch every act, word, thought, feeling—to guard their days and nights from weakness, baseness, littleness, or impurity—at the same time giving them extraordinary power to accomplish these ends. (114)

Bucke's emphasis throughout is on the religious and the reforming—on what involves and changes the reader. One feels certain that he has his own case in mind, again, as the model for the ideal reader (or perhaps serially, for the various types of readers he mentions). Bucke admits elsewhere in Walt Whitman that he does not “yet fully understand the book [Leaves of Grass]” or “expect ever to understand it entirely” (103). For him, Leaves of Grass is an infinite book, drawing the reader on and on in an endless journey, a vehicle for progress and transformation rather than a text from which one could ever expect to extract a finished “meaning.” He writes about this phenomenon: “There is the same peculiar magnetism about *Leaves of Grass* as about Walt Whitman himself, so that people who once really begin to read it and get into the range of its attraction, must go on reading it whether they comprehend it or not, or until they do comprehend it” (103). Bucke certainly followed his own advice, continually re-reading and re-evaluating Whitman's poems. According to James Coyne, one of Bucke's biographers, by the time of his death, Bucke had learned most if not all of Leaves of Grass by heart (Coyne 44).

Bucke's analysis emphasizes above all else the importance of an intense identification with Whitman's persona, of the reader being brought into contact with, and absolutely fused in the living mind of Walt Whitman, to whom these things are, not as a matter of speculation and belief, but as a matter of vital existence and identity: and as he reads the poem (it may be for the fifth or fiftieth time), the state of mind of the author inevitably (in some measure) passes over to the reader, and he practically becomes the author—

becomes the person who thinks so, knows so, feels so.²⁸ But, until this point is reached (and with many readers, so far, it is never reached), the poem is necessarily more or less meaningless. (75)

The transfer of states of mind here is in keeping with Bucke's idea of the function of art in Man's Moral Nature, but by the end of the passage we have a virtual identification between Whitman and the reader. Later, he reiterates the point, explaining the unique method he considers necessary to a reading of Leaves of Grass:

The secret of the difficulty is, that the work, different from every popular book of poetry known, appeals almost entirely to the moral nature, and hardly at all to the intellect—that to understand it means putting oneself in emotional, and not simply mental relation with its author—means to thoroughly realize Walt Whitman—to be in sympathy with the heart and mind of perhaps the most advanced nature the world has yet produced. (106)

For Bucke, like becomes like in the process of reading, a process that centers around this sympathetic and non-intellectual “realization” of Whitman and the reader's emotional relation with the image of the author. The purpose is a transfer of state of mind. “What I assume you shall assume,” Whitman proclaims at the beginning of “Song of Myself” and in so doing sets up a parallel between the current state of his narrator and the future state of his reader that Bucke explicates here (LoG 26).

²⁸ Bucke emphasizes in his own account of Whitman, and notes especially in Traubel, that Whitman's gift, which is shared by those possessed of cosmic consciousness, is in not speculating about, thinking, or even believing in foundational truths, but “feeling” or “seeing” them.

Bucke attempted to “realize” Whitman not only in his own attitudes, but also in his appearance. Pictures of Bucke from the late 1870’s onward tend to show his drift into Whitmanesque wardrobe and grooming patterns. He adopted a beard rather like Whitman’s, a gray broad-brimmed hat such as the poet sometimes wore, and cultivated a similar taste in informal jackets. Late in his life, the grey-bearded Bucke was often mistaken for Whitman in public. Many of Bucke’s biographers have noted this similarity, and portraits of Bucke and Whitman placed together have become a commonplace in books that mention the two.²⁹ The case is not unique—Edward Carpenter, as we shall see later, also adopted for a while a look and mode of dress influenced by the engraving that serves as frontispiece for the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass. This outward mark of discipleship (and its accompanying rejection of more conventional professional or class-appropriate garb) should probably not surprise us. Whitman set himself up as a role model more consciously perhaps than any other poet before or after. His own obsession with his image can be seen in the many conversations over photographs and portraits to be found in the daily talk recorded in Traubel’s With Walt Whitman in Camden. But something more interesting is going on here than an Elvis fan growing sideburns.³⁰ Alexander Gilchrist, a painter who was a friend of Whitman, and the son of Whitman’s friend, admirer, and critic Anne Gilchrist, claimed that Bucke sometimes thought he was Whitman (Miller, “Introduction” The Correspondence V 1890-1892 2). In his poetry, Whitman invited his readers to identify

²⁹ Rechnitzer places them together in his life of Bucke, and the dust jacket of Lozynsky’s Richard Maurice Bucke, Medical Mystic presents Bucke on the front and a very similar Whitman on the back.

³⁰ However, this kind of fan-mimicry is also fascinating, and has the potential to teach us quite a lot about the way the arts influence the personae adopted by their enthusiasts.

with him, perpetually attempted to break down barriers to a closer and closer intimacy between reader, book, and author, ending with a kind of shared identity. The idea that interaction with a book can cause such an effect is not far-fetched. Recent reader-response work theorizes that a reader's identity is formed and realized through his or her contact with the text. As Wolfgang Iser writes:

Reading sparks off an ideational activity in the course of which each individual reader will have to discard and replace the ideas formed through information provided and knowledge invoked; it seems to me that this process, always active as the reader travels inside the text and executes the instructions given to him, actually gives shape to his identity. If that is the case—and following the lines of gestalt psychology, I would plead most emphatically that it is—then the actual reader's so-called identity may, in the final analysis be brought to light and articulated by the very activities to which he has been subjected in following the instructions laid down by the text. (Prospecting 52)

Whitman's textual practices increased the identification felt by many of his readers.

Bucke's changes of dress seem to be just one way a lifelong pattern of conscious and subconscious identification manifested itself.

Comparative Readings and a Community of Believers

From the publication of Walt Whitman until the time of Cosmic Consciousness, Bucke's reading technique and his interpretations of both Whitman's poetry and his own experience underwent a slow but profound shift. A shift in the way that Bucke

compared texts, gained partially through his involvement with the Shakespeare-Bacon question, worked to produce a radical new view of the history of religious expression.

One conversation in particular gave him a means by which he could connect Whitman's writing, his own experience, and the writings and experiences of others. Bucke spoke with Caleb Pink, the "C.P." of Cosmic Consciousness, a British exponent of land and social reform active in Brooklyn in the 1860's and 70's.³¹ In 1895 Pink wrote a book, The Angel of the Mental Orient, in which he dealt with his understanding of his own illumination.³² Bucke wrote that his conversations with Pink, sometime before the publication of Pink's book, helped Bucke interpret his own past experiences. The talk with Pink "threw a flood of light" Bucke wrote (speaking of himself in the third person) "upon the true meaning of what he had himself experienced" (Bucke, CC 11).³³ Bucke's use of the "light" metaphor here comes very near to a pun, because it was precisely the nature of the "light" in experiences that had been called "illumination" that Bucke now interpreted differently.

For Bucke after his conversations with Pink, the often figurative "light" involved in accounts of "illuminations" became not a metaphor for knowledge (as he uses it

³¹ Very little has been written on Caleb Pink. He first met Whitman in 1876, in the company of Alma Calder Johnston, the wife of J. H. Johnston, whose recollection of the event in "Personal Memories of Walt Whitman," doesn't have much to say about Pink, who at that time had a "vague sympathy" for Whitman (in Myerson Whitman in his Own Time 260-261). Bucke may have had his conversations with Pink before the Bolton meeting, or some time after. No letters from or about Pink are catalogued in the Bucke collection. Pink's nephew, J. William Lloyd, an anarchist and follower of Carpenter, is also listed as a case of cosmic consciousness.

³² Pink's book is attested to in the references of Bucke's Cosmic Consciousness, but is not indexed by WorldCat, and is unavailable. Bucke's copy, if he had one, is not preserved in his library in the Bucke Collection.

³³ The date of Bucke's germinal conversations with Pink are unknown—they may very well have taken place before Bucke's reception at Bolton and discussions with Carpenter.

above) but a literal symptom. Bucke had not before his talks with Pink made the connection between the “flame” he had seen during his own illumination, the mentions of light in Whitman’s poetry, and the language of “illumination” often used in terms of religious experience. Now the connections became clear. “Looking around then upon the world of man,” he writes of himself, “he saw the significance of the subjective light in the case of Paul and in that of Mohammed. The secret of Whitman’s transcendent greatness was revealed to him” (11). The light that appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus, the vision of light given to Mohammed, the light that Whitman speaks of in “Prayer of Columbus” as “Light rare untellable, lighting the very light, / Beyond all signs, descriptions, languages,” was not a miracle or a unique divine visitation, nor yet a metaphoric way of speaking about a transformative experience, but a literal symptom of a class of experience shared by all of them.³⁴ The experience was the expression of a bodily change—the birth of a new faculty. Bucke would write later that “It seems tolerably certain that with illumination there occurs actual, physical, molecular rearrangement somewhere in the cerebral centres and that it is this molecular rearrangement which, when considerable and sudden, gives rise to the phenomenon of the subjective light” (345).

Suddenly aspects of Bucke’s own experience, as well as lines from Whitman’s poems, leapt into significance. The trope of “illumination” in Cosmic Consciousness,

³⁴ Though Bucke makes the subjective light a normative feature of Cosmic consciousness, and interprets historical and literary accounts that focus on light as being instances of this phenomenon, he must have been aware of the possibility that some cases used the figure of light as an analogy—as in J. William Lloyd’s account. Having an experience while reading Edward Carpenter’s poetry, Lloyd writes that “There was no particular sensation, except that something beautiful and great seemed to have happened to me, which I could only describe in terms of light. Yet it was purely mental. But everything looked different to me” (CC 343).

however, assumes several meanings. Bucke speaks of “intellectual illumination”—the sudden knowledge of the universe that comes to the person experiencing cosmic consciousness:

Like a flash there is presented to his consciousness a clear conception (a vision) in outline of the meaning and drift of the universe. He does not come to believe merely; but he sees and knows that the cosmos, which to the self conscious mind seems made up of dead matter, is in fact far otherwise—is in very truth a living presence. He sees that instead of men being, as it were, patches of life scattered through an infinite sea of non-living substance, they are in reality specks of relative death in an infinite ocean of life. He sees that the life which is in man is eternal, as all life is eternal; that the soul of man is as immortal as God is; that the universe is so built and ordered that without any peradventure all things work together for the good of each and all; that the foundation principle of the world is what we call love, and that the happiness of every individual is in the long run absolutely certain. (73)

In this experience, a person “will learn in the few minutes, or even moments, of its continuance more than in months or years of study, and he will learn much that no study ever taught or can teach” (73-74). “Especially,” writes Bucke, the person experiencing cosmic consciousness obtains

such a conception of THE WHOLE, or at least of an immense WHOLE, as dwarfs all conception, imagination, or speculation, springing from and belonging

to ordinary self consciousness, such a conception as makes the old attempts to mentally grasp the universe and its meaning petty and even ridiculous. (74)

This passage, meant as a description of the common elements in every case of cosmic consciousness, soon reveals itself for what it is—a rephrasing of Bucke’s own experience. The other cases he reports seldom match the description.

Illumination can be the sudden knowledge-by-experience, what William James would call the “noetic” element in mystical experience, as well as the literal experience of the “subjective light.” Bucke’s search for “the subjective light” and for cases parallel to Whitman’s assumed illumination and his own fuelled his increasingly wide-ranging program of reading on religious and spiritual topics. He had been acquiring and reading books by men and women who would form the canon of mysticism, as well as secondary materials on world religion and historical studies of the development of religion, for some time. In an 1880 letter to Harry Buxton Forman, for instance, Bucke orders Sir Edwin Arnold’s The Light of Asia, a long poem fictionalizing the life of Buddha that was a first step towards Eastern thought for many of the period, and some books from F. Max Muller’s 50-volume edition of The Sacred Books of the East (Lozynsky, Medical Mystic 71-72). Ten of the volumes were published by the end of 1880, including the first installment of a translation of the Upanishads—which would give Bucke his conceptions of “Brahmic Bliss” that he would later use in Cosmic Consciousness.³⁵

³⁵ Mueller’s volumes are not present in the catalogue of the portion of Bucke’s library still exists, Richard Maurice Bucke: A Catalogue Based on the Collections of the University of Western Ontario Libraries. But from the “List of Works Quoted” in Cosmic Consciousness, it seems likely that Bucke owned the 44 volumes that had been published by 1885. He cites at least eight of them in that work (CC xii-xiii).

Bucke's increasing contact with Whitman's British disciples, particularly Edward Carpenter and the members of the Bolton "College," was also a key element in the development of his concept of "cosmic consciousness." Through correspondence and several pivotal meetings, Bucke and the British Whitmanites began to validate one another's spiritual readings of Whitman, his work, and his connection with mystical experiences. The meeting that began as what J. W. Wallace called Bucke's "apostolic visit to the small church planted here" (qtd. in Rechnitzer 126) wound up modifying Bucke's reading and thought significantly, and moving the mystically minded members of Whitman's circle towards similar positions. Bucke could write to Traubel that the meetings with the Bolton Whitmanites had convinced him "more than ever" that "we are right at the centre of the largest thing of these late centuries" (Lozynsky, Medical Mystic 154). We can see these meetings either as the seed-ground of a new religion, or as the firming up of an "interpretive community," where cases of what would be called "Cosmic Consciousness" were shared, discussed, and related to readings of Whitman—not leading to a consensus, by any means, but a convergence of interpretative method. The two possibilities amount, perhaps, to very similar things.

By 1891, Edward Carpenter was well on his way towards incorporating what he learned from Whitman, along with his earlier studies in the Romantics and their Anglican followers and later delvings into Eastern philosophy, into a more or less coherent, if eclectic, mystical idealism interwoven with progressive ideas about social reform and sexual identity. And the Bolton "college" organized around J. W. Wallace was putting together Wallace's "Christ-man" mysticism with an interest in utopian social

change and the “love of comrades.” Bucke thus stumbled into the midst of a small but vital outpost of mystical and progressive thought and enthusiastic Whitmanism that would bolster his own enthusiasm (if it ever needed bolstering) and give him more than ever a sense of what he would call “the cause” (his emphasis) in his letter to Traubel. Bucke had often predicted that Whitman would draw a following in the future and spawn a faith. This meeting gave him a clearer sense of what that faith might look like.

Bucke had begun writing to J.W. Wallace, the head of the Bolton group, in 1890. He had received from him a copy of an address he had given to the “Eagle Street College” that detailed the illumination experience Wallace had undergone at the time of his mother’s death. Bucke would later use the account in this address with some modifications as Wallace’s entry in Cosmic Consciousness. While the other members of the Bolton “college” had not responded immediately to Wallace’s account of his experience, Bucke at once felt its importance.

In a letter written late in 1890, Bucke enthusiastically urges Wallace to publish the address. Wallace insists on the 12th of December that he could “hardly think of publishing it as you suggest” and that “If I were sure that it might be of service to anyone I would not withhold it—but I doubt it.” He goes on to explain the disappointing reception that the address got from the men of the Bolton “College”—its delivery was “followed by a long and impressive silence, more eloquent of the effect it had produced than the usual applause. But I found that those to whom it was mainly addressed secretly thought the experience it records a mere illusion, and the conclusions based upon it unsustainable” (Letter, Wallace to Bucke, Bucke Collection). Bucke was, Wallace

wrote, “the first who has endorsed it from a like experience.” He concluded that “only those who have known something of a like kind can appreciate its significance and they do not need it.” He promised, however to “think about it.”

This idea—that only those who shared an experience could properly appreciate the poems or accounts that referred to it—would take on an important dimension in the thought of both men. Like Bucke, Wallace had “mystical” experiences which enriched his reading of Whitman’s poems, just as Whitman’s poems influenced his reading of his experiences. Also like Bucke, he assumed that the mystical sense of things he had partially and occasionally felt was constant and complete in Whitman, that the sense that

the natural is also the supernatural & that all the commonest facts and experiences of life are miraculous and God-revealing, are with him [Whitman] not merely intellectual convictions only to be realized in some great moment, but are matters of daily perception.

Whitman’s poems are, Wallace writes, so “saturated with this sense and the emotions associated with it” that “in some degree” they are unintelligible to “those who do not share his point of view, or to whom it is merely a verbal formula.” Wallace then spoke of Whitman’s “latest poem,” misquoting the title as “In the Sunset Breeze.” He called it a “beautiful illustration of what I have said above” and urged Bucke to “note the double meaning and significance, and the tender beauty of it all” (Letter, Bucke Collection).

In the letter that Bucke frames in response, he shows that he is already putting together the ideas that would later form his thesis of “Cosmic Consciousness,” though he had yet to find a term for it:

That ordinary men under extraordinary conditions break through (as it were) into the infinite and get a glimpse of what goes on there. That extraordinary men such as Whitman, Isaiah, Paul, John, Swedenborg (?), Blake (?) Jean Paul live a greater or lesser part of their lives in more or less clear view of it I what we all most grant. What I want to know at present is: Is mankind, in its forward march, approaching nearer and nearer the divine land so that one day such a life as Whitman's (for example) will be an ordinary human life? (Lozynsky, Medical Mystic 144)

“Tell me what you think of this,” Bucke asks of Wallace, searching for affirmation.

Bucke's respect for Wallace as a spiritually advanced disciple of Whitman is shown at least partially by his recognition of Wallace's readings of Leaves, which are close to Bucke's own. Bucke writes about the reception of Wallace's address:

I am surprised to hear from you that the members of the “College” did not see the meaning and the importance of the experience you showed them, more especially as they are readers of L. of G. But how blind many apparently good, hearty, honest intelligent readers of W. are to this his main thesis and teaching. You, for instance, are, as far as I know, the first (besides myself) to see the spiritual (the main) meaning of “To the Sunset Breeze.”

What does Bucke mean here by “the spiritual meaning”? “To the Sunset Breeze,” the short poem that Bucke sets up as a test of the enlightenment of readers of Leaves of Grass, is at the literal level an extended apostrophe directed by the poet, “old, alone, sick, weak-down, melted-worn with sweat,” to a “cool-freshing, gently vitalizing”

breeze that blows in through the poet's window and door at the end of a "heated day" (LoG 458). The breeze is figured as a messenger from nature, successively made "companion better than talk, book, art," figured as a "messenger-magical strange bringer to body and spirit of me," whose touch balks distances, seems to penetrate the speaker with "occult medicines," and brings him to a felt communion with the landscape over which the breeze has blown: "I feel the sky," Whitman says, "the prairies vast—I feel the mighty northern lakes, / I feel the ocean and the forest—somehow I feel the globe itself swift-swimming in space" (459). The breeze itself is given an explicitly spiritual value and a connection with some un-named loved ones long lost: it is "blown from lips so loved, now gone—haply from endless store, God-sent." Whitman addresses the breeze:

(For thou art spiritual, Godly, most of all known to my sense,)

Minister to speak to me, here and now, what word has never told, and cannot tell,

Art thou not universal concrete's distillation? Law's, all Astronomy's last
refinement?

Hast thou no soul? Can I not know, identify thee? (459)

To a modern reader, this seems one of Whitman's more precise late lyric restatements of a theme that pervades his work throughout his career—the power of natural facts to act as signs of (or messengers from) a transcendent nature. It combines with the motif of sunset and old age to indicate that the poet still gains refreshment from nature, still operates through his (now failing) body after all these years, still searches for the transcendent soul of nature in its concrete instantiations. Bucke's reading is different,

and the differences tell us a great deal about how his reading of Leaves had progressed since the readings presented in Walt Whitman.

When Whitman sent a printed version of the poem to Bucke, on 18 November 1890, Bucke responded immediately and eagerly to it, writing to Whitman only three days later that

If I know any thing of L. of G. or of you this is one of the most subtle, extraordinary little poems you ever wrote and so far from its being done off-hand it seems to me deeper than the deepest study—even to follow in thought the (double) meaning of it makes me giddy as in looking up, up, into the far sky. But what's the use, not 10 people of all who read the piece in Lippencott's³⁶ will have the remotest idea what it is about—but along with the rest, by and by, the true readers will come, and you, and the rest /of the leaves/ being understood, this will be also—that is as far as such fairy-etherial touches, hints, can be understood or comprehended. (Lozynsky, Medical Mystic 140)

Bucke figures himself here as a privileged reader, literally ahead of his time, and “To the Sun-Set Breeze” as not merely a comparatively slight refiguring of Whitman’s ideas about the spiritual message and import of natural facts, but a poem that is valuable precisely because of its subtlety and double-meaning. Precisely what Bucke means here is not necessarily apparent, until we look at his brief treatment of the poem in Cosmic Consciousness. He writes of Whitman’s last years:

³⁶ Lippencott’s Monthly Magazine, where the poem appeared in December 1890.

Doubtless the vision grew more dim and the voice less distinct as time passed and the feebleness of age and sickness advanced upon him. At last in 1891, at the age of seventy-two, the “Brahmic Splendor” finally departed, and in those mystic lines, “To the Sunset Breeze,” which the Harpers returned to him as “a mere improvisation,” he bids it farewell (CC, 235).

Bucke was developing in 1890 the concept of the phenomenon he would later call “cosmic consciousness”—and treats “To the Sun-Set Breeze” as a direct address not just to a fact of nature which heals and gives access to nature but to a reified cosmic sense itself. The importance of this, of course, is heightened for Bucke by its relationship to an internal, “hidden” narrative of Whitman’s spiritual history and illumination that it and other poems provide.³⁷ To Bucke, Whitman was a dying prophet. “Good-Bye My Fancy” is full of farewell poems, and for Bucke “To the Sun-Set Breeze” is the most important. Read as Bucke construes it, it seems to recount a last mystical experience for Whitman, and the poet’s farewell (as his body fails) to his inspiration.

What we see happening with Bucke’s letter to Wallace is something like a gnostic distinction in the community of the readers of Leaves of Grass. Those who read Whitman’s works are split into those who know and experience what Bucke considers by this point the “main thesis and teaching” of Whitman, and those who have not yet penetrated into the deeper meanings of the poet’s work and so are unable to properly appreciate or understand either a poem like “To the Sun-Set Breeze” or, significantly,

³⁷ In some ways, this attempt (which many besides Bucke have attempted) to find a hidden biography that would explain Whitman’s rise to poetic power and serve as a reference to his poetry may have been parallel to Baconian attempts to make a coherent and conspiratorial narrative out of the life of Bacon that accounts for a double life as the author of the Shakespearean plays.

Wallace's account of his experience. It is particularly interesting, of course, that Bucke treats Wallace's extremely vague statement about "double meaning" in the poem as if Wallace had detailed and shared an opinion exactly consonant with Bucke's reading. Already, Bucke is making assumptions of unanimity that will enable and characterize his work on cosmic consciousness. It is possible, but by no means clear, that two men who both talk about vaguely about hidden meanings in a poem are talking about the same hidden meaning. Hints in this case become confirmation and build a community of interpreters largely because they are merely hints, and talk around what is hidden, allowing for personal variations in interpretation without conflict. If Wallace had explained precisely the "double meanings" he was speaking of, Bucke may not have agreed with them.

Bucke spoke just as elliptically when he wrote to Whitman himself about his new readings of Leaves on 31 March 1891:

Ruskin says of great writers that they "express themselves in a hidden way and in parables." I have understood this of you, Walt, for many a year and I am bold enough to say that I believe I have followed the subtle winding & burrowing of your thought as far as any one. [--] I have known well from the first that "there are divine things well envelop'd—more beautiful than words can tell." It is this mystic thread—running through all your poems that has fascinated me from the first more than anything else about them. I have noted the (by most people)

“unsuspected author.”³⁸—“spiritual, godly, most of all known to my sense.” and I understand (tho’ you will never tell—perhaps could not tell us) where the secret prompting comes from. (Lozynsky, Medical Mystic 148)

Whitman was a man who understood more than most the value of silence: he wrote to Bucke on April 2nd that “Yrs of 31st M[arch] comes & helps me much” before continuing on to the usual topics of his correspondence with Bucke—complaining about his local doctor, his company, his bowels, and the weather (Correspondence V: 185-186).

Bucke’s letter uses a device that is common to Whitman’s disciples—echoing Whitman’s words to show their understanding of his poetry. The quoted lines all show poems that Bucke had been giving especial attention. “To the Sunset Breeze” we have dealt with above, and “Shakspere-Bacon’s Cipher” we shall deal with below. Bucke’s interpretation of and acceptance of “Song of the Open Road,” the source of “divine things well envelop’d,” had also been playing an important role in his life. In a letter of February 8th, Bucke had written to Traubel,

Some time ago I said: “From this moment I ordain myself loosed from all limits.”
 And I find it a very good way to live—let each one do as it suits him. . . I am for living the new life and getting the good of it—do you know what that means? I am not worrying abt. what folk think or say (146).

“Song of the Open Road” may be read as a poem intended to free up Whitman’s readers from the ties of social convention, to raise them out of their settled places, connections,

³⁸ Bucke here uses a device that is common to Whitman’s disciples—echoing Whitman’s words to show their understanding of his poetry. We will deal with Bucke’s interpretation of and involvement with the source of “that unsuspected author,” “The Bacon-Shakspere Cipher,” below.

and opinions and on to the road to take part in the struggles they must face. It clearly functioned in this way for Bucke, who is, in quoting that performative line to Traubel, assuming the “I” of Whitman’s poem, and using it to declare a change in his own life.

Bucke’s official reason for his trip to England was to stir up interest in (and find investors for) the Gurd Water Meter. One of Bucke’s commercial enthusiasms, the meter, designed by Bucke’s brother-in-law, was also one of his longest-running and most exasperating failures. Bucke was neither a canny businessman nor a good promoter. Despite his tireless efforts and his belief in his imminent wealth, the meter business eventually came to nothing. The secondary purpose for the visit, however, turned out better than he could have hoped.

Bucke had come bearing gifts for the Bolton Whitmanites, including the preserved remains of Whitman’s canary bird, and a handwritten copy of “My Canary Bird,” the poem that had been inspired by it.³⁹ It was perhaps the most peculiar of Whitman’s many gifts to the group. The poet had often sent manuscripts, books, photos, and other relics to the members of the “College,” and it was clear that he considered the members the kind of sincere and enthusiastic audience as he had often sought.

On meeting Bucke, the “College” members sang him a song, the lyrics written for the occasion to the traditional Welsh tune “The March of the Men of Harlech.” A brief excerpt serves to capture the tone:

Doctor Bucke, Walt’s brave defender,

Thanks to you we gladly tender

³⁹ See Ed Folsom’s “Whitman’s Dead Canary Bird” in *WWQR* 5, for the interesting fate of this relic (43-45).

Noble service did you render

to our hero's fame

You, his chosen "explicator,"

"Leaves of Grass's" vindicator

honored be your name. (Lozynsky, Medical Mystic 15)

Bucke was much moved by this recognition, and no doubt flattered by the Bolton's group recognition of him as the principal "explicator" of Leaves. He wrote to Whitman on July 18, 1891, the day after he arrived, "I am really at a loss how to begin this letter or how to write it. My reception here has been such that I am absolutely dumbfounded" (Lozynsky, Medical Mystic 151). He was very impressed by the good-fellowship and devotion of the Bolton group, writing to Whitman that

You are right to say that the Bolton friends are true and tender—they are that and if there are any stronger words you may use them! Most of the evening I laughed and the rest of it I could have cried their warmhearted friendship for you and for me was so manifest and so touching. (Lozynsky, Medical Mystic 151-152)

The same day, he wrote another letter to Horace Traubel, perhaps the only other of Whitman's disciples who had given his life so fully to the service of the poet, describing his first two days with the Bolton group. The tone is one almost of wonder:

We had many little speeches and much talk and I was very greatly gratified to find that they realize the magnitude of this Whitman business just as fully as we do—nothing that I said of the meaning and probable future of Whitmanism (and I spoke out pretty plainly) staggered them at all—they had thought it all before;

and I tell you, Horace, I am more than ever (if that is possible) convinced that we are right at the centre of the largest thing of these last centuries. It is a great privilege and will be ages from now a great glory to us. For my part when I stop and think of it I am fairly dazed—the strangest thing, to me, about it all is that I have had premonitions of this spiritual upheaval and of my (small) part in it since I was eight or ten years old—and now it has come—a solid fact and come to stay—and we will stay with it.⁴⁰

In America, Bucke had probably never had an audience that so nearly matched his own enthusiasm or shared so many of his presuppositions about Whitman. While Bucke was seemingly rarely at a loss for faith in Whitman, he had often struggled to make himself understood to those for whom Whitman was merely a poet (and often a suspect one at that). The Bolton group, under the enthusiastic guidance of J. W. Wallace, gave him a more reasonable ground for believing in the destined greatness and success of “Whitmanism”—a faith that was only then beginning to build the kind of community of belief that could make it more than the individual readings of isolated enthusiasts.

For their part, Wallace and the other members of the Bolton group seemed impressed with Bucke as well, writing that “his visit was a genuine delight to us all . . . he left us with memories of a personality not unlike Whitman’s in its robust manliness and democratic camaraderie and simplicity” (Johnston and Wallace 24).

⁴⁰ If Bucke searches for one thing most in his engagement with Whitman and his poetry, it may be a sense of time as meaningful and justified: the difficulties of the past, the imperfections and struggles of the present justified absolutely as a perfect and all-inclusive progression, and leading towards a still-greater future. This is perhaps one of the moments when he felt this most acutely.

Bucke went on to make various social calls in attempts to find investors for his water meter project, visited briefly with Tennyson, and then went on to meet at Millthorpe with Edward Carpenter, with whom he had corresponded since 1880⁴¹ (Weir 39). Carpenter had presented an early edition of his Towards Democracy to Bucke, along with some pamphlets in a letter of August 24, 1883 (Bucke Collection). Carpenter and Bucke had met twice before—once in 1884, when Carpenter had spent time with Bucke in Ontario after visiting Whitman, and then again in 1886, meeting at the home of a mutual acquaintance in England. Early on, the two had written back and forth about Whitman, but their correspondence had flagged after their second meeting (Weir 45). In the meantime, as Lorna Weir has shown, Bucke had been forwarded a number of Carpenter’s letters to Whitman explaining Carpenter’s travels in Ceylon and his interest in Indian thought—including his attempts “to get first hand the results of the Eastern thought and tradition in matters relating to religion” (qtd. in Weir 46).⁴² Bucke never put in writing what he and Carpenter had talked about at Millthorpe. Bucke’s last letter to Whitman from Britain was written right before the visit, and his letter from ship-board after the meeting gives no details, since he would be talking to Whitman in less than a week (Lozynsky, Letters 248-249). At the time, Carpenter was still digesting and formulating an explanation of and theoretical framework in which to understand the

⁴¹ An annotated copy is in Bucke’s library, though it is likely that the annotations were written later: one scored section is quoted in CC (Jamison Catalogue).

⁴²Lorna Weir’s “Cosmic Consciousness and the Love of Comrades: Contacts between R. M. Bucke and Edward Carpenter” details the surviving correspondence between the two, and argues for Carpenter’s influence on Bucke’s views of cosmic consciousness. Weir’s assertion that Bucke had gone to England “in the hope of speaking with Carpenter about the evolution of human consciousness” is convincing, though I would say that Bucke’s understanding of CC is not so neatly attributable to one source.

mystical experiences he had undergone while writing Towards Democracy—he had written on the topic of consciousness in Civilisation: Its Cause and Cure, but had yet to write the more theoretical account in From Adam’s Peak to Elephanta or the 1894 “Note” to Towards Democracy that details his experience.⁴³ It seems very likely that, as Weir argues, Bucke and Carpenter spoke at some length on the subject.

It is clear, however, that Carpenter accompanied Bucke on his return to Bolton, where he met the members of the “college” for the first time. It was during that meeting that Bucke first publicly spoke on his rapidly cohering theory of Cosmic Consciousness. No text of the speech survives, but Wallace recalls it briefly in his “Whitman’s Friends in Lancashire” preface to Visits to Walt Whitman:

At a general meeting of our friends the same evening Dr. Bucke was urged (on Traubel’s previous suggestion) to give us an address on Whitman as a basis for subsequent discussion and talk. He seemed very diffident, saying that he was no speaker and advising us to ask Carpenter instead, but finally yielded on condition that I should first read something from “Leaves of Grass,” “to get the ball rolling.” (Wallace and Johnston 26)

Wallace chose and read “By Blue Ontario’s Shore,” and then Bucke

gave us, quite informally and conversationally, the weightiest and most impressive address we have ever heard. . . . His subject was Cosmic Consciousness—more specifically as illustrated in Whitman. He told me later in Canada that my reading had suggested the subject of his talk by recalling to him

⁴³ Bucke received an inscribed copy of Carpenter’s Civilisation in September of 1889, which he annotated heavily and quoted in Cosmic Consciousness. He also quotes Carpenter’s “Note.”

the circumstances of his own illumination in 1872 . . . for, by a curious coincidence, I had read the poem he himself had read to this two friends, H. Buxton Forman and Alfred Forman, immediately before his illumination took place. When writing his book, he told me in a letter that it was his address in Bolton which had started him on it. (25-26)

Cosmic Consciousness

After 1891, Bucke's ideas about Cosmic Consciousness came together rapidly, sharpened, and gained subtlety. Between 1891 and the publication of his book ten years later, Bucke worked hard at building a context in which to read his own experience, and Whitman's poetry. Those of Whitman's disciples who took him religiously generally argued for the necessity of a shift of context—that Whitman's poems should not be read with and in terms of the work popular poets and literary men of his time, but along with the teachings of Jesus or the sacred scriptures of the East. Bucke had argued since his biography of Whitman that the greatest effects of Whitman's poetry were religious (he had hinted the same in Man's Moral Nature). But now he began to assemble in earnest a matrix of texts and experiences in relation to which Whitman's poetry, and Bucke's own illumination experience, ought to be read.

Bucke sent out letters soliciting his friends and acquaintances for accounts of experiences like his own, sometimes obviously relying on leads from or accounts given by other friends. In most cases, he seems to have sent a letter asking for a brief biography and account of "spiritual evolution," or "spiritual development." Some of the

responses make it evident that he asked specifically for straightforward accounts in plain language. After receiving the first responses, Bucke followed up in some cases with another inquiry asking his subjects for details about specific elements of their experience that would fit with his theory—particularly the “subjective light.” He also seems to have asked in several cases for corroborative testimony by friends or relatives of his subjects, particularly questioning them about changes in appearance or personal charm that may have occurred about the time of the experiences. If one of his subjects was an author or poet (as Traubel and Carpenter were), Bucke often searched for evidence of illumination in their work. To anticipated objections to his methods, Bucke wrote that

In the reporting of no case was the reporter (the person having the experience) prompted by word or sign. Every one of the following reports . . . is given absolutely spontaneously and nearly always without any knowledge of the phenomena belonging to other cases, and certainly without being influenced in narration by a knowledge of other cases. (CC 256-257)

Bucke received in return a surprisingly rich harvest of accounts of spiritual experience, which make up the largest part of the modern cases of cosmic consciousness he analyzes in his book. The accounts are a mixed lot. They vary in amount of detail offered, from Bucke’s account of “E.T.,” which contains nothing but a birth date and age of “illumination,” to several which contain long biographical statements and extensive extracts from literary works. They also vary widely in philosophical and theological framework, from Quaker sex-reformer Paul Tyner’s revelation of the living experience of Christ to Caleb Pink’s belief in the extinction of the individual self and the fusion of

the human life force with God after death (357, 300). Some illuminations were instantaneous, and others occurred over the space of years. Some featured Bucke's "subjective light" and others did not. Clearly, in order to make all of these experiences work together, Bucke would need to find a more flexible common element than the beliefs they engendered.

Many of the accounts Bucke gathered were from fellow Whitmanites: Bucke received Traubel's account of his illumination experiences, a brief letter from Carpenter that alluded to the difficulty of speaking about his own experience,⁴⁴ accounts from Carpenter's disciple J. William Lloyd, the anarchist, from "C. Y. E," a woman involved in the Bolton circle, and from John H. Johnston, the diamond merchant who often had organized fund raisers for Whitman. He received an account of an anesthetic-related incident of cosmic consciousness from J. Addington Symonds.⁴⁵ The common elements he was able to derive from the accounts must have shocked Bucke. He had argued all along that Whitman's influence would remake the moral natures of those who read him. Now he had the evidence.

Besides the contemporary cases, Bucke added case studies of a wide variety of mystics, philosophers, and poets. He divided the cases into major or indubitable instances and "additional—some of them lesser, imperfect, and doubtful instances" (CC

⁴⁴ Carpenter also sent a letter on March 12, 1893, forwarding a letter from a Samuel A. Jones to Henry Salt on cosmic consciousness and Yogic topics. Jones didn't make it into CC.

⁴⁵ Bucke didn't place Symonds' account in the main sections of Cosmic Consciousness, as he considers artificial stimulations of cosmic consciousness—including Indian yogic techniques as well as drug use—as producing a "kind of artificial and bastard cosmic consciousness" (379). He writes that no "great work has ever been done by persons in whom the faculty was artificially excited, though doubtless the lives of such persons have been made immensely happier and better" (379). The status of what William James called the "anaesthetic revelation" (borrowing a term from the eccentric philosopher Benjamin Blood) has been debated in theoretical works on mysticism since.

xviii). Buddha, Jesus, Paul, Plotinus, Dante, John of the Cross, Bacon, Jacob Boehme, Blake, Balzac, Mohammed, Bartholome de Las Casas, and Whitman all ended up in the major cases, as did Carpenter, the only living case of Bucke's acquaintance accorded the honor. Among the thirty-six people in the second category Bucke included philosophers like Socrates, Spinoza, Pascal, Emerson, and Li R, Old Testament figures including Moses, Gideon and Isaiah, and writers including Tennyson, Thoreau, Wordsworth, and Richard Jeffries.

Notably missing, of course, was a personal acknowledgement from Whitman of what Bucke was certain must have been not just one, but many cosmic consciousness experiences memorialized and alluded to in the poems of Leaves of Grass. In a letter of January 19, 1880, at the beginning of his planning of Walt Whitman, Bucke first attempted to get Whitman to say something definite in prose about a mysterious something involved in the genesis of his poems. Bucke's hint is both knowing and oblique:

The germanancy and groth [sic] of such a product as "Leaves of Grass" is a psychological [sic] expression almost unique in the history of the race and some record of it ought to remain if possible—I need not explain any further what I want from you for you will understand at once what I mean and you must surely have often thought of putting it upon record. (Lozynsky, Medical Mystic 67)

Whitman's only response (in a lost letter of January 26) was to send Bucke a list of materials for use in writing the biography.

As Bucke's ideas about cosmic consciousness solidified (and Whitman's health declined), Bucke asked Horace Traubel twice, with increasing specificity and urgency, to pose the question to Whitman before his death. On March 14, 1892, Bucke asked Traubel, "Do you think W. would tell you any thing about his own experience of 'Cosmic Consciousness'? Would you try him some day if he was in better trim than usual? Do not say that I asked you" (Lozynsky, Medical Mystic 179). Instead, Bucke recommends a more oblique method of raising the question,

Tell him (for instance) that the doctor says that Christ, Paul & Mohamet all had C. C. but that W. W. is the man who has had it in most pronounced development—then try to and get from /ask/ him something about it [/] where he was and what [he was] doing at the time /it first made its appearance/?" (180).

Bucke offers the details of his own case as a norm: "Did a luminous haze accompany the onset of C. C.? How many times has the C. C. returned? and how long remained at a time?" Getting this information, Bucke pleads, would be "most important to me and interesting to thousands—to many millions in the end, but I fear he will say nothing." Bucke regrets lost opportunities for talking to Whitman personally: "If I had known as much a few years ago (abt C. C.) as I do now I would have got some valuable statements from him but now I fear it is too late" (180).

It was. Again on March 20 of that year, Bucke wrote to Traubel urging him to speak to Whitman about cosmic consciousness, writing that he is "anxious to obtain from [Whitman] some confirmation or correction of my views on the subject" (181). In that letter, Bucke outlines his beliefs about cosmic consciousness at some length, and

poses a number of questions for Whitman. Bucke's conclusions are already clear in the questions and points. He tells Traubel that "Whatever Walt may say to you about it every page of *L. of G.* proves the possession of the faculty by the writer" and "Not only so but he describes the onset of the faculty, its results and its passing away, and directly alludes to it over and over again" (182). Bucke's reading of Whitman's poems in terms of cosmic consciousness is clearly well-developed already. It is clear that a reading of "Song of Myself" lies behind Bucke's ideas of Whitman's date of illumination: "The faculty always comes suddenly—it came to W. suddenly one June day between the years 1850 and 1855—which year was it?" (182).⁴⁶

Bucke, the disciple, lays out his interpretation, and pleads for confirmation: "Tell W. that I beg of him," he writes to Traubel, "to give me through you a little light to help me forward with my present task" (182). Whitman died six days after the posting of this final communication. There is no evidence that Traubel ever asked the gravely ill Whitman any of Bucke's questions, or if he did, that Whitman answered (the poet was practically comatose). Whitman, who had so often and so resolutely pointed to his poems when asked for explanations, had done so again.

Bucke's letter to Wallace and Johnson on April 10th reveals a man deeply disturbed by the death of his prophet but still faithful. "My heart is heavy as lead," he writes,

⁴⁶ Though Bucke apparently received no information on this point from Traubel, by the time of *Cosmic Consciousness* he had narrowed it to 1853 or 1854. In his biography of Whitman, Bucke had dated the "conception" of *Leaves* to that time, but hadn't yet developed his idea of the poems being the result of a first "illumination" (Bucke, *Walt Whitman* 135). He had included, however, a letter from Helen Price that implied that Whitman had composed his poetry in a trance-like state (30-31).

Over and over again I keep saying to myself: The Christ is dead! Again we have buried the Christ! And for the time there seems to be an end of everything. But I know he is not dead and I know that this pain will pass. Give my love to all the dear College fellows—now we are really brothers. (184)

In Bucke's rhetoric, it seems that Whitman has in some sense passed to his disciples the burden of his work, and this passing-on has sealed a compact between them. On June 24, 1893, Bucke could write to Wallace of his dedication and even a sort of wish for martyrdom:

My life has been dedicated for now many years to the 'Great Cause' and what remains of it is and shall be also so dedicated. It is the one thing I care for—that I live for and if I could in some way die for it I think my satisfaction would be complete (185).

Bucke's continued interest in and publications on cosmic consciousness must be seen, I think, as an attempt to continue Whitman's "Great Cause." These writings show Bucke's understanding of what that cause consisted and how he thought it could be best carried on. Following his usual pattern, Bucke published many of the component parts of Cosmic Consciousness independently as addresses and articles before finishing the complete book.

Reading the book alongside these early explorations, we see that Cosmic Consciousness is truly the work of a lifetime. Bucke's work on the development and decay of the human faculties is included and vital to his thesis. Bucke had argued in his 1892 presentation "The Origin of Insanity" for a general scheme whereby the stage of

evolution at which a particular mental faculty entered the human race is correlated to the age that it appears in the individual. More recently developed faculties, he proposed, citing Darwin, would be the most unstable. Mental faculties having “developed with great rapidity” among the “Aryan Race” would break down most often, accounting for the higher rate of insanity among whites (66). Bucke extended this principle to cover his later thesis: cosmic consciousness, more recent than, say color vision or the musical sense, would thus come latest in life, be most sporadic, and only appear among the most advanced of the race. Cosmic consciousness was ensconced in the time-scheme of evolutionary thought.

This evolution had moral consequences as well, and Bucke’s theory of emotional progress of the race and the gradual extinction of fear and guilt that had been found in Man’s Moral Nature reappeared, transfigured, in Cosmic Consciousness. In his introduction, Bucke adapted the genesis myth to figure cosmic consciousness as the experience that would redeem mankind from the evolutionarily distant fall (also a rising) into self-consciousness (with its attendant understanding of sin) from the merely animal state. From the solidity and balance of simple consciousness, “incapable of sin or the feeling of sin and equally incapable of shame,” the proto-man evolved into a condition of unhappy knowledge, distinction, and labor—“doing certain things in order to encompass certain ends” (6). Cosmic consciousness would bring humankind into balance again, destroying the merely self-conscious understanding that leads to fear, pettiness, and partiality:

The Savior of man is Cosmic Consciousness—in Paul’s language—the Christ. The cosmic sense (in whatever mind it appears) crushes the serpent’s head—destroys sin, shame, the sense of good and evil as contrasted one with the other, and will annihilate labor, though not human activity. (6-7)

Bucke had always been critical of the concept of sin, and had been strongly attracted to Whitman’s ideal of universal equanimity.

Bucke’s comparative readings of contemporary experiences and historical religious and poetic accounts, together with the undiminished evolutionary assumptions he had held at least since Man’s Moral Nature, led to the startling conclusion that is central to Cosmic Consciousness: “there exists a family sprung from, living among, but scarcely forming a part of ordinary humanity, whose members are spread abroad throughout the advanced races of mankind and throughout the last forty centuries of the world’s history” (CC 11).

He continues, explaining that “The trait that distinguishes these people from other men is this: Their spiritual eyes have been opened and they have seen” (CC 11). This tradition of seers and poets is responsible for the great ideas in human thought and religion. They had, he writes,

created all the great modern religions, beginning with Taoism and Buddhism, and speaking generally, have created, through religion and literature, modern civilization. Not that they have contributed any large numerical proportion of the books which have been written, but that they have produced the few books which

have inspired the larger number of all that have been written in modern times.

(11)

The qualification for membership in this “family” is that “at a certain age” each had “passed through a new birth and risen to a higher spiritual plane” (11). By this criterion, of course, Bucke placed himself not only as a disciple of Whitman, having had his moral nature elevated at the poet’s hands in a sort of apostolic succession, but also as a legitimate heir to a succession of luminaries whose ideas formed the bases of the most important strains of Western and Eastern philosophical and religious thought. Where Whitman had denied himself a tradition, and named himself as a founder, Bucke created a context.

It was natural for Bucke to move from the simple identification of those who seemed to have had the experience of cosmic consciousness to thinking of them as representatives of a common race, the future of human evolutionary development. The closest Whitman came to this idea was probably in the 1860 poem “Beginners,” where he wrote of the common elements in the lives of innovators, those people who are “provided for upon the earth, (appearing at Intervals)” and who are so “dear and dreadful . . . to the earth” (LoG 10).

Bucke’s evolutionary theories and his psychological explorations were not the only things he took from his outside studies. The methods of reading we develop to read one text, to solve one question or make sense of one mystery, are often applied to other questions, other texts. Bucke, during the years leading up to the publication of Cosmic Consciousness, was dealing with two complex problems: the interpretation of Walt

Whitman's poems and life, and the question of the Baconian "authorship" of Shakespeare. These issues became inextricably intertwined, and reading practices and interpretive conventions developed originally through engagement with one of these problems generally came to be put to use in better understanding both. Bucke's third obsessive interest, cosmic consciousness, became the key to understanding both mysteries. To understand the development of Bucke's reading methods during the period of the composition of Cosmic Consciousness, we need at least a cursory understanding of his involvement in the Bacon-Shakespeare controversy.

Ciphers, Mystic and Otherwise

The controversy had begun in earnest with William Henry Smith's Was Lord Bacon the Author of Shakespeare's Plays?, in 1856. Delia Bacon's The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespeare Unfolded was published the next year, sparking much more debate, particularly in American literary circles.⁴⁷ Her book purports to uncover not only that Bacon wrote the plays attributed to Shakespeare, but that he did so in order to distance himself from pro-democratic sentiments which were hidden in the plays. Bucke's involvement in the authorship controversy, however, was likely stirred by his reading of Ignatius Donnelly's exhaustive volume The Great Cryptogram: Francis Bacon's Cipher in the So-Called Shakespeare Plays, published in 1887.

This immense book, densely argued and heavily supported by citations and cryptographic proofs, weighs in at nearly a thousand pages. It is itself fascinating—not

⁴⁷ Nathaniel Hawthorne had written the introduction for Bacon's book, though he clearly did not uncritically endorse her theories.

chiefly as an argument, but as the story of an obsession, the triumph of the will attempting to find a secret truth. In the chapter entitled “How I Became Certain There Was a Cipher” Donnelly explains the beginning of one phase of his search:

In the winter of 1878-9 I said to myself: I will re-read the Shakespeare Plays, not, as heretofore, for the delight which they would give me, but with my eyes directed singly to discover whether there is or is not in them any indication of a cipher. And I reasoned thus: If there is a cipher in the Plays, it will probably be in the form of a brief statement, that “I, Francis Bacon, of St. Albans, son of Nicholas Bacon, Lord Keeper of the Great Seal of England, wrote these Plays, which go by the name of William Shakespeare.” (516)

Thus having already determined the content of the secret message he was looking for, Donnelly set about with an almost super-human determination to find it. His reasoning follows the interpretative logic common to such efforts. He first focuses on apparently peculiar or inexplicable moments in the plays, on misspellings, on inconsistencies, on scenes that seem “useless” or “meaningless” to him. These seemingly meaningless moments must, he reasons, signal hidden meanings. And so he rhymes his way through every possible word that might suggest “Bacon.” Having exhausted the surface of the plays, he then begins to use more and more elaborate numerical ciphers, more and more accidental-seeming evidence in the folios as products—errors in page numbering in early editions, printer’s “tokens” out of sequence. Finally, he develops a vision of the text that is truly Kabalistic in its complexity, assumptions of control by the author, and single-minded conspiratorial thrust. In the end, there are no accidents, and every clue is

sketched with the appearance of mathematical regularity. The book is a monument to the ability of the imagination to find what it seeks for. Donnelly also opts to retain some of the base formulae of his cipher—much to the derision of his critics.⁴⁸ The book, then, contains an apparently rigorous and exhaustive series of proofs that are based on grounds that remain carefully hidden.

Bucke was fascinated. Though he wouldn't publish on the subject until 1896, when he began writing letters to the editor in the Toronto Weekly Sun, he mulled over the issue for years with his typical ceaseless energy and ever-increasing intensity before he ventured putting his discoveries into writing.

Whitman had also read in Donnelly's book the year of its publication, with some eagerness. The poet had been exposed to the Shakespeare-Bacon argument years before Donnelly's cipher.⁴⁹ One of Whitman's early supporters and defenders, William Douglas O'Connor, was an avid Baconian who vigorously defended arguments for Bacon's authorship by Delia Bacon and others, launching a fusillade of short articles in a variety of newspapers. In the process, O'Connor became a friend and correspondent of Delia Bacon. Eventually, he published a novel, Harrington: A Story of True Love, in which the title character espoused a Baconian view, and in 1886 he published Hamlet's Note Book, which laid out his views on the subject in a more direct fashion (Donnelly

⁴⁸ Whitman's supporter William Douglas O'Connor would defend Donnelly in a short book, Mr. Donnelly's Critics, as well as several articles.

⁴⁹ The best treatment of Whitman's reaction to this question is Floyd Stovall's 1952 "Whitman and the Baconians."

923-925).⁵⁰ While Whitman had discussed the authorship question with O'Connor, and even written a short essay on "What Lurks Behind Shakspere's Historical Plays," he had not wholly shared the younger man's enthusiasm (Loving, Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself 442).⁵¹

The reactions of Bucke and Whitman to the issue, and specifically to Donnelly's book, tell us a great deal about both men. After The Great Cryptogram was published, Whitman wrote to Bucke, William Sloane Kennedy, and John Burroughs: "I remain anchor'd here in my big chair—Have you read the Bacon-Shakspere résumé in the last Sunday's N. Y. World? I am tackling it—take less & less stock in it" (Correspondence IV 118). Despite his initial disparagement, and his disappointment with Donnelly's argument, Whitman's first response in print is "Shakspere-Bacon's Cipher," written in the months following his reading of The Great Cryptogram:

I doubt it not—then more, far more;
 In each old song bequeath'd—in every noble page or text,
 (Different—something unreck'd before—some unsuspected author,)
 In every object, mountain, tree, and star—in every birth and life,
 A part of each—evolv'd from each—meaning, behind the ostent,
 A mystic cipher waits infolded. (LoG 457)

In this poem (originally called "The Mystic Cypher") Whitman takes The Great Cryptogram as a starting point, but gives it only the slightest of nods before asserting

⁵⁰ Donnelly considered O'Connor important enough to the Baconian cause to include a laudatory biographical sketch, a photograph, and an analysis of O'Connor's works in The Great Cryptogram.

⁵¹ Whitman's general position on Shakespeare—that his work represented and anchored Feudalism—was naturally opposed to Delia Bacon's thesis, which made Shakespeare practically a closet republican.

something wider and wilder and characteristically Whitmanian—the existence of hidden meanings, and clues to a hidden author, in every object of attention. He makes all of life a text, grants it all the same kind of perfect, inspired meaning that Donnelly must have found in the plays, and encourages his own readers to turn back to it, looking for hidden depths. Whitman well knew the value of this kind of invocation of hidden meanings. The earlier editions of Leaves of Grass are saturated with the technique, which imparts a sense of the suggestiveness and significance of the everyday, and charges the reader to look for the same deeper truths in the world as in Whitman’s poems. Whitman seems to have dismissed the details of the particular Baconian argument entirely. The poet had little patience for Donnelly’s ciphers, charts, and detailed “proofs,” what Whitman called “the minutiae of the problem”: “three and two make five, six from twelve leaves six—that is too much from me” (Traubel, WWVIC 4: 167-168). Instead, Whitman transcended the particulars of the problem to consider instead the spiritual potential of the idea of hidden meanings.

Bucke’s reaction, on the other hand, was apparently to adopt the reading methods in Donnelly’s book. When he applied these tools to Whitman’s own work, the poet’s reaction was practical and dismissive. On Saturday March 30, 1889, Traubel told Whitman that Bucke had “discovered a cipher in November Boughs.” Whitman’s first response was an incredulous “What?” When Traubel explained, Whitman laughed,

‘Oh my! I never thought I was so subtle!’ Then he said: ‘In a case like that a man can find anything he is determined to find: what he wants is always there—infallibly: it reminds me of the fellows who mine in the far west: what do they

call it—sugaring? Sugaring a mine? no—that is not the word for it, though there is a word.’ After vainly jogging his memory: ‘Well—I can’t get the word I want: not sunk, sugared, broken: there’s a good word: anyhow, the case is the same: it means dream deposits: dream gold, silver, what not: not mines in the ground but in people’s heads, in the paper of promoters, in the fancy of investors: dream values—sugaring the kettle!’ Then he added: ‘There may be some such sugar-coatings in November Boughs: we may trust the Doctor to find them there or not there!’ (Traubel, WWVIC 4: 454)

Whitman was always well aware of the fervor of Bucke’s enthusiasms, having been the focus of the most extreme of them for years. But he is also keenly aware of the assumptions and techniques involved in a reading such as Donnelly’s, and of the potential for self-deception, or in any event, reading only one’s own intentions. Bucke himself must have changed his mind about a Whitman “cipher,” if he considered it seriously at all. He never refers to it in any of his published works.

Bucke wrote in November of 1891, saying “I am still reading Shakespeare and Bacon (comparing the two (?) men)—it is still a most fascinating story—what would I not give for a week with O’Connor to talk it all over” (Lozynsky, Letters 261) .

Whitman’s responds, in a letter of November 18, 1891, in a typically level-headed fashion, acting as he so often would as a stabilizing influence for Bucke’s imaginative flights. He tells Bucke in no uncertain terms to

’Hold y’r horses’ ab’t the Shakspere-Bacon point—Ign: D[onnelly] collects a staggering am’t of S’s conventional personal inferiority—it has quite seriously

impressed me, & is superimposed on what I have clearly long seen, that there are strange mysteries & hiatuses in the S. cultus matter—but the Bacon attribution & cypher are too thin yet—too “got up” at best—but we will see what time brings out further—at any rate ‘probable’ or even ‘likely’ wont do in science or history. (Correspondence V: 266)

A not-very chastened Bucke replied on November 21, agreeing that “‘probable’ or even ‘likely’ will not do in science or history” & no one feels this more strongly than myself” but protesting that “in this S-B. matter it is the speculation that I enjoy—I am not too anxious to be sure—in one sense to be sure would spoil the fun” (Lozynsky, Letters 262).

The correspondence between Bucke and Whitman in the years that follow is spotted with references to the Shakespeare question. Whitman often sent clippings or books on the question to Bucke, and Bucke in turn offered Whitman books that he had read on the subject. One book recommended by Whitman, J. E. Roe’s The Mortal Moon, or Bacon and His Masks. The DeFoe Period Unmasked, turned out to have had, apparently, quite an impact on Bucke’s exegetical practice—or at the least is a parallel development based on the extension of similar methods.

One fundamental exegetical practice among devotees of the Bacon hypothesis was in finding similarities of style and substance and presenting parallel passages in parallel quotations. In Bucke’s “Shakespeare Dethroned,” for instance, he would argue that similarities in both the content and the style between Bacon’s writings and the plays

proved that the same man wrote both.⁵² Roe, who had apparently become very good at this sort of practice, took the argument further, finding echoes of Bacon (and therefore proof of his authorship) in an implausibly (in fact impossibly) wide range of works. According to Roe, Bacon wrote not only Shakespeare's plays and sonnets, but also Daniel Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe," Burton's "Anatomy of Melancholy," and Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, among others. Despite the impossibility of Roe's argument, Bucke would eventually come to believe something similar—attributing the works of Montaigne to Bacon. Bucke's manuscript exploration of the authorship question, complete but unpublished at the time of his death in 1900, apparently argues from similarity of sentiment and style. Harry Buxton Forman, who humored so many of Bucke's enthusiasms, apparently poked fun of him for attributing the whole Elizabethan and Jacobean canon to one man (Rechnitzer 174). Bucke found resistance, as well, in the pages of The Conservator, where he and William Sloane Kennedy crossed swords many times over the Shakespeare-Bacon controversy (and incidentally, the reputation of O'Connor). Kennedy's most incisive critique of Bucke's assumption that writers who share distinctive phrases and ideas must be the same person took the form of a "proof" that Whitman and Emerson were the same person, using evidence like that of the Baconians.

⁵² Bucke's early publications on the authorship question seem decidedly unoriginal. He applies anew or reports on the methods and discoveries of others in a brief and magazine-friendly fashion. Elizabeth Marriott, in the preface to the third edition of her Bacon or Shakespeare? An Historical Enquiry, writes that Bucke's argument in "Shakespeare Dethroned" [an alternate title for Bucke's "Shakespeare or Bacon?"] is "derived almost entirely from Mr. Edwin Reed's copious work 'Bacon *versus* Shakespeare'" (Bucke, Catalogue 15, Marriott 5). The argument from cosmic consciousness that Bucke later came up with was perhaps his most innovative or novel approach to a field that seems dominated by summaries and restatements.

In “Shakspere-Bacon’s Cipher,” Whitman had used the idea of a hidden cipher as a stepping stone to a wider question of a hidden motive force, hinting that “In each old song bequeath’d—in every noble page or text, / (Different—something unreck’d before—some unsuspected author)” (LoG 456). Bucke’s engagement with the Shakespeare authorship question moved him towards a more general question of authorship and encouraged him to consider a more truly “mystic” cipher. As early as 1891, he had used Whitman’s line about “some suspected author” in a letter to Whitman to refer to the idea that cosmic consciousness played a role in the authorship of the poems (Lozynsky 148).

In studying Whitman, Bucke found himself trying not only to understand the multiple levels of Whitman’s writings, but Whitman’s multiple personae. Readers of Whitman who knew the poet well in the flesh often were faced with some dissonance when confronted with the apparent differences between Whitman as he presented himself in his poems—the representative man, the kosmos, the incarnation of the universal—and the Whitman they knew, the Whitman we know from the letters and from With Walt Whitman in Camden, human to the point of sometimes appearing prosaic.⁵³ In the hagiographic excesses of Walt Whitman in 1883, Bucke attempted to conflate the two—to ascribe to the biographical Whitman all of the traits apparent in the persona of Whitman. The result was, as we have seen, less than convincing—perhaps

⁵³ This contrast has occasionally been a fascination or a stumbling block for writers on Whitman. A writer fascinated with the duality of selves, Jorge Luis Borges, writes of the “melancholy transition” that the reader must feel when going from the “paradisiacal sphere of [Whitman’s] verses to the insipid chronicle of his days” (“Note on Walt Whitman,” in Folsom’s Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song 236). Of course, the Whitman we see most clearly in WWIC is an older and more conservative personage than the writer of Leaves of Grass.

even to Bucke.⁵⁴ By the time of Cosmic Consciousness, some seven years later, Bucke was also having to face an alternate reading of the poems of Leaves—one hinted at by Edward Carpenter and John Addington Symonds, suggested by the letters between Whitman and Peter Doyle that Bucke edited and published. It was a reading that Bucke would never tackle head-on in print: that Whitman’s poems, at least on one level, address a male lover.⁵⁵

Two parallel problems arose among devotees of Baconian authorship. If Bacon wrote the plays, why are their voices and the attitudes they seem to express not identical to his as shown in other works? How do we reconcile what Bucke calls the “ostensible Bacon of the court, politics, prose writings, business, etc., and possibly others” with the Shakespeare-voice? Along with this question came a problem with the author who shows himself in the sonnets. The theory had been also been raised that many of Shakespeare’s sonnets were addressed to a young man.

The denial of personally or culturally unacceptable implications in canonical texts has always been among the most effective goads to ingenious interpretation. Mystical interpretations of the Song of Songs, for instance, were often driven by the apparent unworthiness of the sexual implications of a poem that must, because of its

⁵⁴ It is of course possible that Bucke’s opinion of Whitman was also colored by the persona Whitman assumed in his company. Bucke’s assertion that Whitman did not gossip, for instance, would have been impossible for Horace Traubel to make.

⁵⁵ Lorna Weir deals with the reaction of Bucke to Carpenter’s attempts to sound him out on the possible implications of “the love of comrades”—according to her, Bucke met all such overtures with “selective silences” (45). This was a common reaction among Whitman’s American and Canadian disciples, who were generally stunned by the idea. Many of Whitman’s British disciples were familiar with at least some expressions of homosexuality from having attended public schools.

canonical status, impart important knowledge.⁵⁶ In Cosmic Consciousness, Bucke finds a creative solution to the uncomfortable implications of his own most holy texts—the works of Whitman and Shakespeare/Bacon. Bucke’s treatment of Bacon and the sonnets in this book mirror in important ways his treatment of Whitman and his poems. The solution is elegant, and calls on strategies and habits of reading that Bucke had developed from years of engagement with a variety of texts. The Cosmic Sense, he reckons, is to be figured as a sort of separate self, with whom the everyday self can converse, and indeed which the everyday self sometimes will see as wholly separate:

‘Shakespeare,’ the author of the plays and ‘Sonnets’ is really another (while the same) self of the Bacon who wrote the prose works, spoke in Parliament, lived before the world as a jurist, courtier and citizen. . . . Just as the Whitman of the ‘Leaves’ is wholly distinct (yet the same) from the Whitman who rode on omnibusses and ferries, ‘lived the same life with the rest,’ and died in Camden, March 26, 1892. Just as ‘Gabriel,’ while being Mohammed, is at the same time another and distinct personality. (CC 155-156)

This naturalizing and psychologizing of an apparent external source of inspiration into a second self clearly has much to do with Bucke’s readings of Whitman’s talk of his “other I am.” Bucke further explains the idea later in Cosmic Consciousness:

Paul, Mohammed, Yepes [St. John of the Cross], Behmen [Jacob Boehme],
Blake, tell us over and over again that the great thoughts, divine emotions, which

⁵⁶ In Katz’s “Mysticism and the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture,” he notes how “Piety and mystical dogma have combined, through an allegorical unfolding, to subvert the sexual content of, and to domesticate, the Song of Songs, making it, in the process, the preferred book of the mystical soul” (28).

they express, are not their own but communicated from without. The protestations made by Blake—a hundred times repeated—and the last time to his wife a few minutes before his death, in reference to the songs which he sang as he lay slowly dying: “My beloved! they are not mine,” have been, in one shape or another, made by them all. Still we believe to-day that that other self which wrote the Epistles, dictated the Koran, composed the Aurora, was really none other than a part (the more divine part) of Paul, Mohammed, and Behmen respectively. (370)

In the case of Bacon, Bucke shifts pronouns and references in a way clearly learned from dealing with Whitman’s poems. He goes on to interpret the Sonnets as poems from the self-conscious Bacon addressed to the personified cosmic sense. He writes, “This identity (at the same time) and disparateness is the true solution (it is believed) of the Bacon-Shakespeare controversy” (156).

An exemplary reading (and a successful one, given Bucke’s assumptions), is Bucke’s analysis of Sonnet 33 (“Full many a glorious morning I have seen”). This sonnet, with its puns on “son” and “sun,” and its accounts of brief moments of favor, is good fodder for Bucke’s conventions of interpretation:

Full many a glorious morning have I seen
 Flatter the mountain-tops with sovereign eye,
 Kissing with golden face the meadows green,
 Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy;
 Anon permit the basest clouds to ride

With ugly rack on his celestial face,
 And from the forlorn world his visage hide,
 Stealing unseen to west with this disgrace:
 Even so my son one early morn did shine
 With all triumphant splendor on my brow;
 But out alack! He was but one hour mine,
 The region cloud hath mask'd him from me now. (171)

Since “mornings” in general, and splendors of one hour in particular seem to refer to illumination, Bucke assumes the sonnet “refers to the intermittent character of illumination, which holds true in all cases of Cosmic Consciousness, in which there is more than one flash of the divine radiance” (171). From this beginning, Bucke moves to a general sermon on the nature of cosmic consciousness: the poem “treats of the cheerlessness and barrenness of the intervals [between occurrences of CC] as compared with those periods when the Cosmic Sense is actually present” (171).

The method of reading of the sonnets, “as if addressed to a young male friend,” Bucke concludes, would “lack meaning and dignity. . . [l]ooked at from this point of view, they are entirely unworthy of the man . . . who wrote ‘Lear’ and ‘Macbeth’” (154). However, while dismissing this interpretation as “unworthy” of his image of its author, he still does not deny that erotic level of signification as possibly real. Instead, he shows a complex understanding of multiple meaning natural to a man who had read Whitman for a considerable portion of his life. “It may be claimed” he writes, that “an almost (or quite) constant characteristic of the writings of the class of men dealt with in this volume

[those who have experienced cosmic consciousness] is exactly this double meaning corresponding with the duplex personality of the writer” (155).

“Of this double, often triple, meaning,” Bucke continues, “the works of Dante and Whitman supply perhaps the best examples” (155). He alludes to Whitman’s “Prayer of Columbus” and “With Husky Haughty Lips, O Sea!” before making a blanket statement: “There is perhaps not a line in the ‘Leaves’ which has one meaning only” (155).

Bucke has been criticized for his readings of Whitman’s poems in Cosmic Consciousness. Lozynsky calls Bucke’s reading of section five of “Song of Myself” “relentlessly literal, allowing no scope for ambiguity or the complexities of figurative language” (171). “Literal” is clearly not the best word for Bucke’s reading, though it is more reductive and one-sided than Bucke’s previous readings of the same poem. To evaluate it fairly, it is important to read Bucke’s explication here in terms of his purpose and also in terms of his previous readings of Whitman’s work. Bucke had earlier, in Walt Whitman, pointed out the many layers of the “I” in “Song of Myself,” and had often hinted that the “you” addressed by Whitman was just as complex. Bucke had already noted and applied what we might call the “performative” nature of the poem’s statements, and the way in which Whitman is not only speaking “for himself . . . but as much for others” (Walt Whitman 160). What Bucke presents in Cosmic Consciousness is a bare explication of one of many levels of interpretation—in this case a biographical-mystical level intended to make clear to the reader the unspoken history of Whitman’s

experience of cosmic consciousness, and in particular the ways in which that experience matches Bucke's model of illumination.

Bucke's explication, presented in a parallel column alongside the poem, warrants a close look. He begins biographically, by naming the time of Whitman's illumination:

The new experience came in June, probably in 1853, when he had just entered upon his thirty fifth year. It would seem that he was at first in doubt what it meant, then became satisfied and said: I believe in its teaching. Although, however, it is so divine, the other I am (the old self) must not be abased to it, neither must it, (the new self) ever be overridden by the more basic organs and faculties. (Cosmic Consciousness 227)

Many critics who have attempted to evaluate Whitman's mysticism have faulted him for his acceptance of the body. But Bucke argues in Cosmic Consciousness that Whitman was the greatest of those having the cosmic sense in that unlike Paul or the Buddha, who Bucke characterize as thinking that "The body is nothing or less than nothing," Whitman refused to denounce or discount the body or the self-conscious life. A brave resistance to the dictates of the cosmic sense characterized Whitman's greatness:

It is against this most natural view (for the glory of the Cosmic Sense is well calculated to throw into deep shade all the rest of life) that Whitman from first to last set himself. He saw with the eye of a true seer—with the eye of absolute sobriety and common sense—that the self conscious life was as great in its way as was that of the new sense—let that be as divine as it would; saw that nothing ever was or could be greater than simple seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting,

knowing—and on that he took his stand. “The other I am” he says (the old self) “must not be abased to you” (the new sense) “and you must not be abased to the other.” (CC 93 sidenote)

This opinion substantially matches Whitman’s own. In an unpublished essay fragment in which he compared his own work to that of William Blake, Whitman applied essentially the same criteria—a kind of self-control in the face of ecstasy that kept him grounded in what was common to all men.⁵⁷ He wrote in the third person of his own work, probably intending the note for anonymous or pseudonymous publication:

Both are mystics, extatics but the difference between them is this – and a vast difference it is: Blake’s visions grow to be the rule, displace the normal condition, fill the field, spurn this visible, objective life & place the subjective spirit on an absolute throne, wilful and uncontrolled. But Whitman, though he occasionally prances off or takes flight with an abandon & capriciousness of step or wing, and a rapidity & whirling power, which quite dizzy the reader in his first attempts to follow, always holds the master over himself, &, even in his most intoxicated lunges or pirouettes, never once loses control, or even equilibrium. To the perfect sense, it is evident that he goes off because he “permits” himself to do so, [illeg] while ever the director, or directing principle sits coolly at hand, able to stop the wild teetotum & and reduce it to order, at any a moment. In Walt Whitman, escapades of this sort are the exceptions. The main character of his

⁵⁷ Whitman wrote the fragment as a rebuttal of Swinburne’s comparison of Blake to him in that author’s 1868 William Blake: A Critical Essay. Swinburne had claimed that Blake’s poetry was more profound than Whitman’s.

poetry is the normal, the universal, the simple, the eternal platform of the best manly & womanly qualities. (Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts 1503)

In Bucke's narrative of "Song of Myself," Whitman turns from this moment of resistance, and continues to address his second self, the cosmic sense:

Stay with me, loaf with me on the grass, instruct me, speak out what you mean, what is in you, no matter about speaking musically or poetically, or according to the rules, or even using the best language, but just use your own words in your own way. (CC 227)

Bucke previously suggested that this address to the "you" was spoken to the reader. For the purpose of the argument at hand, however, he presents it as a kind of invocation of the cosmic sense. Bucke's account of section five then shifts to a reminiscence wherein Whitman "turns back to tell of the exact occurrence" of his first experience of cosmic consciousness:

The illumination (or whatever it was) came to him or upon him one June morning, and took (though gently) absolute possession of him, at least for the time. Henceforth, he says, his life received its inspiration from the newcomer, the new self, whose tongue, as he expresses it, was plunged to his bare-stripped heart.

His outward life, also, became subject to the dictation of the new self—it held his

feet. Finally he tells in brief of the change wrought in his mind and heart by the birth within him of the new faculty. He says he was filled all at once with peace and joy and knowledge transcending all art and argument of the earth. He attained that point of view from which alone can a human being see something of God (“which alone,” says Balzac, “can explain God;” which point, unless he attains, “he cannot,” says Jesus “see the kingdom of God”). And he sums up the account by the statement that God is his close friend, that all the men and women ever born are his brothers and sisters and lovers and that the whole creation is built and rests upon love. (CC 227-228)

Bucke again uses quotation and allusion to provide an interpretative context for Whitman within the community of those possessing cosmic consciousness.

But where does this leave the sexual implications of Whitman’s imagery? The answer Bucke often avoided giving about Whitman may be found in his handling of the Shakespearean sonnets. The young man or dark woman of the “Sonnets,” Bucke concluded, “might have had a real existence and might have been spoken to and spoken of as the superficial meaning of the ‘Sonnets,’” but this doesn’t change the greater importance of the cosmic meaning (CC 155). If Bucke read the sexual imagery in Whitman’s section five, he must have felt much the same way about it—the subject at hand and Bucke’s assurances about Whitman’s highest purposes would have made it irrelevant in the face of the larger concern. As Bucke said:

It is this ecstasy, far beyond any that belongs to merely self-conscious life, which the poets, as such, especially occupy themselves . . . leaving to the singers the

pleasures and pains, loves, and hates, joys and sorrows, peace and war, life and death, of self conscious man; though the poets may treat of these, too, but from a new point of view, as expressed in the “Leaves”: “I will never again mention love or death inside a house” –that is, from the old point of view, with the old connotations.

Bucke believed then when Whitman spoke of sex, he spoke of it as it related to or symbolized cosmic consciousness, which Bucke has made the central fact of the poetry. The idea that the love of comrades itself might be the message of the “Calamus” poems or others would have been dismissed more or less out of hand, banished by Bucke’s own sense of what was important, and the certainty that Leaves of Grass contained it.

The Purpose of Cosmic Consciousness

But how does Bucke justify his prioritizing of the layers of Whitman’s message? The important element in finding the innermost meanings of an author is knowledge of the author’s intention. For example, Bucke asserts that

Dante used the theological terms current in his day to veil and express far deeper and loftier thoughts than had theretofore ever been annexed to them. Attach the current signification to the terms used and his verses had one meaning, but ascribe to these terms his intention and they have another vastly wider and deeper. (155)

Dante's intention, like Whitman's and Bacon's, seems transparent to Bucke because he is certain that all writers on cosmic consciousness share a single aim: to illuminate others. It was an aim that Bucke shared.

As Bucke stated that "intention" was most important to understanding a work inspired by cosmic consciousness, so we must understand that, perhaps unlike other early studies in comparative mysticism, Cosmic Consciousness is not chiefly a book intended to inform, but rather calculated to transform.⁵⁸ In his introduction, Bucke strikes a notably apocalyptic tone that echoes Whitman's own in the 1855 preface.

Bucke writes

In contact with the flux of cosmic consciousness all religions known and named to-day will be melted down. The human soul will be revolutionized. Religion will absolutely dominate the race. It will not depend on tradition. It will not be believed and disbelieved. It will not be a part of life, belonging to certain hours, times, occasions. It will not be in sacred books nor in the mouths of priests. It will not dwell in churches and meetings and forms and days. Its life will not be in prayers, hymns nor discourses. It will not depend on special revelations, on the words of gods who came down to teach, nor on any bible or bibles. It will have no mission to save men from their sins or to secure them entrance to heaven. . . .

The evidence of immortality will live in every heart as sight in every eye. Doubt

⁵⁸ It can (and no doubt has) been argued however, that the search for a common experiential core in multiple religious traditions, as carried out by Bucke, James, and their successors, always aims at transforming religious understanding, frequently takes the form of creating a sort of syncretic or meta-religion (as in The Perennial Philosophy of Huxley), and often has apocalyptic undertones.

of God and of eternal life will be as impossible as now doubt of existence; the evidence of each will be the same. (Bucke, Cosmic Consciousness 5)

Bucke echoes elements of Whitman's theory of reader response when talking about the purpose of Cosmic Consciousness. Whitman had always emphasized what he taught in his poems and prose writings was not any given content, but urged the reader to his or her own never-ending progression of work and discovery: that it was "no lesson—it lets down the bars to a good lesson, / And that to another, and every one to another still" ("Who Learns My Lesson Complete," LoG 331). He had written in "A Backwards Glance O'er Traveled Roads" that he sought "less to state or display any theme or thought, and more to bring you, the reader, into the atmosphere of the theme or thought—there to pursue your own flight" (Poetry and Prose 666). Bucke likewise writes that his book "is intended not so much to teach anything as to show that there exists a certain lesson to be learned and to indicate where it may be studied. This volume is not so much a road as a finger post on a road" (Bucke, Cosmic Consciousness 215).

Bucke's method of "pointing," however, differs greatly from Whitman's technique. Whitman studiously avoided connection between his own work and any other. Derivative works and works that referred to other works were to be eschewed. Bucke's work, on the other hand, is consonant with, and attempts to replicate in the reader, the results of his own years of spiritual quest—a quest essentially to find an intellectual framework and a literary / religious context in which to read his own experience. He writes that his book's "greatest value (if it have any) will be to lead to the serious study of certain men of an exceptional type; not one or the other of them, but as a

group and from a particular standpoint” (Bucke, Cosmic Consciousness 215). But why does Bucke lay his emphasis on notable individuals and their work? And why present such a mix—what R. C. Zaehner calls a “motley rout” of figures? (Zaehner, Concordant Discord 48). Bucke holds that those who have manifested cosmic consciousness do not contradict one another, and indeed, tend to a kind of unanimity. He is what some modern students of mysticism call a perennialist, believing that all accounts of cosmic consciousness are differing descriptions of what is essentially the same experience or object. He draws the analogy to the partially subjective nature of normal perception:

Each person who has the faculty is made aware by it of essentially the same fact or facts. If three men looked at the tree and were asked half an hour afterwards to draw or describe it the three drafts or descriptions would not tally in detail, but in general outline would correspond. Just in the same way do the reports of those who have had cosmic consciousness correspond in all essentials, though in detail they doubtless more or less diverge (but these divergences are fully as much in our misunderstandings of the reports as in the reports themselves). So there is no instance of a person who has been illumined denying or disputing the teaching of another who has passed through the same experience. (71)

If all cases are more or less the same (when read in Bucke’s manner), then why does not Bucke simply state what he knows about cosmic consciousness, or even focus only on Whitman, whom he considers to be the “the best, most perfect, example the world has so far had of the Cosmic Sense” (CC 225)? In part, the question is one of impact. Bucke

realizes acutely that some books and some lessons are particularly suited to a given character, and that no one exposition of the truth is apt to affect all men:

And as there are many men in the West who are, or would be if they read them, more benefited by Buddhistic and Mohammedan scriptures than they are by Jewish or Christian, so, doubtless, there are thousands of men in southern Asia who, born Buddhists, Brahmans, or Mohammedans, would be, from some peculiarity of mental constitution, more readily and profoundly stirred by the Gospels and Pauline epistles, or “Leaves of Grass,” than by the Vedas or any of the books that owe their inspiration to the teachings of Gautama or Mohammed.
(374)

Again, this is a typically Whitmanian sentiment. In an unpublished note, Whitman writes that

Every soul has its own individual language, often unspoken, or lamely feebly haltingly spoken; but a true fit for that man, and perfectly adapted to his use. — The truths I tell to you or any other, may not be plain to you, because I do not translate them fully from my idiom into yours. —If I could do so, and do it well, they would be as apparent to you as they are to me; for they are truths. (Notes and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts 61)

Whitman follows this up with the idea of poet as a kind of anti-Babel, who can speak to everyone in his or her own tongue. The poet is “the great translator and joiner of the whole” who possesses

the divine grammar of all tongues, and says indifferently and alike How are you my friend? To the President in the midst of his cabinet, and Good day my brother, to Sambo, among the hoes of the sugar field, and both understand him and know that his speech is right. (61)

Bucke is no poet, and so presents as many accounts of mystical experience in as many styles as he can, assuming that, guided by his interpretations and translations, the reader will see the underlying ahistorical pattern as Bucke has seen it. Before we look deeply at Bucke's rhetorical use of the parallel text and of universalizing interpretation, however, we must establish his purpose.

In Cosmic Consciousness, Bucke is attempting to introduce the reader to as many personal influences as he can. Since Man's Moral Nature, he had not given up on the idea that direct personal influence might come through or behind or around the insufficient words of a poem or story to change the outlook of the reader. Bucke's most important and final purpose is to facilitate illumination. He writes of himself in the third person:

. . . he hopes to furnish aid to his fellow men in a far more practical and important sense. . . . He realizes that, granted the necessary heredity, any individual not already beyond the age may enter cosmic consciousness. He knows that intelligent contact with cosmic conscious minds assists self conscious individuals in the ascent to the higher plane. He therefore hopes, by bringing about, or at least facilitating this contact, to aid men and women in making the almost infinitely important step in question. (CC 4).

If Bucke presents many voices, he is also careful to reduce those voices as near to unanimity as he may, using his own case as the norm. To this purpose, he makes use of a method sometimes adopted by the Baconians: the presentation of supposedly parallel texts, with explication. Bucke adds typographical innovations to this method.

Bucke adopts a two-column format for most of the "case study" chapters. On the left there are quotations from the author being treated, while on the right, Bucke presents both translations from the original idiom of the quotation to the language of cosmic consciousness or parallel texts from other authors in the "case study" section. Bucke's belief in the unanimity of those who have experienced cosmic consciousness is emphasized by his practice of citing the parallel texts only by number. Reading Bucke's masterpiece, we often find ourselves presented with a quotation and an additional text that seems to parallel it. A moment of productive uncertainty or confusion is created by this juxtaposition. Only by thumbing to the index of sources in the front of the book can we find out that the person who sounds so much like Paul in the parallel quotation is in fact Whitman. Between the presentation of unlabeled parallel texts and the translation of idiom, the reader is faced with a very strong sense of an atemporal order.⁵⁹

This appearance of unanimity and order is doubled by Bucke's "translations" to the language of cosmic consciousness. Many seemingly-disparate terms having to do with religious experience are held to refer to cosmic consciousness: it has "many names" but "they have not been understood or recognized," Bucke writes (CC 52). Nirvana in

⁵⁹ Something akin to this technique may be found in the poems of T. S. Eliot—what Borges in his essay on Whitman calls "The deliberate manipulation of anachronisms to produce an appearance of eternity" (Perlman, Folsom, and Campion 236).

the words of the Buddha, the Kingdom of Heaven in the language of Jesus, Paul's use of "Christ," Mohammed's references to either the personal "Gabriel" or the general "spirit," and Lao-Tzu's "Tao" refer, in Bucke's scheme to the same faculty or condition. Cosmic consciousness becomes in a way a universal signified: all spiritual goals or experiences regardless of their social or historical context are held to be the result (or mistranslation) of a "common core" of experience.⁶⁰

This results in, as James Robert Horne perceptively notes, Bucke's belief that all previous religious interpretations of the cosmic consciousness experience "have been, in a sense, erroneous, and have been misunderstood by those who heard and lived them" (Horne 58-59). Anticipating the arguments of scholars of mysticism for decades to come, Bucke found the reasons for this misunderstanding, and this fall from an unspeakable unanimity of experience into a Babel of diversity of doctrine and report, in problems of subjectivity and linguistic inadequacy.

In one place, Bucke notes the plurality of interpretation and differences in worldview and reference that necessitate it:

however godlike the faculty [cosmic consciousness] may be, those who first acquire it, living in diverse ages and countries, passing the years of their self-conscious life in different surroundings, brought up to view life and the interests

⁶⁰ For a scathing critique of Bucke's assumptions of unanimity, particularly between Eastern and Western traditions, read Zaehner's chapter on Bucke in his Concordant Discord. Zaehner uses Bucke to critique a whole school of thought on mysticism: Bucke "represents an attitude towards mysticism that is both commonly held and in his case so uncritically extreme as to demolish his own premisses by the very absurdity of his conclusions" (49).

of life from totally different points of view, must necessarily interpret somewhat differently those things which they see in the new world which they enter. (80)

In another place, Bucke seems to argue that the fault lies with language itself. Those having cosmic consciousness “were obliged (for want of a better) to use the language of self consciousness” (CC 381). Thus, all accounts are “exceedingly incomplete and the words and phrases used have been so inadequate as to have been to the last degree misleading.”

Bucke’s theory of language (and the theory of what is ineffable that goes with it) in Cosmic Consciousness has developed and gained sophistication from its earlier statement in Man’s Moral Nature. Language is now implicated in the progress and limits of consciousness, and is seen as developing alongside the various mental faculties. He believes that “self consciousness is only possible after the formation of concepts and the consequent birth of language,” and that language is limited to the expression of concepts. In this he is guided by theoreticians of language of the period.⁶¹ He quotes Trench’s argument that “You cannot impart to any man more than the words which he understands either now contain or can be made intelligibly to him to contain” and F. Max Mueller’s maxim “Without speech, no reason, without reason no speech” (27). According to the evolutionary linguists of Bucke’s day, vocabulary for emergent mental faculties like color perception evolved alongside the faculties themselves and with the concepts (again lagging behind) that make them thinkable and speakable. Since a

⁶¹ Shortt mentions many of these in his discussion of Bucke’s use of philological proofs for the evolution of the human mind (97).

concept needs to be formed for an experience before it can be speakable or thinkable, many emotions and sense impressions as yet defy direct expression in language:

As a matter of fact ninety-nine out of every hundred of our sense impressions and emotions have never been represented in the intellect by concepts and therefore remain unexpressed and inexpressible except imperfectly by roundabout description and suggestion. (28)

It seems natural then to Bucke that cosmic consciousness—a faculty much greater and much newer—is as yet imperfectly speakable. To create it in a reader, one must either hint and provoke as Whitman did, or attempt to give it a conceptual form, a normative model, a context of interpretation. Bucke’s final work attempts both of these goals. We cannot deny that the concept of “cosmic consciousness,” though now often removed from much of the context of Bucke’s thought, has in the hundred years since been a useful tool in handling conceptually a range of human experience. If it has sometimes proven clumsy, a tool that leaves its marks on what it grasps—we understand that that is in the nature of tools, even the more accurate ones that we deploy today.

Conclusions

Bucke is clearly no objective scholar or critic. But he is nonetheless a reader of prodigious ability and creativity. Bucke’s most recent biographer, Peter Reznitzer, wrote that “Bucke . . . misread Leaves of Grass as a sacred text, as holy writ, an approach fundamentally alien to Whitman’s purpose” (233). Bucke sometimes did exasperate Whitman—he was too dogmatic, too evangelical for the comfort of a poet

who profoundly distrusted dogma and thought the typical type of evangelism a vain and morally suspicious enterprise. Bucke was at times too sure of himself and sure of Whitman. Traubel recorded a characteristic exchange:

B. spoke of something as “a miracle.” W. said: “Miracles are dangerous affairs, Maurice.” B.: “You may not be a believer in miracles, Walt, but you are a worker of miracles.” W. said: “You are a liberal interpreter, Maurice: you construe me far beyond what I am or could be—far beyond what I want to be.”

“A liberal interpreter”—the charge is just. But something else is going on here. Whitman was making the old argument, the argument of Schleiermacher and Emerson against exceptional miracles. He continued:

“What greater miracles than the telegraph, telephone—all the wonderful new mechanisms of our day!” And at the same time he said he always “wanted to be ‘quoted against the theological miracles.’” Bucke’s insistence that there was a background for it all, W. said, did “not explain the case.” W. added: “The whole miracle dogma business has been swung as a club over the head of the world: it has been a weapon flourished by the tyrannical dynasties of the old world—dynasties murderous, reeking, unscrupulous, barbarous: they have always tried to justify their crimes by an assumed divine grant of some sort.

(Traubel, WWWIC 4: 352)

What is recorded here is a dispute over terms and associations. Whitman’s operating definition of miracles (in this discussion) is not Bucke’s. There’s a misunderstanding, a misreading, but it is only partially on the doctor’s part. When Bucke protests that

Whitman performs miracles, I think what he had in mind was no loaves-and-fishes performance, but the kind of miracle that Bucke could well attest to: the transformation of the reader's personality. When Rechnittzer writes, then, that Bucke misread Whitman by taking his work as holy writ, he is both quite right and hopelessly wrong. Whitman meant Leaves to be holy writ—though not exactly in the way Rechnittzer implies. To treat something as scripture may imply respect for the text, but the extraordinary status of scripture actually produces a level of creativity in its interpreters.⁶² When a text reaches a certain level of prestige, interpreters are obliged to make it speak to their own conditions. Like other mystical exegetes the world over, Bucke read his experiences, his needs, and the framework of his worldview both from and into the scriptures that formed a proving ground of his identity and a provocation to his ingenuity. If anything, Bucke's profound respect for Whitman's poems—his belief in the greatness of the secret that they undoubtedly concealed, his faith that they were addressed to him, his certainty (bolstered by experience) that Whitman's indirections could slip past the limits of the speakable, and hint into consciousness things beyond—this respect was precisely what made possible his most important and unconventional readings, and enabled Bucke to make sense of his life and his world. What Whitman most often objected to in Bucke was his attempts to bring to Whitman's peculiar text-centered faith, with its indirect and chancy method of transmission and lack of dogma, some of the trappings of traditional religion that Whitman distrusted.

⁶² This creativity is always restrained by the standards and practices of reading within a community. Whitman's text urges creative participation, and Bucke was creating rather than receiving community practices, so he sometimes reaches farther and takes more "risks" than mystical exegetes in more established traditions.

If Bucke misunderstood Whitman's intentions, if he worshipped the idol Whitman had made of himself too literally, if he missed some of Whitman's meanings while attending to his words and exaggerated others, in Bucke many of the fondest hopes Whitman had expressed for his audience and for the transformational power of his book began to be realized.

CHAPTER IV

“THE FACE OF HIS HOURS REFLECTED”:

EDWARD CARPENTER’S READING OF LEAVES OF GRASS

“Towards Democracy” has a milder radiance, as of the moon
compared with the sun—allowing you to glimpse the stars behind.

– Edward Carpenter, “A Note on Towards Democracy”

Every scripture is to be interpreted by the same spirit that gave it forth.

– Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nature

In an explanatory note about his book of poetry Towards Democracy, Whitman’s disciple Edward Carpenter attempts to explain to a more or less baffled audience how his book came to be written, and what he was attempting in writing it.¹ His explanation is fascinating in its own right, as we will see later on in this chapter. However, there is a notable omission, or rather an acknowledgement greatly and conspicuously delayed. Its absence becomes more and more obvious until it becomes almost palpable. Only at the end of his note on this most transparently Whitmanian book of poems does Carpenter

¹ This explanation, titled “A Note on Towards Democracy” was first published in The Labour Prophet in May 1894 and subsequently attached to the book itself, first as an end-note and in later editions as prefatory matter.

broach the issue of the influence of Walt Whitman. This is the book which Wynn Thomas claims to be so like Whitman's work that "if passages from Carpenter's poem were to be introduced at random into 'Song of Myself' even the shrewdest of Whitman scholars might be hard-pressed to identify them" (Thomas, "Representatives and Revolutionists" 145). Carpenter writes that he omitted to mention Whitman's influence

for the same reason I have said nothing about the influence of the sun or the winds. These influences lie too far back and ramify too complexly to be traced. I met with William Rossetti's little selection from "Leaves of Grass" in 1868 or 1869, and read that and the original editions continuously for ten years. I never met with any other book (with the exception perhaps of Beethoven's sonatas) which I could read and re-read as I could this one. I find it difficult to imagine what my life would have been without it. "Leaves of Grass" "filtered and fibred" my blood. (TD xxiv).²

He does not exaggerate.

It is a commonplace among Carpenter's admirers that his life was his true art. As E. M. Forster, one of the legions of his friends, put it, "His greatness scarcely got into his books" (Beith 75). It might also be said, without too much risk of overstatement, that

² All page references to Towards Democracy (henceforth TD) refer to the 1922 Mitchell Kennerly edition. It is notable that Carpenter's other "book" is a collection of music. Carpenter was an amateur pianist and sometimes composer, writing a number of labor-anthems in later life. The re-reading in this case would not be a passive reception, but enacting or performing the pieces. Carpenter's mature poetic style has often been compared to musical form, as was Whitman's. See for example Barua. In his preface to Romain Rolland's Beethoven, Carpenter calls Beethoven "a great leader and teacher" who "freed the human spirit from innumerable petty bonds and conventions, . . . recorded the profoundest experiences of life, and gave form and utterance to emotions hardly guessed—certainly not expressed before his time" (ix). In his essay on Beethoven in Angel's Wings, Carpenter calls him "the forerunner of Shelley and Whitman among the poets, of J. W. Turner and J. F. Millet among the painters" (206).

Carpenter's life, as much or better than his work, may be considered a reading of Walt Whitman's writings. That is not to say that Edward Carpenter was a poseur or impersonator. He had a keen sense of (and disdain for) sham, "front," and false appearances. The things that Whitman helped Carpenter place into context were the very things that became most real to both writers— friendship, sex, spiritual democracy, and mystical experience. Modern critics of Whitman have often chosen one of these aspects of Whitman's works to the exclusion of the others, and argued for making some of these elements mere metaphors or covering fictions for the one they choose, so that what appears to be mysticism is really sex, or what appears to be sex is politics, and so on. Carpenter's life and his reading may, perhaps, give us a more complex view. These elements were so wedded in Carpenter (as they seem to have been in Whitman) as to be practically indistinguishable: they form many waves in one drift of thought. We will see that the interpretative strategies and meaning-giving structures that Carpenter applies to sex and those he applies to mysticism, for instance, will come to be largely the same.

Next to proposing the idea that Carpenter's life was his art, the most common strategy among Carpenter's critics might be to mention the unity of Carpenter's life and work. As Noël Greig writes in his introduction to Carpenter's works on sexuality:

Carpenter made an attempt to live his life as a whole. He wished to link all aspects of himself—the inner and the outer, the intellectual and the spiritual, the physical and the emotional—with all aspects of the world. So then, his work is a reflection on his preoccupations, desires, actions, dreams and experiences, and as such it bears all the marks of life's to's and fro's. If we look into his life, we can

see beyond a seemingly disconnected series of writings to patterns of thought running through all, emerging at times in one form, at times another, sometimes forcefully and sometimes falteringly. The shelf of books is not a ladder of achievement, it is Edward's diary to the world. (11)

While this is perhaps true of most authors, it is perhaps more apparent than usual in Carpenter. We find this same compactness of motive and work when we treat Carpenter's reading. While Carpenter was influenced at different times in his life by a wide variety of books, the books that influenced him the most were treated virtually as of one piece—whether the books of Maurice early books that Carpenter imbibed at his father's side, Mazzinni's revolutionary pamphlets that he read at Cambridge, Plato's dialogues that most likely began to give him a way to understand sexuality and the soul, Thoreau's essays that made him wish for greater simplicity, or the books of Indian philosophy and poetry that sent him across the world to meet with spiritual teachers on the sub-continent and made him understand Whitman afresh. Whether we consider Whitman's poetry that helped him understand his role and his identity, or Bucke's theories about cosmic consciousness that expanded on those beliefs, we find them all assimilated and put together into an unusually integrated whole in Carpenter's evolving worldview.

Carpenter was often hailed (or reviled) as the "English Whitman" and his poetry was famously dismissed as "Whitman and water."³ When he asserted in his "note" to

³ By Havelock Ellis, who would later become a friend of Carpenter's and reconsider his initial judgment. Ellis's wife was very close emotionally to Carpenter, who she looked to for advice. She herself had what Carpenter would call an "inverted temperament"—she was a lesbian.

Towards Democracy that he had never intentionally “tried to imitate” the style of Leaves of Grass, he was telling the truth. There is something deeper at work than deliberate imitation. Carpenter attributes “what resemblance there may be” (and as we shall see, the resemblance is in almost every line) to “a deeper similarity of emotional atmosphere and intension in the two authors—even though” as he says “that similarity may have sprung and no doubt largely did spring out of the influence of one upon the other” (TD xxiv). It is the nature of this deeper influence that is our subject. In order to understand it, we must ask ourselves how words on a page helped a repressed young Cambridge fellow, disappointed in love and haunted by thoughts of alienation and inauthenticity, to become the be-sandaled guru-figure whose prose writings on homosexuality, women’s liberation, air pollution, animal rights, and spirituality helped change the face of liberal England, and whose poetic works, though not much remembered today, were adopted by some in British radical circles as something like holy writ. Havelock Ellis wrote that many of his friends cherished Towards Democracy “as a sort of Bible” (Beith 47). Katherine Bruce Glasier, one of those friends, explained: “It is no exaggeration for many of us inside and outside the political Socialist movement to say that Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass and Edward Carpenter’s Towards Democracy have become as a kind of Twentieth-Century Old and New Testament” (86).

Like Leaves of Grass, Towards Democracy helped produce conversions, both political and spiritual. Gilbert Beith’s collection of eulogies and essays on Carpenter, In Appreciation contains several examples of readers’ strong reactions, including accounts of and references to what we’d have to call mystical experiences. Many of Carpenter’s

friends, followers, and acquaintances resort to religious language in order to explain the unusual and profound effect he had on them, and a few use the language of Bucke's Cosmic Consciousness. In that book, which Carpenter helped inspire, J. William Lloyd's mystical experience is recorded—an experience that occurred while reading Towards Democracy. Of all Whitman's disciples, Carpenter was probably most personally influential and maintained the largest sphere of friends. Reading Beith's volume of appreciatory essays on Carpenter, we see testimony to a man who pursued friendship with a religious intensity. Sometimes Carpenter's presence was capable, of inducing the kind of reaction that many of Whitman's admirers experienced on first meeting that poet. Guido Ferrando is only a little more emphatic than others when he writes "I shall always remember, as long as I live, the sense of elation, of blissful peace which enwrap my soul when I stood for the first time in front of Edward Carpenter, my hand in his warm grasp, his vivid piercing eyes looking deep into mine, his noble delicate features radiant with a luminous smile" (Beith 15). The most eloquent of Carpenter's friends, E. M. Forster, wrote of this presence:

The spell of his personal influence was tremendous. It worked not only when he spoke of immortality or comradeship, but when he mentioned other subjects or was just keeping quiet. . . . It was the influence which used to be called magnetic, and which emanated from religious teachers and seers, it depended on contact and couldn't be written down on paper, and its effect was to increase one's vitality, so that one went away better able to do one's work. One's own work, not his; it was an influence, not a doctrine. It suggested the direct transference of

power, and when the Evangelist said that virtue went out of Christ I suppose that he had some such transference in mind. (Beith 79-80)

From an awkward and conflicted child, Carpenter grew to become something of a radical guru in his own right, sitting contentedly at the center of a very large circle of friends—writers, politicians, and activists—many of whom looked to him as a role model and source of advice. To understand this process and this change, we must look at the boy Carpenter was and the man he became, the book that changed him (Leaves of Grass), the approach he took to it, the experiences he interpreted with and through it, and the works that it and those experiences inspired.

One of Walt Whitman's purposes in Leaves of Grass is to bring the reader level with him, to assert the possibility of reader taking up the task and the burden that the speaker is shouldering: "what I assume," he wrote at the beginning of "Song of Myself," "you shall assume." As we have seen, Richard Maurice Bucke believed that in order to understand Whitman a reader had to become one with him in some way: he believed that there was a kind of merging of personalities and identities in the reading process. In the case of Edward Carpenter, we have a reading that comes out of and results in substantial similarities of character and situation. Carpenter didn't grow to outwardly resemble Whitman quite as closely as Bucke did—though he did abandon the conventional dress of his class for a rougher and more Whitmanian wardrobe (later to be supplemented by Indian sandals he made himself). But in his dreams, his goals, and the structures of his identity, Edward Carpenter may prove to be the closest to Whitman of the disciples.

As is the case with most readers, those things he found by affinity seem somewhat exaggerated in him. In a way, Carpenter is like the dream-Whitman of the categorizing critic: often straightforward where the older poet is coy, often explicit where the other is cagey. Carpenter leaves no doubt as to his politics (an idealistic anarchism with socialist leanings), his sexuality (an unabashed, active, but spiritualized and idealized homosexuality), or his mysticism (pronounced, with well-attested-to Eastern borrowings). While Carpenter attempted the hinting and suggestive techniques of Whitman with some success in what is probably the central work of his thought, Towards Democracy, he later expanded on and attempted to state his central thought in a more typically discursive way in series of essays on sex, mysticism, psychology, comparative mythology, and social criticism. It is a common charge that Carpenter was essentially unoriginal—a popularizer, a synthesizer. Yet Carpenter was a disciple in the best sense. He was astute at finding and fitting together models and ideas that fit his situation and helped him best cope with his experience. He also had the rarer knack of putting those ideas and ideals to work—of living them.

Edward Carpenter first read Whitman's poems in the summer of 1868,⁴ in his lodgings in Cambridge.⁵ H. D. Warr, a friend at Trinity Hall, handed him a copy of William Rossetti's blue-covered edition of selections from Leaves of Grass. Warr asked

⁴ Carpenter's use of dates in his autobiographical writings is notably vague. He cites the first reading as '68 in several places, but almost as often qualifies it, as he does here, admitting "it may have been '69" (64).

⁵ Carpenter's autobiography, My Days and Dreams, is the primary source for the various biographies written about him, but it ends with 1916. Sheila Rowbotham's 1977 "Edward Carpenter: Prophet of a New Life" is the best source on Carpenter's friendships and political involvements. Dilip Barua's 1966 dissertation on Carpenter, finally published in 1991 as Edward Carpenter: 1844-1929: An Apostle of Freedom, is perhaps the best overall study. Chushichi Tsuzuki's Edward Carpenter: 1844-1929 Prophet of Human Fellowship provides a fine overview with many insights about Carpenter's social views.

“Carpenter, what do you think of this?” It took Carpenter some time to formulate an answer, even to himself. But after “half an hour poring, pausing, wondering” he determined that he “could not make the book out.” However, he said, he “knew at the end of the time that I intended to go on reading it” (64).

Perhaps no book written to that point had so insistently demanded rereading as Leaves of Grass. Carpenter called this characteristic of Whitman’s verses the “inexhaustible quality and power of making one return to them” (65). Those most strongly affected by Whitman’s book—Bucke, Gilchrist, and Carpenter, among others—were constantly re-reading it. Whitman’s effects demanded time, repetition, consideration, and a progression through multiple possible meanings.

Whitman anticipates his readers’ frustration and initial incomprehension. In “Song of Myself” he writes: “You will hardly know who I am or what I mean” (LoG 77). But soon after, as always, he encourages further reading, not just of the book, but of the world, bringing about a semiotic arousal, a kind of watchful attitude and continued search for meaning: “Failing to fetch me at first, keep encouraged, / Missing me one place search another, / I stop somewhere waiting for you” (78). His prose, too, is full of such gestures. In a late essay, “A Discovery of Old Age” Whitman states what he had said many times less explicitly in other places:

Perhaps the best is always cumulative. One's eating and drinking one wants fresh, and for the nonce, right off, and have done with it—but I would not give a straw for that person or poem, or friend, or city, or work of art, that was not more grateful the second time than the first—and more still the third. Nay, I do not

believe any grandest eligibility ever comes forth at first. In my own experience, (persons, poems, places, characters,) I discover the best hardly ever at first, (no absolute rule about it, however,) sometimes suddenly bursting forth, or stealthily opening to me, perhaps after years of unwitting familiarity, unappreciation, usage. (P&P 911-912).

Carpenter entered into Whitman's book in cumulative stages over ten years—a period of his life we will examine in detail, bringing in biographical background and theoretical explanation from later in his career as we go. Carpenter's readings changed in focus as he turned the mass of Whitman's poems in his mind and turned it to his needs. To understand the process of his reading during this period, we must take into consideration his emotional needs, his sexual and spiritual stirrings, his vocational doubts, and what reader-response critic Wolfgang Iser might call his "repertoire"—the ideas, other books, and experiences in conjunction with, and in terms of which, he read.⁶ In turn, the strategies for producing meaning which Carpenter extracts from Whitman's poetry became a vital part of how he reads everything else—from bodies and books to his own emotions and the texture of his experience.

To begin, we must understand Carpenter's boyhood and youth. No reading so complete and complex as Carpenter's could occur without a great deal of preparation. Carpenter's emotional, religious, and sexual predilections, along with his attitudes towards society, nature and art, and the particular way in which all of these positions

⁶ In Iser, "repertoire" is a property of a text—the other texts, print and social, that are necessary to understand a given text. I misuse it here for the lack of a better term. For a good theoretical account of progressive unfolding of a book through multiple reading, see Iser's "The Reading Process."

were bound together, made him an exceptionally sensitive and engaged reader of Whitman.

Childhood and Family Life

It has often been said that Carpenter's rather quiet, lonely, and unhappy childhood helped form many of the positions that defined his revolutionary and rebellious adulthood. As Carpenter himself does in his autobiography, his biographers have most often focused on his alienation, his emotional starvation, and his lack of a reliable male role-model. While Carpenter's negative views of the mannered, moneyed, and fashionable Brighton society he grew up in certainly defined the problems he would attempt to solve in his literary, political, and social career, many of his outlets for emotion and means of introspection and resistance were also formed during this period. It was in resisting this society that he discovered the importance of nature, reading, individual religious experience, and the arts.

Edward Carpenter was born to a middle class naval family. His father had come home from the sea and entered the legal profession. Charles Carpenter, though a magistrate with considerable investments (and eventually a comfortable inheritance), was often anxious about money—several stock market crises nearly occasioned sending his daughters out to be governesses. This current of financial worry under the trappings of affluence impressed on Edward from a very early age the tightrope-walk of “keeping up appearances” in the fashionable resort town of Brighton where the family made its home.

Edward recalls in his autobiography My Days and Dreams that although his father had “strong religious feeling,” he had “emancipated himself from current orthodoxies in religion, and seldom in later life went to church—a fact which to the mild respectabilities around” the city of Brighton “was a sufficient justification for calling him an Atheist” (38). The individual exercise of religion thus appeared early to Carpenter as a way of resisting social pressures and false appearances, a source of strength that drove (and was the chief manifestation of) his father’s non-conformity. Charles Carpenter’s religion grounded itself in “a kind of Broad Church mysticism, derived at first from reading S. T. Coleridge (whom he had met occasionally in former years in London), and gradually broadening out under the influence of Eckhart, Tauler, Kant, Fichte, Hegel and others into a religious and philosophic mysticism without much admixture of the Broad Church at all” (39). This mysticism had a strong experiential side. His son reports, “it was his habit to think of the divinity as clearly present” (41). The elder Carpenter would often say, “When I am taking my bath or even when I am breathing I say to myself ‘This is God working within and around me’” (41). His mystical beliefs, then, translated to a profound change in the felt quality of all of his actions and experiences. His son would search for many years for a belief that could transform his consciousness and sense of self in such a way.

In My Days and Dreams, Carpenter cites two later passages from his father’s letters that show his influence on or parallels with Carpenter’s developing spirituality. The first, written in 1873, reflects on a “Common Life” that underlies both nature and human consciousness:

Circumstances have been leading me to think a good deal lately about Instinct. I do not see how any distinction can be drawn between what we call Instinct in the lower animals—such as the insect when she deposits eggs and then brings to the place of deposit the food needful for the support of her offspring grub, and covering them up (eggs and food) together, flies away to perish—and that power in Plants that causes them to send forth their roots often to a great distance and in a special direction, in search of the material needful for their nutriment, the mineral perhaps without which they could not live. This can only be understood, as it seems to me, upon the assumption of their being a Life, an intelligent Life, in the Plant or Insect, of which they are unconscious. Think of the Swallow going to Egypt perhaps, and then at proper season returning to its old nest under the eaves of some cottage in England. The possession of sense-organs, therefore, does not expel from the Bird or Fish this Intelligent Life within them, which orders their migrations, etc., but of which they are unconscious. And why should it be otherwise with man? That he should be conscious of this life will one day be his highest blessing. (40)

In a letter of 1876, Charles Carpenter wrote again:

Surely the true meaning of Nirvana is that at some future stage of our being man will be so conscious of the indwelling and inworking of Deity, that he will ascribe every movement, whether of his body or mind, to the One Will, the One Vernunft, the One Life, and thus think of himself as being swallowed up by and absorbed, as it were, in that Being. (40)

The tree seeks far abroad for nutriment, and the swallow returns always to his home. Citing these letters, Edward, for whom the pursuit and announcement of this “One Life” had by that time become a central concern, must have seen evidence of both natural impulses playing out in his own spiritual and intellectual life. Carpenter would have to seek abroad, making pilgrimages to America and India, to find his nutriment. Though his father’s opinions were to have a crucial and long-lasting effect on him, he would have to hear them from others, and hear them out of their immediate context in order to find the proper fit with his own life.

Even by a young age, however, Edward developed what he would later call “a fatal bias towards religion” of a more organized sort than his father’s. While later he would disdain false finery and hollow appearance in religious practice, as a child he was most impressed by sartorial splendor. In My Days and Dreams he looks back with some pity and not a little humor at himself as a child of fourteen who began to consider the priesthood following a kind of hero-worship of a local curate, a “smooth-haired, carefully shaven, meek young man, probably of feeble mind” who drew the boy’s attention because of the praise he drew from the locals and the splendor of his “spotless surplice” (14). Later, Edward recalls guiltily a misguided childhood heroic fantasy: if his house caught fire, he imagined himself bursting into his mother’s room and bravely saving, not mother or sisters, but his prayer book from the threatening flames (15).

Books were an important focus of emotional life in the Carpenter household. Charles Carpenter read widely in “natural history, travels, and science” but neglected art and music, the subjects that from an early age most interested Edward. Charles’s

reading was intense, rapturous, emotional. One of Edward's clearest memories of his youth was of his father's intense engagement with books:

Of an evening, after dinner or supper . . . we sat round the drawing-room table, or in scattered chairs, reading. My father would get out his Fichte or his Hartmann and soon become lost in their perusal. Occasionally he would, when he came to a striking passage, play a sort of devil's tattoo with his fingers on the table, or, getting up, would walk to and fro quarter-deck fashion, with creaky boots, and reciting his authors to himself. Then my mother or perhaps my elder sister would remonstrate, and after a time he would settle down again. Sometimes if he was very quiet one might look up from one's book and see from his upturned eyes and half-open lips that he had lapsed into inner communion and meditation. (41)

His son would write that "Any tale of heroism, or prodigy of science would bring ready tears to his eyes; and his love of reading—as in the case of his own father—lasted to the latest years of his life" (39). At the age of eighty the elder Carpenter would "not unfrequently sit up till one or two in the morning, conning the last new book or running over favorite passages of his philosophical authors." The younger Carpenter imbibed the works of the German and early British romantics, transcendentalists, and mystics almost by accident of proximity. The sources of transcendental thought were a natural part of his home life.

Charles Carpenter, with his little unconventionalities and his apparent escape into his philosophical and religious reading, probably imparted to his son an intellectual cast and habit of mind that would prove the seed of later developments. However, a father

worrying about his investments⁷ and absorbed in an inward-looking mystical / philosophical search was little emotional support to a young boy. Charles Carpenter's lapse into tears while reading heroic stories seems to have been one of the few outlets of tender emotion in the household at No. 45 Brunswick Square. The troubling memory of those literary tears would fructify later in Carpenter's own theories of aesthetic responses. In those theories, an emotional response to art always requires an outward action—a social or political action of corresponding strength. In Carpenter's later writings, the love of books always finds its counterpoint in a more substantial love of friends.

Carpenter would later regard his childhood as a period of emotional starvation. Indeed, we might wonder if his later development might not be partially a reaction to the dearth of feeling he perceived in the family. Carpenter's mother, while "firm, just, and courageous," "belonged to the old school, which thought any manifestation of feeling unbecoming" (15). Emotionally stunted in her own youth by what her son called "Scottish pride and puritanism," Sophia Wilson Carpenter was emotionally unavailable to her sensitive young son. That son saw her life as "one long self-sacrifice," and his biography characterizes her as a saint who gave up everything for her husband and ten children. He considered her time to be largely consumed by keeping up the appearances necessary to her class. Edward and his siblings, meanwhile, learned early to "suppress

⁷ Investment and divestment will prove to be an undercurrent of *My Days and Dreams*—EC's early interest in outward shows (his idolization a church curate for his spotless surplice [14]) and his father's worries about "investments" and appearances shadow forth Edward's later defrocking: his later escapes from society will be marked by symbolic changes of clothing—giving away his evening clothes, adopting the Indian sandal, and sunbathing naked.

and control emotion, and to fight our own battles alone.” This was, he said, “in some ways a good training, but liable in the long run to starve the emotional nature” (15). The culture outside of the family only made this isolation worse.

Edward was miserable in what he would later call the “heartless conventionalities” and “silly proprieties” of Brighton social life. The timid boy thoroughly internalized the worry about appearances common to upper-middle-class families like his own. Like many sensitive children, he was painfully aware of social constraint and the observing and judging gaze of society; consequently, he felt out of place, “an alien, an outcast, a failure, and an object of ridicule,” always afraid of “committing unconscious trespasses of invisible rules” (14). The “Civilization” that Carpenter so often rails against in his later writings is perhaps at the always a reflection of Victorian Brighton as seen through the eyes of an alienated boy—an insincere and empty facade of fashionable clothes, intractable social codes, and conventional beliefs.

From early on, Edward found himself comfortable in the company of women. He had little choice. His brothers, including Charles, Edward’s first hero and protector, left for work in the military or civil service.⁸ Carpenter was raised surrounded by his six sisters and their female friends. These young women had a great deal of influence on Carpenter’s early life. Particularly influential were his two elder sisters, Ellen and Lizzy, who introduced the young man to poetry, music, and the appreciation of nature.

Ellen, possessing a mind with an “adventurous outdoor quality about it” and “an eye for landscape and animal painting” (32), led Edward on long country walks and rides

⁸ See Stewart for a good treatment of this brother’s influence on Carpenter—planting in him perhaps a sense of heroism and the importance of standing up for others (110).

over the Downs, nurturing a love of nature that he would retain to the end of his life. Lizzie, on the other hand, had a “highly poetic, sensitive temperament” and provided a much-needed source of “sympathy, tenderness, and romance” in the house. Her musical talents shaped Carpenter’s interest in the subject: while she would play Beethoven’s sonatas, he “turned over the pages by the hour.” From the age of ten, Edward tried to learn the piano himself. As piano lessons were “not considered appropriate for a boy,” he had to play late at night (24). With Lizzy, he even “talked a little poetic philosophy . . . and discussed Tennyson and Shakespeare” (33).⁹

Reading Nature

While he would not become seriously interested in poetry until much later, the seashore and the Downs near Brighton became important retreats for Carpenter. Solitude in nature presented an alternative to the anxieties of Brighton society, and served as important sources of spiritual refreshment. In his autobiography, he describes the sea as a sort of sublime natural counter-point juxtaposed to the over-civilized house:

We lived within two hundred yards of the sea, and its voice was in our ears night and day. On terrific stormy nights it was a “grisly joy” to go down to the water’s edge at 10 or 11 p.m.—pitchy darkness—feeling one’s way with feet or hands,

⁹ Edward’s relationship with Lizzie was a peculiar and strong one. His first book of poetry, Narcissus and Other Poems (hereafter Narcissus), was dedicated to her, with strongly romantic overtones: “This I give thee! To betoken / Love, whereby thy life has bound me. / If I speak, the spell is broken: / Silent love shall still surround thee.” That Carpenter compared himself to her (unfavorably) is evidenced in another poem, “To L. C.”: “Ah, when I think of thee, and how my life / Is set apart from thine that is so pure, / So much to be desired, on my soul’s strife / There comes a calm; for then I am most sure / God is, in whom our sundered days draw night, /--Else were’t not good to live or gain or die.” Barua finds this evidence of a “fixation” (Barua 176).

over the stony beach, hardly able to stand for the wind—and to watch the white breakers suddenly leap out of the gulf close upon one—the “scream of the madden’d beach dragged down by the wave,” the booming of the wind, like distant guns, and the occasional light of some vessel laboring for its life in the surge. (25)

Carpenter presents the sound of the sea as an ever-present natural fact underlying the social world of Carpenter’s family, and transcending their personal distance. As we have seen, the family often spent the evening reading—“of which” Carpenter writes “we were all fond.” Each member of the family gathered with their individual books, together but alone. They sat in the same room, but each really inhabiting separate worlds:

My sisters would play or sing a little; and when they ceased, the sound of the near sea would reassert itself or the roaring of the wind in the chimney. My mother sat on a low chair , with a book on her knee and some knitting in her hands, but occasionally, tired with the work of the day, would drop asleep; at ten o’clock the servant brought up wine and biscuits, and shortly afterwards we would all—except my father—retire. (41)

The sea here, as in Whitman, is a sign of common life, of the intrusion of nature that underlies and links individuals in their isolation. Like Whitman, Carpenter would dream later of books that would act as these common facts of nature, and, instead of isolating individuals, would turn them towards one another, join them together in shared experience, or awaken them to an underlying bond or unity.

Though the sea was an important and ever present reminder of nature in Carpenter's youth, the Downs were his "favorite refuge." Tsuzuki writes that though Carpenter hadn't yet read Wordsworth or Shelley, he was "born into romanticism"—and his accounts of his youthful wanderings are very much in keeping with that school of thought (12). He would spend days wandering

for miles, not knowing very clearly where I was going—in a strange broody moony state—glad to find some hollow (like that described in Jefferies' Story of my Heart) where one could lie secluded for any length of time and see only the clouds and the grasses and an occasional butterfly, or hear the distant bark of a dog or the far rumble of a railway train. The Downs twined themselves with all my thought and speculations of that time. (MDD 26)

Christopher Stewart, in his dissertation chapter on Carpenter's spiritual autobiography, "Edward Carpenter's Queer Spirituality and Social Vision," notes the meditative and spiritual tone that permeates Carpenter's description of these lonely walks. He argues that they "may have afforded the inner space required to formulate concepts of selfhood" and "likely contributed to the development of his mystical sensibility" (108). I would agree. When Carpenter writes this part of his autobiography, he makes a reference that helps us contextualize his early experiences in nature. Carpenter uses a reference to Richard Jefferies' Story of My Heart to describe a "hollow" in the ground on the Downs. Carpenter's choice is far from accidental. In Story of My Heart, his spiritual autobiography, Jefferies, himself a habitual wanderer of the Downs, presents his

youthful meditations on nature and the soul. In the same sort of “hollow” that Carpenter describes, Jefferies was

utterly alone with the sun and the earth. Lying down on the grass, I spoke in my soul to the earth, the sun, the air, and the distant sea far beyond sight. I thought of the earth’s firmness—I felt it bear me up; through the grassy couch there came an influence as if I could feel the great earth speaking to me. I thought of the wandering air—its pureness, which is its beauty; the air touched me and gave me something of itself. I spoke to the sea: though so far, in my mind I saw it, green at the rim of the earth and blue in deeper ocean; I desired to have its strength, its mystery and glory. Then I addressed the sun, desiring the soul equivalent of his light and brilliance, his endurance and unwearied race. I turned to the blue heaven over, gazing into its depth, inhaling its exquisite colour and sweetness. The rich blue of the unattainable flower of the sky drew my soul towards it, and there it rested, for pure colour is the rest of heart. By all these I prayed; I felt an emotion of the soul beyond all definition; prayer is a puny thing to it, and the word is a rude sign to the feeling, but I know no other. (Jefferies 25)

By referring to Jefferies’ book, Carpenter provides a comparison to an un-named experience while keeping it ambiguous and refusing to define it. Instead of describing an experience in the kind of detail that might require conclusions, Carpenter gestures towards a parallel text. Jefferies’ sense of numinous connection with the facts of nature is perhaps among the nameless (or as yet unnamed) feelings Carpenter experienced on the downs. Years later, Carpenter recalled those moments:

How can I describe, how shall I not recall, the thoughts which came over me as I wandered, towards the close of my school-time, over these same hills—the brooding ill-defined, half-shapen thoughts? The downs were my escape; even in their most chill and lonely moods they were my escape from a worse coldness and loneliness, which, except for a few boy-friends at school, I somehow experienced during all that time. Nature was more to me, I believe, than any human attachment, and the Downs were my Nature. It was among them, at a later time that I first began to write a few verses. (MDD 28)

Throughout his life, Carpenter would often return to nature, juxtaposing it with and interpreting it through his readings and his relationships, particularly during times of growth or crisis. In Germany, in the Cambridge gardens, and later at his farm at Bradford, Carpenter's contact with nature would always help him put his life in order.

This engagement greatly influenced Carpenter's reading of Whitman. Reading, especially reading of a spiritual sort, has as one of its great functions the calling-up of past moments of the reader's own reflections and experiences. It is certainly no wonder that when Whitman (or Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," or much later Jefferies' book) wrote of the dialogue with the soul in nature, or presented poems that featured its communing, Carpenter would be greatly touched. These vague childhood experiences were recalled in his reading, and perhaps altered a little in the recollection. Among the Whitman's poems that first affected him, Carpenter would list "Out of the Rocked Cradle," (an early title for the poem that would become "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking"). It is the reminiscence of a poet borne back by his own words to the days

when he walked by the seashore, a “curious boy,” “Cautiously peering, absorbing, translating,” listening to the suggestive call of a lyrical bird over the “hoarse surging of the sea” (LoG 208). Carpenter’s boyhood romanticism, his searching for something he didn’t know and couldn’t understand, his vague but profound-seeming feelings, and his “grisly joy” show us just how relevant the poem must have seemed to him.

Schoolboy Loneliness and Sexuality

Carpenter would respond just as strongly to Whitman’s poems of friendship and loneliness as to his work about nature, and for similar reasons. Reading Whitman’s poems of furtive voyeuristic attraction and aching tenderness, Carpenter saw his own emotions writ more completely, given a framework and attached to a greater meaning. He could trace his own “desire for a passionate attachment” to his “earliest boyhood.” But, as he says in his autobiography,

the desire had no expression, no chance of expression. Such things as affection were never spoken about either at home or at school, and I naturally concluded that there was no room for them in the scheme of creation! The glutinous boy-friendships that one formed in class-room or play-ground were of the usual type: they staved off greater hunger, but they did not satisfy. On the other hand I worshipped the very ground on which some, generally elder, boys stood; they were heroes for whom I would have done anything. I dreamed about them at night, absorbed them with my eyes in the day, watched them at cricket, loved to press against them unnoticed in a football melly, or even to get accidentally hurt

by one of them at hockey, was glad if they just spoke to me or smiled; but never got a word farther with it at all. What could I say? Even to one of the masters, I remember, who was a little kind to me, I felt this unworded devotion; but he never helped me over the stile, and so I remained on the farther side. (29)

Though Carpenter thus early felt what Whitman called “adhesiveness,” this unspoken (and practically unspeakable) need for strong emotional friendships with other men, there was no possibility of him expressing the “fund of romance, and of intense feeling” that he believed was “latent in so many boys and capable even of heroic expression” (29). Carpenter found himself barred from even the crasser expressions of homosexual desire, what he condemned as “bad sexual habits and frivolities” and imagined as the end products of “misdirection of the natural emotions of boy-attachment.” He wrote:

as a day boy, [who did not board at Brighton College, the school he attended] and one who happened to be rather pure-minded than otherwise, [I] grew up quite free from these evils: though possibly it would have been a good thing if I had had a little more experience of them than I had. As it was, no elder person ever spoke to me about sexual matters—no mother, father, brother, monitor or master ever said a word. (29)

Thus, he was free to make his own judgment, “unbiased by any person or book,” and “from the earliest time when I thought about these things they seemed to me natural—like digestion or any other function—and I remember wondering why people made such a fuss about the mention of them” (29). It was not until he read Whitman at the age of twenty-five, he tells us, that he encountered with “a great leap of joy” a “treatment of sex

which accorded with my own sentiments” (31). Once again, Carpenter felt the influence of Whitman—he both recognized himself in the older poet, and simultaneously sharpened his awareness of his own positions.

In Havelock Ellis’s pioneering Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Carpenter, in an anonymous case-study, tells substantially the same story of his early sexuality, revealing that during his days at the Brighton academy “and till a good deal later,” he never learned “the practice of masturbation.” “My sexual nature was a mystery to me,” he writes: “I found myself cut off from the understanding of others, felt myself an outcast, and, with a highly loving and clinging temperament, was intensely miserable” despite (or as a result of) the schoolboy crushes recounted earlier. He was shy and self-conscious, “was too convinced” as he says, that he was “a hopeless monstrosity ever to make any effectual advances” (Ellis 107). His desires were also subordinated, as they would be throughout his life, by “that other desire of the heart,” the need for a more substantial love (MDD 30).

The Carpenter that emerges from his autobiography seems to have always denied his emotions at his own peril. When he was unable to find an outlet for them, the effects on the health of both his mind and body were sometimes quite severe. “At times,” including many of his moments of crisis, he says that the desire for love “threatened to paralyse” his “mental and physical faculties” (30). He writes that he felt “starved and unfed,” that loneliness “was like an open wound continually bleeding.” Carpenter’s choice of metaphors here may not be coincidental. Whitman presents himself in his

poetry as a wound-dresser, and Leaves of Grass as a meal for the hungry. The Whitman of the poems would also prove to be the kind of teacher and lover that Carpenter lacked.

Years later, in his pioneering book The Intermediate Sex, Carpenter would return to the subject of “Affection in Education,” lamenting the ugly turns that school friendships sometimes took, and recommending the institution of something like a spiritualized non-sensual loving friendship between older and younger boys. He approvingly quotes an older man who “has had large experience as a teacher” as saying

It has always seemed to me that the rapport that exists between two human beings, whether of the same or of different sexes, is a force not sufficiently recognized, and capable of producing great results. Plato fully understood its importance, and aimed at giving what to his countrymen was more or less sensual, a noble and exalted direction. . . . As one who has had much to do in instructing boys and starting them in life, I am convinced that the great secret of being a good teacher consists in the possibility of that rapport; not only of a merely intellectual nature, but involving a certain physical element, a personal affection, almost indescribable, that grows up between a pupil and a teacher, and through which thoughts are shared and an influence created that could exist in no other way. (83)

Note the Whitmanian texture not only of the thought but of the language. In his autobiography, Carpenter laments the deeply-felt absence of such teacher-initiator figure in his own early life. He would not find one until he came to the Whitman of Leaves of

Grass, who offered initiation both into a conception of sex that fit into Carpenter's ideals, and, later, into a variety of mysticism that promised to meld body and spirit.

Carpenter's father suggested that the boy go abroad after completing his studies at Brighton College, (probably to keep his son from taking orders immediately) and Edward spent a summer in Switzerland and a year studying in Heidelberg. There Carpenter learned German, argued about the bible with the professor who was his host, and attended lectures on scientific topics, including those from Robert Wilhelm Bunsen (the inventor of the Bunsen burner).¹⁰ What Carpenter remembered best of the visit, though, were more romantic reveries, "those long moony rambles through the woods—not very clearly thinking about anything that I can make out, but wondering, and just waiting—and every now and then chancing in some secluded glade or gorgeous sunset scene upon something that caught my breath and held me still" (45). He lays in wait for wonders, and at times finds them, nature pulling him rapt out of himself. But he gives no further interpretation of these experiences—though he associates them with poetry. He tells us that after these moments of rapture were the occasions on which he first "perpetrated some rhymes."

Carpenter's trip to Germany also initiated a long-standing quarrel with the sartorial conventions of polite British society, and the aggrandized sense of self that they

¹⁰ Barua writes that this is when Carpenter became familiar with the approach and techniques of the German higher biblical criticism of the time. By the time of his ordination, Carpenter had certainly read works of this kind, and internalized them enough to base his explanation of biblical events on their general outlines. It is also possible that Carpenter's host may have inculcated him with these ideas when they discussed the Bible. But Barua confuses Bunsen the inventor and scientist with "Baron Bunsen." Christian Karl Josias von Bunsen, the theologian, historian, and diplomat never taught at Heidelberg or indeed held any academic position at all. Carpenter never uses first names for these men, only distinguishing by calling the latter "Bunsen the historian."

imply. During his stay, Carpenter had worn “a tall hat” to the English church he attended. When his German host teased him about the habit, and other “idiotic habits” of the British, Carpenter, in a fit of disgust at his own pride and propriety, stopped wearing the hat. When he left, he carried it back to England in his carpet bag. “So I learned something besides German at Heidelberg” he writes, and Carpenter thereafter showed an increased sense of the ridiculousness and priggishness of his own actions and those of English society. When Whitman declared that he would become “undisguised and naked” in order to experience both nature and his more authentic self, Carpenter must have recognized a kindred spirit. The elaborate and uncomfortable formal dress of wealthy or pretentious English of his time is a living symbol in Carpenter’s life for all the social dress and conventional shackles on identity that he would try to win free of and urge others to dispense with.

The autobiographer Carpenter frequently reacts to his own early pretensions with irony and a sort of wondering amusement over his past silliness: and so it was with the choice of Trinity Hall at Cambridge. He had settled on it, he says, because it was a “gentlemanly college” and because it was “Head of the River” at the time and the school from which the last Senior Wrangler (the student at Cambridge who achieved the highest marks in Mathematics) came. “My father laughed,” writes the older Carpenter, “as he certainly was justified in doing—and I can only wonder now what sort of animal I was then” (46). His somewhat priggish pretension to a social class he was beginning to feel uncomfortable about mingled uneasily with the remnants of the sense of inferiority and alienation he had felt since his days at Brighton.

Carpenter had assumed that Cambridge would be an intellectual Mecca “where folk would talk Latin naturally and where” he, the outsider, “lameled taught at school and late coming from loafing in Germany, would be an outcast and object of contumely.” Here we find Carpenter unequal to his own image of Cambridge, and a victim of the sort of intellectual ducking and self-deprecation that Whitman would attack, and which Emerson had attempted to rout in the “American Scholar” address. Carpenter found himself instead at a school where boating was much more important than studies, among “healthy muscular companions who bothered their heads about no abstruse problems, and for the most part rarely read a book” (47).¹¹ He soon found himself (not without some surprise) at the head of his class in examinations. His tutor recommended that he study for the mathematical tripos, and he spent some time reading in advanced mathematics. Though he did this with “a good deal of pleasure,” and collaborated on the proof of a significant theorem, he would later regard the months and years of cramming as mostly wasted, an example of the sterile learning of figures and facts that the later Carpenter, like Whitman, tended to regard as folly.

It was not until he was preparing for his degree that Carpenter turned to literature. He began to read Wordsworth intensely, particularly enjoying “Tintern Abbey.” He began to write—first two prize essays in English, one “On the Continuance of Modern Civilisation.” This essay, written in 1866, shows Carpenter’s growing awareness of the class problem, and the development of his social thought. He expresses

¹¹ Stewart makes an interesting reading of the boating slang in Carpenter’s autobiography in terms of coded references to homosexual experiences (119). Given that Carpenter’s otherwise very candid confessional case-study in Ellis contradicts any sexual experience at this period, it seems unlikely (Ellis 107-).

concern over the pernicious effect of “class interest and class tyranny” which crush “the individuality of men” (qtd. in Tsuzuki 14). “Civilization,” which was eventually to become a dirty word for Carpenter, is represented here as moving towards (in the words of Tsuzuki) “a liberal utopia, in which . . . the universal harmony of individual interest would prevail, party strife, class jealousy, and crime would die out, and the function of government would be reduced to a minimum” (14). In order to carry this out, Carpenter recommends “the equal diffusion of education . . . among all the classes” and attacks “idleness” as a “continual drag on progress” (qtd.in Tsuzuki 14). It is within this framework of promoting harmony and abolishing class distinctions that he would read many of Whitman’s ideas—the mystical, the social, and the sexual.

Carpenter was also writing at the time “quantities of verse, very formless and incoherent” which, he said “formed an outlet for my own feelings in the absence of any more tangible way of expressing them” (MDD 49).

Late at night, he would return to nature, as he often did during crises of self, going alone to the side of the river “amid the hushed reserve and quiet grace of the old College gardens, and pouring my little soul out to the silent trees and clouds and waters.” Though they were clearly significant, Carpenter was uncertain of what these moments meant,

what kind of longing it was—something partly sexual, partly religious,¹² and
both, owing to my strangely slow-growing temperament, still very obscure and

¹² Note Whitman’s similar connection between sexual and religious states: “I think Swedenborg was right when he said there was a close connection—a very close connection—between the state we call religious ecstasy and the desire to copulate. I find Swedenborg confirmed in all my experience. It is a very peculiar discovery” (WWWIC 5:376).

undefined; but anyhow it was something that brooded about and enveloped my life, and makes those hours still stand out for me as the most pregnant of my then existence. (MDD 50)

The image of this garden becomes tied up with Carpenter's emotional and spiritual progress—associated with these unnamed moments of promise, with romantic disappointment, and later with the reading of Whitman's poetry. Note also “pregnant,” here used to say something like “full of undelivered meaning”: Carpenter uses the language of conception, pregnancy, and birth throughout My Days and Dreams to suggest an unconscious growth—which culminates both in changes of the self and in artistic creation. While this is a typical romantic trope, it also expresses Carpenter's sexual conception of influence, as we shall see later.

In 1868, the year (or possibly the year before) he first read Whitman, Edward Carpenter wrote an untitled poem. In it, he expresses his doubts about religion and society and shows the influence of the most popular romantic poets of the day. Carpenter wrote that Wordsworth and now Shelley “still ruled my artistic and emotional conceptions” during this period.¹³ Shelley's work, particularly “‘Adonais’ and ‘Prometheus,’” he writes, captivated him and held him for a long time. He had also read “portions of Plato” again and again, which would ground his understanding of Whitman (65-66).

¹³ Notice that Carpenter here shows a basic tenet of his belief (common to many readers)—that readers pick up moral conceptions and emotional casts or the language and ideas which make them possible or expressible from the poets they identify with. For Carpenter, at least, this is certainly true.

The untitled poem, like all of Carpenter's pre-Towards Democracy verse, is formal, and like most of his pre-Whitmanian verse it is traditionally romantic and brooding in sensibility. The poem's speaker, "pale and wan with watching," stares up at the overcast sky, and imagines beyond the obscuring clouds a celestial order in which the stars move "in breathless adoration" around a central Platonic sun. This seems to speak more to a religious cosmology in which the orbits of the stars are held together by love than to any then-current scientific conception. However, Carpenter had a real interest in the subject—he would eventually become an extension lecturer on astronomy.

O pale and wan with watching, starless night!

Far, far beyond thy cloudy banks

Pass and repass in serried ranks

The flaming watchfires of the infinite—

Gliding and streaming through the realm of space

In breathless adoration round

The burning throne whose base profound

Knoweth no resting-place.

Between this godlike figure on his "burning throne," and the world in which the speaker lives—a "dark field of feverish tears," there is no communication. Between God and the creature, planet and invisible sun, there is a vast silence: the "myriad worlds" move on "hushed." Carpenter's speaker, himself silent, and doubly removed from the sight of the "Monarch" by a layer of clouds, feels that his "soul is crushed / Beneath a weight untold"—immensely heavy, but more than that a weight of things that he cannot say,

that will not be heard. Cambridge life for Carpenter, he wrote in My Days and Dreams, contained

a curious romance . . . and yet on the whole, with few exceptions, how strangely unspoken it was and unexpressed! This succession of athletic and even beautiful faces and figures, what a strange magnetism they had for me, and yet all the while how unsurmountable for the most part was the barrier between! It was as if a magic flame dwelt within one, burning, burning, which one could not put out, and yet whose existence one might on no account reveal. How the walks under the avenues of trees at night, and by the riversides, were haunted full of visionary forms for which in the actual daylight world there seemed no place!¹⁴ (77)

Carpenter's silent attraction to the "beautiful faces and figures" is a decidedly Whitmanian sentiment—as "magnetism" is a key word for Whitman. Carpenter must have sympathized with the older poet who wrote in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" that he "saw many [he] loved in the street or ferry-boat or public assembly, yet never told them a word" ("Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" 6, LoG 138).

Carpenter's silence seems to be both the silence of a repressed love and the result of feeling cut off from the perception of, or the hearing of, the divine. His expression of this already complex silence here will develop in his later poems, as it does in Whitman, into an admixture of the unworded (things he had no words for at the time, and were inarticulate), the unspeakable (things that he will be unable to say due to personal or

¹⁴ Rahman points out in his "The Alienated Prophet: The Relationship between Edward Carpenter's Psyche and the Development of his Metaphysic" that a draft copy of this passage read "the walks under the avenues of trees at night and by the riverside were haunted full of sexual visions and incomplete romances for which in the actual daylight world there seemed no place" (Rahman 195).

social constraints), and the ineffable (things that are superior to language or which language is unequal to represent for any one of several reasons):

To thy deep silence through the moving years

Cometh no cry of misery,

No sound of all the things that be,

Upborne from this dark field of feverish tears;

But all the myriad worlds thou dost enfold

Move on before their Monarch hushed,

And, looking forth, my soul is crushed

Beneath a weight untold. (MDD 80)

The poet then turns to address “great Humanity,” then asleep, calling for a hero “who will dare to fight / To raise the tresses of thy drooping head”: a hero who will awaken the people, motivated by his love. The hero is the sympathetic being, the one like an angel who “cares through the immensity of suns.” The “burden”—both song, responsibility, and the weight of things untold, untellable—lies “heavy and dark” on the noblest of humanity.

O great Humanity, that liest spread

Beneath the gaze of the sleepless night,

Who is there who will dare to fight

To raise the tresses of thy drooping head?

Who cares through the immensity of suns?

Which of the angels shall arise?

Oh! heavy and dark the burden lies

On all thy noblest ones.

Carpenter compares two worlds here. Above the clouds, in the celestial and infinite realms, the “morning stars may shout and sing” because in this world, there is “Love and Joy and Peace, / And Life—true life that cannot cease.” Meanwhile, in the world where the poet dwells, there is only “the ghastly shuddering of Death’s wing” (81).

While this poem may seem the typical romantic lament against mortality in the abstract, there was a more immediate and personal context. One of Carpenter’s close friends had recently died—a boy named Yate. This was Carpenter’s first close experience of death. The son of a country doctor, a “fellow of some originality and thought and of a single gentleness and candour,” for a year or two Yate and Carpenter were “always together” (47). The boy contracted rheumatic fever. Thus mortality—specific and universal—cuts short possibilities of both true communication and of the sort of love that depends on it. In contrast to the celestial music, the harmony of the spheres, the earth is a place of failed communication, dead promise, where “faint whispers only come to die / Upon the threshold of our hearts”:

Far off the morning stars may shout and sing,

For there is Love and Joy and Peace,

And Life—true life that cannot cease—

But here the ghastly shuddering of Death’s wing.

And here faint whispers only come to die

Upon the threshold of our hearts,

Voices at which the sad soul starts

With a half-uttered sigh. (MDD 80)

From this melancholy prospect, the poet turns to his surroundings. The things around him seem muted too, barely stirred by the subtle inter-relation of forces—breezes, and stirrings of the water. The watching owl while it possesses “joy” despite being “solitary,” nurses it in a “low weird tone” where it hides.

O hanging cloud, O scarcely stirring trees,

O velvet waters moved to sound

By the gliding fishes’ bound,

O Willow, whispering to the fitful breeze,

O gentle touch of the sweet summer air,

O solitary owl, alone,

Nursing thy joy in low weird tone

Within thy leafy lair! (MDD 81)

Carpenter’s speaker addresses each in turn. He demands of all, in a sudden breaking out of the overtly mystical, that they rend appearances, “unveil,” and show beyond them the joy that underlies their quiet appearance, the “flaming soul of world-wide Love”:

O one and all, unveil! and let us see

The flaming soul of world-wide Love

Burning behind you, far above

Beneath, deep-fountained life, strange mystery!

Unveil! O night that washest Earth’s dark shore,

O suns, through space that ever roll,

O Love, clasping us body and soul

For evermore!

Both worlds, below and above the clouds are felt to be the expression of one life, of one Love that informs all. The separation and darkness is a veil over the “strange mystery” of “deep-fountained life.” The silences and separations are to be replaced by the acknowledgement of “Love, clasping us body and soul / For evermore” (51). However, the poet’s desperate invocation is not explicitly answered—the poem ends here. In his autobiography Carpenter offers this poem as a neither as good poetry nor well-defined thought, but as a “specimen of the kind of thought and the half-formed emotional atmosphere in which I brooded” and of his “juvenile style.” On these terms it is a success, giving us an insight into the tangled problems of sex, religion, and vocation that Carpenter was attempting to sort out in his long night-time walks through the university gardens, and which Whitman would allow him to express.

Religious Career and Vocation

In 1868, Carpenter had been offered a religious fellowship, which he accepted after only minor qualms,¹⁵ and in 1869, he was ordained Deacon. The young cleric soon found out how broad the gulf was between the mystical, philosophical, and liberal ideals

¹⁵ Tsuzuki quotes Carpenter’s somewhat worldly-wise letter home to his father on the subject, wherein he points out the profitability of lecturing but also of taking on pupils privately. Carpenter also emphasizes that he thinks the life of a Don is “stagnant” and probably won’t stay for long. Tsuzuki points out that much of the tone of the letter may have been designed to appease Carpenter’s father who may still have had doubts about his son’s clerical ambitions (15).

on which his father had raised him and the official position of the Church of England he was proposing to enter. Idealistically, he at first assumed “with an easy faith in progress . . . that anyhow in a few years the Church, widening and growing from within, would become adapted to the times, and would be a perfectly habitable and a useful institution”(52). Carpenter was more serious about his vocation than most clerical fellows of the time, and was disappointed by his experiences preaching in the College Chapel “with the usual accompaniment of winks and grins from the fellow-students, shuffling of hassocks, racings half-dressed through the prayers on winter mornings with clicks of watches timing the performance, and all the gaping signs of unconcealed boredom” (52). When he left to take a curacy at St. Edwards “under a dry evangelical of the steel-knife and lemon-juice type,” Carpenter found things no better. Indeed, his class-consciousness and what we might call uncharitably but probably accurately a touch of spiritual and aesthetic snobbishness recoiled at

the deadly Philistinism of a little provincial congregation; the tradesmen and shopkeepers in their sleek Sunday best; the petty vulgarities and hypocrisies; the discordant music of the choir; the ignoble scenes in the vestry and the resumed saintly expression on returning into the church; the hollow ring and the sour edge of the incumbent’s voice; and the fatuous faces upturned to receive the communion at the altar steps. (53)

Carpenter found these scenes of what he considered sham, self-satisfaction, and ugliness to be “considerably worse than the undisguised heathenism of the chapel performance” (53).

When it came time for Carpenter to be ordained, he was awakened to just how different his ideals were from the accepted position of the Church while taking the Bishop's examination. Required to write a biographical sketch of Abraham, Carpenter "without any particular misgiving" opined in print that "Abraham's intended immolation of Isaac was a relic of Moloch-worship, and of the old practice of human sacrifices, and that the 'Voice of God' which bade him substitute the ram did indeed figure the evolution of the human conscience to a higher ideal than that in vogue among savage nations" (53). Instead of the orthodox reading—that Isaac's sacrifice was a typological precedent of the sacrifice of Jesus—Carpenter substituted an evolutionary view of religion based on the progress of human faculties.¹⁶ The bishop was not amused. He called Carpenter in for a chat that lasted until midnight. Carpenter's views, "sadly blurred by the Broad Church mysticism of F. D. Maurice," sounded suspicious to the Bishop, and he made Carpenter write out his beliefs on the Atonement—retiring while Carpenter worked into the night.

In the morning, Carpenter handed in what he called his "mystic script." After a close examination, the Bishop decided that "he could not say that he really followed it, and that he was sure it was not the doctrine of the Church of England" (55). However,

¹⁶ He ascribes the source of these ideas as "Bunsen the historian" and "Dean Stanley in his Jewish Church" (53). This Bunsen is Christian Carl Josias von Bunsen (1791-1860), author of God in History (Gott in der Geschichte oder der Fortschritt des Glaubens an eine sittliche Weltordnung), who argued that prophecy should be interpreted historically. Like other of Whitman's disciples, Carpenter was prepared to accept him by an evolutionary understanding of the unfolding of religious history, made possible by historical biblical criticism and comparative religion. As the understanding of religious revelation had changed in the past, evolving to "higher" or "more spiritual" forms to fit their times, so continued changes were to be expected.

he would not refuse to ordain Carpenter. Carpenter, for his part, refused to take the hint and disqualify himself.

At the ordination ceremony, Carpenter remembers, “there was a chaffinch hopping about” and his sympathy and attention was on the bird rather than the “longish discourse . . . on creation and suffering and vicarious sacrifice” which he “listened to with due deference” but felt “did not seem . . . to lead to any conclusion” (55).

First Reading Whitman

It was about this time when Carpenter first started to read Whitman. He tells us that he was first impressed

largely by the poems which celebrate comradeship. That thought, so near and personal to me, I had never before seen or heard fairly expressed; even in Plato and the Greek authors there had been something wanting (so I thought). If there had only been those few poems they would have been sufficient to hold me: there was “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” “Out of the Rocked Cradle,” “President Lincoln’s Funeral Hymn,” and the prose Preface—and then afterwards Democratic Vistas. (65)

The mention of the Greek authors is important. Both John Addington Symonds and Carpenter, two of the earliest readers to understand Whitman as essentially homosexual, had a strong background in the classics. Plato's Symposium is in the background of Carpenter's understanding of Whitman's ideas of comrade-love, as Plato's other writings will often inform Carpenter's understanding of later psychological concepts. The idea of love as a universal organizing principle Carpenter would have gotten not only from Whitman and Plato, but also from the mystical Christianity of Maurice.

Plato and the other Greeks of course had a special meaning for many nineteenth-century British homosexuals in public school and university. A classical education often led these young men to attempt to identify with the subject of their studies as an alternative to the prevailing social norms and religious morals of the day. In his Secret Selves: Confession and Same Sex Desire in Victorian Autobiography, Oliver Buckton does a fine job of showing the importance of Greek models for Symonds. In Symonds' words, Plato's Symposium was a "revelation"—a "fatal book" (80). In Forster's Maurice, a novel of homosexual love inspired by Carpenter, volumes of Plato feature prominently in one same-sex courtship. It seems certain that Carpenter first read Whitman's conception of comradely love in contrast to (and in the context of) the Greeks, particularly Plato's Phaedrus and Symposium.

Carpenter purchased first his own copy of Rossetti's selections of Whitman's poems, then the Democratic Vistas. Significantly, it was only "after three or four years" that he purchased a complete Leaves of Grass—probably the 1860 version, which he often cites elsewhere (64). During those first three or four years, perhaps not

coincidentally, he wrote that “his interest” in Whitman’s writings was “mainly intellectual—that is, they were producing an intellectual ferment” but he had not “distinctly come into touch with the dominant individuality behind them, nor felt that they were re-shaping” his “moral and artistic ideals” (66). He thought particularly highly of Democratic Vistas, which was a “mine of new thoughts,” particularly on the social concerns that were beginning to stir Carpenter to a sense of political obligation.

“The Religious Influence of Art”

Carpenter’s published Burney prize essay, “The Religious Influence of Art,” was written in 1870, a year or two after he had first began reading Whitman. Though art in this essay still sports the capital A of the aesthetics of the period, and the religious images that Carpenter deploys owe more to liberal Christianity than Whitman’s views or Carpenter’s later conceptions, Carpenter’s aesthetic bears a close relation to that of the New England transcendentalists. “The Religious Influence of Art” is an important essay in that it gives us a snapshot of Carpenter’s theories of the connection between religious response, nature, and aesthetics at the time that he is reading and assimilating Whitman and revising his ideas about art, religion, and social duty. It must be read as a transitional document, one that shows an image of the young clergyman and aesthete explaining a conception of art, meditating on its spiritual and social function. Soon, that conception would drive him from Cambridge to enlighten the uneducated masses, already uncertain whether it was the masses that really needed enlightening.

The essay tries to locate the inter-relation between the experience of art and religion, taking part in the then-current debate over the role of ritual, art, and music within the services of the Anglican Church. Carpenter begins with the ability of art, music, and nature to evoke in the viewer or listener a sense of entering into a mystery:

I do not think that anyone who has loved music can be ignorant of the irresistible sense it awakens of another world, as it were, flowing ceaselessly around us, into which we are for the time translated with a passing insight into its mystery; nor is it possible to stand amidst beautiful architecture, whether it be in some joyous conception of human Art, or amongst the woods and mountains of Nature's handiworks, without experiencing that feeling of strange wonder and delight, whose very indefiniteness seems to imprint it all the deeper on our minds.

Whatever its phase, and Art has many phases, it always comes to use with the sense of something veiled, of something still half-unexpressed, which in its fulness [sic] we desire yet find not. (The Religious Influence of Art 1)

This sense of productive mystery, of contact with veiled truths, of parity of effect between human art and nature, is an important element of Whitman's view of reading.

In "A Song for Occupations," called "To Working-Men" in the Rossetti selection Carpenter first read, Whitman focuses likewise on what could be called a reader-response theory of experience—an accounting of art that focuses on the reader's experience (implicitly a spiritual experience):

All architecture is what you do to it when you look upon it,

(Did you think it was in the white or gray stone? or the lines of the arches and

cornices?)

All music is what awakes from you when you are reminded by the instruments,
It is not the violins and the cornets, it is not the oboe nor the beating drums, nor
the score of the baritone singer singing his sweet romanza, nor that of the
men's chorus, nor that of the women's chorus.

It is nearer and farther than they. (LoG 181)

Music is not only to be found in the individual instruments, but is something which the listener recalls when prompted. Architecture is the action that the experience of viewing it calls up from the viewer. Without a reader to realize them, "The most renown'd poems would be ashes, orations and plays would be vacuums" (181).

The view of nature in Carpenter's essay—that the artist speaks in the language of symbols borrowed from material nature—seems an even better fit with the "Language" chapter of Emerson's Nature. Emerson wrote, "the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind" (Essays and Lectures 24). According to Carpenter, art works by a correspondence between the inner world and the outer:

If beauty in Art does excite in us anything more than a mere sensual pleasure, if in fact it provokes in the mind trains of thought and emotion, dimly enough perhaps yet realised yet sufficient to hold us with a strange power, it must be because the laws of material nature, by means of which the artistic spirit is expressed, are in some sort of correspondence with the invisible work of thought and feeling, and so serve to wake into action that spiritual world within us.

("Religious Influence of Art" 3)

Like Emerson and Whitman, Carpenter finds the relationship between the outward world of nature and the interior, unseen one of the mind to be vitally important. Like them, he finds that the dividing line between the two is not only difficult to find, but may prove to be illusory:

It is this correlation between the visible and the invisible kingdoms which is at once the stumblingblock and the clue in all theories of Art. It lies so near us that we are not in a position to contemplate it, so to speak, from without. The two worlds run so close and intermingle with each other so gradually that we cannot even draw the line of separation between them. Nay, if we take the analogy of all Nature, we may well believe that we never shall be able to draw the line of separation; but rather that we shall at last behold them both, as part of one great plan, identical in their essence though diverse in outward manifestation. (3-4)

There is a correspondence between a God who expresses his nature in the material world, and the human nature that must gather and reflect what portions of the divine nature that it can:

We cannot say how this linking together of mind and matter takes place, but we know that it is present with us in every act of consciousness. And so we may, in some sort, understand that if the outward world is the creation of One, and the laws of Nature the eternal modes of His operation, all the visible universe must indeed be a reflection, as it were, of His mind; and as we look upon it, if there is anything of divinity within us, it must leap forth to embrace that which it recognises as the manifestation of a kindred spirit. Nature in her fulness is God's

art. Man is in a different position; he cannot (as far as we know at present) create his own materials, but must make use of what Nature gives him, imitating and studying her till he is in some sort master of those outward things, and then using them to reflect again some little ray of the divine light which has found a home within him. (4-5)

This act of reflection and expression is not limited, in Carpenter's scheme, to the artists, who "have the divine power (which all perhaps have in some degree) of giving light to the hidden thoughts within them by the symbolism of Nature" but also the greater proportion of humanity, who "can appreciate the import of this symbolism without being able so readily to bend it to their own use . . . the great audience of Nature and art."

These latter can often "feel more deeply and rejoice more in the message than those whose tongues are not bound, but they cannot impart it so readily to others" (5). They will still feel the need to express this beauty, but by "word and life" rather than "chisel and pen." True art, for Carpenter, is a process of reception and expression: "'being and doing.'" The best response, then, is one that has what he might have called a moral effect. He writes that

the highest and truest Art of all is in a man's own life; where his will, deriving its inspiration from above, comes into the field with all the crowded passions and the blind instincts and affections which, for good or evil, are the last outcome of the material nature that man shares with the lowest animals; where it draws some to its side, making them its servants for good; shakes itself free from the clinging

grasp of others, and seeks to develop all together into a harmonious whole, crowned with order and might.

In order to feel art, a person must continue to listen to “her words . . . not with a vain, dilettante languor, but with the steady effort to fully realise them, and to lead a life worthy of her message” (31). The essay shows Carpenter in the middle of a sort of aesthetic elitism of the most sensitive. Education, he believes,

as all civilisation does, increases the manifold relations of man, and raises him from the dull monotonous existence of the peasant who drives the team to the quick full life of the educated man who finds interest and excitement and sorrow and delight in a thousand things about his path.

Very soon, of course, Carpenter would think that the educated man, and indeed all of what he referred to as “civilisation,” might learn something of great value from the peasant. For now, however, the superior sensitivity of a man gifted through appreciation of the arts involves a kind of compulsion to service, an obligation and responsibility:

He who has seen the light must go forth, his face beaming like that of Moses, to give light to others; to shine in the darkness, though the darkness comprehend it not. He must stand alone, his office to fold his sympathy about others, to reap sympathy from none. Every great man who has hewn out one step for the world, has laid his body to level the road or to be a stepping-stone for future generations, has saved mankind only through the depth of his own solitude.

The supreme type of this self-sacrificing and socially-obligated aesthete / artist / visionary was Jesus:

He, the Master-Christ, who looked through all nations and time and saw but misery cankered with sin, may well have prayed that the cup might pass from him, for his nature was sensitive beyond what we dream; yet he too shrank not from that terrible solitude of his whole life, but was content, according to the eternal law, to sacrifice himself, while he descended to the weakness of men in order to draw all men after him. (38)

Carpenter here shows his affinity to what Andrew Elfenbein calls “the English clerisy”—a class of “university professors, pastors, and schoolmasters” who, drawing on the writings of Coleridge, conceived of themselves as a sort of priesthood of arts and philosophy, passing on to future generations the best their culture had to offer” (Elfenbein 83). These disciples would need values that Carpenter had in plenty: “passionate conviction, emotional involvement, spiritual vocation, and the dissemination of feeling” (85).

Carpenter’s immediate conception of the clerisy and its missionary obligations no doubt sprung partly from F. D. Maurice, an Anglican “broad church” liberal and the founder of Christian Socialism, who adapted Coleridge’s conception of the clerisy to a missionary purpose of enlightening the newly-enfranchised masses of the working class (Elfenbein 85-86). Charles Carpenter had been much taken with Maurice’s writings, and Edward, in his role as Curate was quite surprised to find the “steel knife and lemon-juice” incumbent replaced by Maurice himself. The young priest soon found his father’s hero somewhat lacking. While he was “lovable” and sincere, the somewhat vague Maurice made a poor role model for the increasingly politically active and critically

mindful Carpenter. Carpenter likely grew disillusioned with Maurice's ideals through personal contact. Carpenter found the older man a poor sermonizer, unable to present anything but the strength of his own convictions—convictions whose very assuredness troubled Carpenter. "I opened up my difficulties to him," wrote Carpenter, "And he was I think troubled to find I could not reconcile myself to the position which he occupied apparently without difficulty. But to me his attitude was a growing wonder" (MDD 58).

In contrast to Maurice's comfort in the doctrines of the church, Carpenter felt "the insuperable feeling of falsity and dislocation . . . which accompanied" his "professional work from the reading of the services to the visiting of old women in their almshouses" (58). When his elderly parishioners whipped out copies of the Bible and pretended to have been reading them when they caught a glimpse of Carpenter, their parson, he was fairly sickened not only by his own hypocrisy, but the hypocrisy that his position forced on those he made contact with.

As Elfenbein shows, Carpenter represents a convergence of two strands of Romantic thought on reading, education, spirituality, and their social means of dispersal. Carpenter links Maurice's English ideal of the clerisy with Whitman's more revolutionary and anti-institutional version of a teaching and exemplary elite, the "kosmos en-masse." He also bridges between Maurice's social altruism to Whitman's more passionate and personal love of comrades.

Carpenter eventually shifted his viewpoint considerably. From the ideas of aesthetic loneliness and sacrifice he discusses in his prize essay, he moves towards a conception more like the image of the poet as universally beloved interpreter of the

people to themselves presented in Whitman's "Song of the Answerer" (called "The Poet" in the Rossetti selection). It is hard to imagine the later Carpenter celebrating the virtues of self-sacrificing solitude as he does here. But the sentiment of obligation—first to change one's life in accordance to the dictates of what your soul can understand, and then to go forth and enlighten others—will be the motivating force behind his writings and his criticism for years to come.

In this essay, Carpenter shows his conception of reading both Nature and Art to be a method of the soul's ascent, leading finally to a revelation of presence akin to the beatific vision:

Art and Nature stand evermore by our side with a spirituality which burns brighter and brighter through the veil of the senses. Evermore they wake in use the consciousness that each step we take is not of importance for itself alone, but that it makes our next step the easier; till at last, we cannot say when, the veil of material things is rent¹⁷ and we stand in the sunlight of God's presence: the vision of a ladder reaching from earth to heaven, on which the angels of light move to and fro with their glad message, till we exclaim, 'Surely God is in this place, and I knew it not.' If the dream of Jacob tell us nothing else, we cannot doubt that it teaches that any place or action may become to us the revelation of God's eternal presence. Nor can we doubt that all our senses are thus too, if rightly used, fitted to educate us onward from step to step to a greater and greater fulness of spiritual life. They are the outward touch of the Divine hands

¹⁷ Recall Carpenter's early untitled poem referred to above, where he calls on the things of the world to "unveil."

moulding us from the first dawn of life ever closer to Himself. Through them the infant derives its first consciousness; through them the child learns obedience; the boy, courage and power; the man, thoughtfulness; and the artist, everywhere and at every time, a deep communion with the Spirit of all power and truth whom to know is eternal life. (42-43)

Finally, art and religion are both made a matter more of emotional impact than of reason, as contrasted with “formal Morality”:

Art is really more cognate to Religion than to a formal Morality. For if it does not present us directly with the thought of personal Deity, yet it delights in everything to embody the idea of personality or power; and while it makes its appeal to us through our emotions and affections, which ever seek for a personal being to which to attach themselves, it throws round the object of our search a halo of mystery which belongs to our thoughts of Him whose ways are past finding out. (44)

Though Carpenter later changed his opinion on how this attachment of divine sentiment to artistic or mortal figure comes about, the effect would continue to be of interest to him—the “halo of mystery” would attach to both lovers and poets.

Escape and Romantic Disappointment

In 1871 and 1872, Carpenter's sexual frustration, intellectual dissonance, and spiritual unease came to a head.¹⁸ In 1871, he had "escaped" from his duties as Curate, leaving Maurice to find a replacement and taken a vacation abroad with Edward Anthony Beck, a classical scholar and fellow whose rooms at Cambridge adjoined his own. Carpenter wrote that he and Beck "chummed together a good deal—indeed there was a touch of romance about our attachment—we compared literary notes" (62).¹⁹ Together, they had made a sort of aesthetic tour of Europe, which Carpenter described in a letter to Charles Oates, another close friend:

We enjoyed ourselves enormously . . . We expatiated among the flowers & snow of Switzerland; & dreamed of symphonies of colour amid the Italian lakes; & melted with astonishment and heat at Milan; and lived along time ago at Venice; and went up to heaven in an incense-cloud of art at Munich. And—what I wanted especially to tell you--we went to Lugano. (qtd. in Tsuzuki 19)²⁰

¹⁸ Critics agree on this, though their focus differs. In Barua, this unease is shown mostly as Carpenter's indecision over resigning orders and his desire to gain freedom of thought and movement incompatible with his position. For Tsuzuki, Carpenter's unease shows itself to be mostly the result of a developing social / political conscience—he points out that Carpenter and Beck saw the results of the downfall of the Paris Commune on their trip. Tariq Rahman, on the other hand, sees only the result of Carpenter's sexual frustration—writing that Carpenter left Cambridge "because he was disillusioned with the repressive middle class morality which would not allow him to gratify his sexual impulses and not because he was intellectually or religiously maladjusted" (Rahman 197).

¹⁹ In the first edition of *My Days and Dreams*, Carpenter shows what must be regarded as lax discretion on this point—while he provides Beck with a pseudonym, "Edward Brown," in his index he refers to the passage under "E. A. Beck." Later editions did away with the pseudonym altogether.

²⁰ The interpretation of the importance of Beck and Carpenter's trip and their "hint of romance" differs among his biographers. Tsuzuki, whose emphasis is on the socialist aspects of Carpenter's thought, notes that Carpenter and Beck had seen the effects of suppression of the Paris Commune a few months before. Christopher Stewart, whose subject is Carpenter's books as queer autobiography, hints that the relationship may have been sexual.

The two stopped in Lugano to visit the grave of a fellow student at Trinity Hall, Edward Royds, who had perished in a mountain-climbing accident on Monte San Salvatore. “It is not the fall” Carpenter observes, “nor even death that fills us with sad thoughts, but as you have said . . . it is the half-inarticulate dread, it is the scarcely-confessed nightmare dream of divided love; nay! of hopeless, impossible love” (19).

Carpenter wrote a poem about the subject, apparently conflating his relationship with Beck with the death of Royds. “The Peak of Terror” is included in his Narcissus and Other Poems. The speaker tells of climbing a mountain with a romantic friend. Finding “a crag, / Hung darkly on that argent slope, within / Stamped hollow as by the rage of Titan foot,” the two “lit the flame” and in that hollow, made a haven of “Good cheer, while round us dreamed a silent world” (131). The moment of stolen peace and cheer isn’t long, however: “. . . ere we slept, he, my beloved, arose / And lightly left our firelit cave and stood / Night-circled on a jutting rock beyond.” In counterpoint to the sleeping world, the beloved friend sings “to watchful heaven and weary earth, / To glittering peak and star and crescent moon, / And high Love, and the lovelorn Heart of all.” The song “came floating back unto his feet: / Unto his feet, and deep into my heart, / There as I lay by the fire and saw him stand, / Saw him there in the night, and see him now, / Now and forever.” The memory of the silence being briefly broken, of being awake together with his companion while everyone else sleeps, will always be remembered, because never repeated:

For he came not back.

At morning dawn, when earth was dashed with light,

Beside the golden summit he slipped and fell,
 And slid, and passed to his own home beyond.

This sliding might be either death or “back-sliding”—a retreat into convention. Beck wrote in 1871 a letter that proclaimed, despite a light-hearted tone, his impending withdrawal of emotional ties from Carpenter and the poetry that they had shared:

You have no idea how practical I am. Everybody acknowledges it. I do nothing but drink beer. . . . I have utterly abjured all poetry, both for reading and writing. I look at the rising moon unmoved – I wad my mental ears against all manner of sentiment: I will not allow myself to cry or ache inwardly at any sorrow or any injustice: I systematically train myself into a consistent brutality. I am utterly changed; it is all the reaction from you. (qtd. in Barua 19)²¹

Within two years, Beck had married, later to settle into a comfortable and conventional life as a university administrator—slid as surely as by death “into his own home beyond.”

Narcissus and Other Poems

During the Cambridge period, having read Whitman but not yet wholly incorporated him, Carpenter began work on most of the verses that were eventually to be collected and self-published as Narcissus and Other Poems. He writes that during these years he was composing “verse along the usual lines and upon the usual subjects,” while

²¹ Sheila Rowbotham argues persuasively that Beck’s response here is a way of regaining “the privileges of his sex and class” and ties his reaction to a general hardening of a masculine stereotype in mid-century Victorian society (33).

his “inner scarcely conscious nature was setting outwards in a swift current from the shores of conventionality, under the influence of its new genius, into deeps it little divined” (66). Meanwhile his “external self” he would write, was “busy in a kind of backwater” (66). And so he continued to live a conventional life and write conventional verses, while attempting to come to terms spiritually and emotionally with his own needs and with Whitman’s project. Fascinated by the intimacy of Whitman’s poetry, Carpenter desired to

write some sort of a book which should address itself very personally and closely to any one who cared to read it—establish, so to speak, an intimate personal relation between myself and the reader; and during succeeding years I made several attempts to realize this idea—of which beginnings one or two in verse may be found in a little volume entitled “Narcissus and Other Poems,” now well out of print, which I published in 1873. (TD, Note, xvii)

“None of these attempts,” Carpenter wrote in the note to Towards Democracy, “satisfied me” (xvii). And they didn’t satisfy his audience, either, who for the most part ignored this first book. But these early poems merit study for what they reveal of Carpenter’s reading—they show reflect Carpenter’s understanding of and focus on many of the important gestures in Whitman’s poems.²²

²² These poems have almost universally been ignored by critics—at the time of their publication the only notice of them was a very few negative reviews, and Carpenter himself deprecated them after he had achieved his mature style. Barua, usually one of Carpenter’s more exhaustive critics, takes his cue from the poet himself, stating that “In the light of Carpenter’s later development as a poet this book has hardly any importance, except that there is a vague sentiment for nature and humanity” (Barua 37).

Direct address to the reader, Whitman's most blatant of intimacy-building tactics, is used a few times in Narcissus, though it remains more the exception than the rule.

"Who Comes with Me?" is a simple reader-directed lyric that seems to borrow a great deal in purpose if not in form from Whitman's poems that beckon the reader. The speaker entreats his audience to step forward and travel with him into an idyllic natural landscape:

Who comes with me, who comes with me,
Through the morning air so bright and free?
Come hand in hand, by sea and land,
All day together we will be.

Several verses sketch out the perfect landscape of seaside hills and cliffs not dissimilar from the Downs of Carpenter's youth. The poet paints the creatures of nature as free, existing in the present, carrying on their tasks without worrying about the future:

The bee on her way takes holiday,
Flitting at will from flower to flower;
The spider spreads his amber threads,
All careless of to-morrow's shower.

Nature surrounds and speaks to the speaker and reader: "Each bird upsprings and joyously sings, / And all are singing to me and you." The final stanza reiterates the call, and the importance of the relationship between reader and poet:

O come with me, O come with me,
All day together by land and sea;

What matters to know of whither we go,

If only together we two be?

This poem is reminiscent of several of Whitman's poems, notably the 1860 untitled "Calamus" section later known as "We Two Boys Together Clinging," in which Whitman figures the reader and himself as a pair of boys, "One the other never leaving," "With birds singing—With fishes swimming—With trees branching and leafing" (LoG 111).

More substantial, and with a purpose more akin to Whitman's, Carpenter's "The Fellowship of Humanity" addresses the unknown reader

As one who, late at eve returning home

Under the stars, hears on the common road

A fellow-footstep fall, and sees one come

Dimly, he knows not whom, nor can forebode;

There is an uncertain communication between writer and reader, and a communication, even if vague and undefined, in the other direction—a response with which Whitman was singularly concerned. The speaker

But cries to him 'God Speed thee,' and is glad

Hearing his restful answer through the night,

And dreams of love, and though his heart be sad

Feels darkly some strange instinct of delight:

So I to thee. If on this earthly way

Our paths had lain together, I perchance
 In the sweet sunlight had beheld thy day
 And known thee as thou art—as in a trance,—

And loved thee, and thou me. But seeing now
 Sad night compels us, and our way is won
 Though ignorance and blindness to the brow
 Of that fair mountain of the morning Sun

This is a wistful might-have been, and certainly not the assured intimacy of Whitman's poems to the reader. Whitman's characteristic attitude is found in the short poem "To You"—"Stranger, if you passing meet me and desire to speak to me, why should you not speak to me? / And why should I not speak to you?" (LoG 14). In Carpenter, however, there is a separation which can't be overcome—he and the reader cannot know one another outwardly during the struggle up the mountain "Whence Truth is manifest"—instead, he writes,

let us remain

In word and action strangers, yet in heart
 One and well-known by every joy and pain
 That makes divine our little human part.

Like Whitman, Carpenter here develops a fellow-feeling for the unmet stranger, the reader, passing as it were in the dark, destined not to meet in the flesh, but still to be

close together at heart. Unlike Whitman, Carpenter cannot yet understand a way to have more than a small, abstract sort of unity with his reader—the poem’s unity comes down to a passing in the dark and a bit of sentimental wistfulness. He has not yet developed, as Whitman had in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” a confidence in his ability to abolish the isolation of reader and author, to attempt to collapse the separations of time and space.

More directly bearing the stamp of Whitman’s influence is “Inscribed on a Grave: To the Reader,” one of a collection (while numbered, they are not a sequence) of sonnets that end Narcissus. It seems a companion poem to the evocation of “Who Comes with Me,” the poet bidding farewell to his companion who has strolled with him through the idyllic landscape of poetry:

O Child of light and shadow: though I pass,
 The mountains and the plains where we two played
 Our part of earthly pleasance still are laid
 Out in the open world of sun and grass,—
 For thy fruition. Not in stone or brass
 Seek any sign of me. Let no tear braid
 Thy light-fringed lids because my path is made
 Beyond the bounds thy sight cannot surpass

The text does something Whitman’s poems often do: it turns the reader away from the text itself (in this case, the gravestone inscription) and towards the natural world:

Turn thee again unto the sunlit plain,
 Let all pure influences of the air

And sweet sad fellowship of mortal pain
 Wreath round thy head immortal fancies fair.
 Where'er suns rise on men or late moons wane,
 I leave thee at this stone to meet thee there.

The promised reunion here is through the “sweet sad fellowship of mortal pain” and the “immortal fancies”—death and separation must be conquered by and through the activity of the elegiac romantic imagination.

Beyond his use of the reader-directed or indeterminate “you,” Whitman’s most startling effect is probably his peculiar, expansive, protean, universal or posthumous “I.” Carpenter would later understand and master this technique, as he would the characteristic “you,” in Towards Democracy. In Narcissus, there are a number of poems in which he assumes a persona of natural forces, as in the companion poems, “The Spirit of the Mountain Torrent” and “The Spirit of Man,” but they feel conventional, and have none of the ecstatic expansiveness of the poems of Towards Democracy.

The most interesting of these persona-poems is “In the Grass: By a Monad (of Leibnitz),” which is told from the point of view of a spiritual point of awareness, formerly a human being, who despite being laid in the grass “long ago, / Far from the tumult and the tears of men” continues aware, though “[n]o vestige” of its “mortal part remains” (147). This afterlife among the grass as silent voyeur of the natural processes is certainly reminiscent of Whitman’s claims in “Song of Myself” 52 to “bequeath” himself “to the dirt to grow from the grass I love” (LoG 77). But while Whitman, it is implied, will maintain a kind of beneficent presence, still capable of being found (“If

you want me again look for me under your boot-soles,” he says), Carpenter’s monad is separated from the human world completely, though present:

Yea, though you seek and find me not at all
 In these wide meadows and the shoreward plain,
 Though in the ground and tangled grasses tall
 No vestige of my mortal part remain.

Yet, peradventure, where you plant your heel
 And heedless start the lizard on the sand,
 I am, and all day watch wild duck and teal
 Fly northward in a blue-enamelled band. (Narcissus 148)

Carpenter’s “I” in this poem seems to be an attempt to understand some of the peculiarities of the “I” of Whitman. Eternal and changeless, “void of will, of action unaware, / And dwindled to a mere perceptive point,” the speaker is content to watch and identify with the seasonal changes and motions of nature,

All are but changes of delight to me,
 In each I lose myself, and live, and die,
 And rise upon the next with equal glee,
 Like one who feasts for ever with his eye.

This is a sort of chilly and reportorial sort of afterlife, compared to Whitman’s eternal growths, translations, and progresses.

The centuries soon pass, and, while I live,

The world, which without me were but a dream,
 Its changing image to my mind shall give, —
 One image and one aspect of its scheme.

In Leibnitz's theory of monads, Carpenter found a scheme in terms of which he could approximate Whitman: each monad is an immortal and indivisible point of consciousness that, while unique, mirrors the universe, and exists in a relation of pre-established harmony to the rest of the monads, which together by representation make up the universe "which without [them] were a dream," and ascend towards God.²³

Whitman's poetry is notoriously polysemic—there are many layers of meaning possible, depending on a reader's critical approach (or approaches) and personal experience. In attempting a history of reading of the sort we are trying to accomplish here, we may rely on a variety of sources—biographical, critical, poetic—to try to understand the reader's experience and approach. One of Edward Carpenter's Narcissus poems, "A Memory," may shed some light on the probable depth of his reaction to certain of Whitman's poems. The poem mourns "the fair sweet hours that are no more"—in particular, a perfect day of quiet intimacy spent in nature with an unidentified "fair friend." It laments in a semi-conventional way that "the mortal mind no magic knows / To render back the joys that once it knew" (Narcissus 160). The poem seems autobiographical, though idealized:

Ah me! that day we sat, two souls in one,

²³ Carpenter's interest in ideas of atomism in spirit or consciousness would continue through his encounter with Whitman. In his Art of Creation he ascribes a kind of consciousness to all things that move (from atoms and cells to the universe itself), and thus make unity of spiritual entities below the level of the human consciousness as well as above it.

Couched in a rocky vale, the summer hours,
 And heard in trance the murmurous waters run,
 And saw the sunbeam sleep amid the flowers.

In a summer landscape, amid a wilderness and natural beauty, the poet and the addressee (the poem is dedicated “To -----.” in typical anonymous love-lyric fashion) have spent moments so intimate that they seemed to be “two souls in one” (an echo of Plato here) and have heard “in trance” the murmuring of waters, hypnotized as it were by the soft sounds and the dance of light and shadow, as “From noon till eve the mountain shadows wheeled / And slid from slope to slope and cleft the air” and “The hollow vale with laughing light was filled.” In later works, laughter will signal moments of transcendence for Carpenter—though here it may very well be love. The lovers, watched the clouds that “rode overhead, as in a dream” until eventually

. . . by magic moved, on us did seem
 To fall delicious sleep, like some sweet balm
 That steeps the soul in memories divine:
 And Fancy, soaring high on wings of Love,
 Held revel in the heaven of hope above,
 Where dawned the daystar of my life and thine. (161)

Now, pain and separation has intervened, and “Only sad echoes of sweet voices heard--/
 Visions that flit along the rugged brow / Of that broad-featured past” (162). The poet, looking back, finds nature’s message less clear, the brief certainty of the past threatened, mankind something small and easily broken:

So pass the years, and ever in the past
 Old Nature smiles at us frail houseless things;
 And if in love or in derision vast
 Men scarcely know; alone thy memory brings
 To me a hope that cannot fail: a calm
 That spreads where else despair: for in thy soul
 I see the mould of Nature's mirrored whole—
 One love, like thine, to shield mankind from harm.

It is the memory of the lover that reassures the doubting poet of Nature's benevolence. And so we might imagine Carpenter reading of "Of The Terrible Doubt of Appearances," with its salvific portrayal of love between friends, or indeed section five of "Song of Myself," in terms of this kind of relationship—though by the time he is writing of his understanding of Whitman's poetry (in letters to the poet), his understanding of the poems is much more multifaceted.

"The Face of His Hours Reflected"

Carpenter began to feel that life at Cambridge "was becoming impossible" (MDD 66). What he called the "tension and dislocation" of his life was nearing a crisis point. After nearly two years of going through the motions of his duties "in a torpid, perfunctory manner," his anxieties and depressions had begun to show themselves in physical signs, until he was "obviously ill and incapacitated" (66-67).

He was at a turning-point in his life and his vocation. F. D. Maurice died in 1872, and with him the last vestiges of Carpenter's attachment to the institutional brand of Christian Socialism he had championed. Sometime around this period, Carpenter first procured a full edition of Whitman, possibly the 1860.²⁴ It was the first time that Carpenter had read, then, many of Whitman's most important poems, including "Song of Myself." However, the particular edition might be more important. That edition, which provided the most complete set of the "Calamus" poems, had a particularly strong effect on Carpenter, and at least in the view of Barua, played an important role in his formation of his sexual identity.

"It is clear," argues Barua "that auto-suggestion played a great deal in confirming [Carpenter] in his sexuality. The craving for friendship which he felt so intensely became a homosexual cult after he had absorbed Whitman's doctrine of comrade-love" (179). This is perhaps too strong. "Auto-suggestion" implies a kind of self-hypnosis. It might be better to think of Carpenter's "shapeless" feelings as a kind of data that he had not yet given a definite interpretation or fit to a purpose and context. Whitman's works showed him one possible form and meaning that could structure that desire.

Barua indicates one particular poem of Whitman's, one of the Calamus series that Whitman excised from all later editions published in his own lifetime. It was a

²⁴ I follow here Barua's judgment that Carpenter likely had access to an 1860 Leaves of Grass (possibly the British issue by Trübner & Co.) during the period when Carpenter was forming his conception of his own homosexual identity. However, there is no way to be certain. Carpenter reproduces the excluded poem and gives it great weight in his 1906 Days with Walt Whitman as well as in his later Some Friends of Walt Whitman (9-10). The prevalence of mirror imagery in Towards Democracy seems to form an weighty if inconclusive argument for Carpenter having read this poem by the time of that book's composition. Carpenter ordered a number of books from Whitman, but there are no records of his ordering an 1860 specifically, and no records of book-orders were before Carpenter's 1876 purchase of a centennial edition..

poem that meant a great deal to those of Whitman's British followers who interpreted his "love of comrades" as homosexual.²⁵ In Carpenter's Some Friends of Walt Whitman, this poem becomes the chief evidence that Carpenter offers to prove Whitman's homosexual orientation.²⁶ Barua cites only the beginning of it, but the end of the poem most clearly shows how Carpenter might have related to it:

Hours continuing long, sore and heavy-hearted,
 Hours of the dusk, when I withdraw to a lonesome and unfrequented spot, seating
 myself, leaning my face in my hands;
 Hours sleepless, deep in the night, when I go forth, speeding swiftly the country
 roads, or through the city streets, or pacing miles and miles, stifling
 plaintive cries;
 Hours discouraged, distracted—for the one I cannot content myself without, soon
 I saw him, content himself without me;
 Hours when I am forgotten (O weeks and months are passing, but I believe I am
 never to forget!)

Sullen and suffering hours! (I am ashamed—but all is useless—I am what I am);
 Hours of my torment—I wonder if other men have the like, out of the like
 feelings?

Is there even one like me—distracted—his friend, his lover lost to him?

²⁵ Another excised poem was the one that drew John Addington Symonds to Whitman. In his autobiography, Symonds notes that sometime after 1866 he heard his friend F. M. Meyers give an impassionate impromptu reading of "Long I thought that knowledge alone would content me" (189). This was the beginning of Symonds' fascination with "Calamus" and Leaves generally.

²⁶ Carpenter uses the term "intermediate"—which has slightly different implications than the modern use of "homosexual."

Is he, too, as I am now? Does he still rise in the morning, dejected, thinking who
 is lost to him? and at night awaking, thinking who is lost?

Does he, too, harbor his friendship silent and endless? harbor his anguish and
 passion?

Does some stray reminder, or the casual mention of a name, bring the fit back
 upon him taciturn and deprest?

Does he see himself reflected in me? In these hours does he see the face of his
 hours reflected?

If in fact Carpenter read this poem at this time in his life, his identification and reaction must have been extraordinarily intense. The role created by the text—what reader-response critics might call “the implied reader”—would have overlapped almost completely with the real reader, Edward Carpenter, with his hopes and fears and pain. Still smarting from his separation from Beck, depressed and feeling simultaneously lost in and entrapped by the academic world he had shared with him, which seemed more and more an empty sham, Carpenter could not have helped see himself “reflected back” in the “he” that Whitman proposes, and in Whitman himself. He knew there was at least one other like him. In Barua’s terms, Whitman “had given him the courage to accept, ‘I am what I am’” (179). But it is more than that.

Whitman’s direct address is designed to forge an intimate relationship between the poet and his reader—to make each reader feel that he or she is the one actually addressed. Most of Whitman’s “disciples” seem to have felt this uncanny effect directly—the sense that Whitman’s “you” referred to them in particular. It is easy to

imagine that from the moment that Carpenter identified with the “you” this strongly, the identification of Whitman as a sort of model, precursor, or paradigm-self continued to strengthen. In Whitman Carpenter found someone who had apparently come through the same situation that threatened him. Having seen himself in Whitman’s mirror, he found himself growing more and more to resemble the image.

Whitman was not just a teacher now for Carpenter. He became more and more a second self. Once Carpenter had recognized his own yearning in Whitman, and allowed Whitman’s constructions on that yearning to take hold of him, he likely began feeling more and more one of the “elect” readers of Leaves of Grass, one of the students or “eleves” who Whitman talks about in the 1860 and later editions. Hadn’t Whitman, in the Calamus poem eventually named “To a Western Boy,” written that “if blood like mine circle not in your veins, / If you be not silently selected by lovers and do not silently select lovers, / Of what use is it that you seek to become eleve of mine?” (LoG 115). As we have seen, Carpenter felt himself qualified.

After reading a complete version of Whitman’s poems, Carpenter felt that “a profound change set in” inside him. Again, his feelings were associated with his readings of, and within, nature—the same gardens, in fact, in which he had brooded and wondered and walked lonely:

I remember the long and beautiful summer nights, sometimes in the College garden by the riverside, sometimes sitting at my own window which itself overlooked a little old-fashioned garden enclosed by grey and crumbling walls; sometimes watching the silent and untroubled dawn; and feeling all the time that

my life deep down was flowing out and away from the surroundings and traditions in which I lived—a current of sympathy carrying it westward, across the Atlantic. (MDD 64)

This “current of sympathy”—the attraction that Whitman as a person (or the persona that Whitman had constructed in his poems) exerted on his disciples should not be underestimated. But before Carpenter was to loosen his moorings and follow this current, he needed another nudge, and he got it from a more proximate influence.

Italy and Jane Olivia Daubeny

In 1873, Carpenter took a long vacation in Italy, which was at the time both a haven for English expatriates and a source of inspiration for those who sought for alternatives to England’s dominant religious and moral codes. Here, Carpenter viewed Greek sculpture, which had a “deep effect” on him, “The other things, pictures, architecture, etc., interested me much from an historical or aesthetic point of view; but this had something more, a germinative influence on my mind, which adding itself to and corroborating the effect of Whitman’s poetry, left me as it were the seed of new conceptions of life” (67). We might not be too amiss here in speculating here on Carpenter’s use of the term “germinative” influence—the “seed of new conceptions of life.” Carpenter is figuratively impregnated by the joint seed of an ancient conception of life and Whitman’s modern instantiation of it. Whitman’s “spermatic” language of influence finds its receptacle here.

What Carpenter found alike in the ancient statuary and in Whitman's work was a sense of "the noblest passions of the soul . . . united and blended with the corporeal form—or rather scarcely conceived of as separated from it" (67-68).²⁷ Along with this unity of the physical and the emotional or spiritual, he took in "the emotional atmosphere which went along with this the Greek ideal of the free and gracious life of man at one with nature and the cosmos—so remote from the current ideals of commercialism and Christianity!"(68).²⁸ And of course, this was made all the more revelatory by the presence of nature in the "'Delicate air' and delightful landscape and climate of Italy."

Through this fusion of aesthetic influences, "without worrying about it," Carpenter found that "a change had taken place in my mental attitude which would make my return to the Cambridge life impossible."

During this period, Carpenter struck up a relationship with an unconventional woman, whose life outside of polite society (and the Christian fold) and whose progressive views on marriage and social views would give him the last spur he needed to decide to leave his position at Cambridge. Olivia Daubeny, a woman of about fifty, was an in-law of one of Carpenter's sisters. She was by all accounts a strong, opinionated woman, "artistic" as Carpenter writes, "to the finger-tips." She had separated from a husband after a brief unhappy marriage, and shared with Carpenter a

²⁷ We may find a parallel here in Emerson, who writes in his "History" that "There are men whose manners have the same essential splendor as the simple and awful sculpture on the friezes of the Parthenon, and the remains of the earliest Greek art" (243).

²⁸ For Carpenter as for so many unorthodox religious and philosophical seekers, a classical education with its emphasis on "the glory that was Greece" had opened the possibility of Greek thought and lifestyle as a site of resistance—an alternative to the ideas and morals of Victorian England.

distrust of and scorn for received opinion. She hated “everything British and Philistine and commercial,” detested “the Bible and religion,” and provided a radical point of view that Carpenter often found himself arguing against. The opposition honed his own views, however. He wrote that it “served to liberate my mind, corrected in many respects the native vagueness of my thought, and certainly helped me greatly on the road to choose my own way in life.” The relationship was a close and important one—some biographers have hinted at a kind of romance, at least on one side, while others have implied that Daubeny herself was an “invert.” Tsuzuki notes that she eventually lived in a London suburb with a girl who “was something more than a companion” (25). In any event, she provided a spur to Carpenter’s vacillating attempts to prepare to leave Cambridge, writing in one letter, “One thing is clear anyhow, your present life is intolerable, change it you must . . . When you get away from the depressing influence of your present life, with all its worries you will breathe and clap your hands and thank God!” Daubeny seconded the urges that Carpenter might have read in “Song of the Open Road” and other of Whitman’s poems that encouraged change and bold enterprise. Leave he did: despite practical promptings by his colleagues at the University (who considered it a quixotic gesture) he disqualified himself from his clerical fellowship and made up his mind to go. Carpenter’s decision might not have been quite so fateful-seeming at the time, of course. Carpenter had believed that he might obtain a non-clerical fellowship, but none was offered to him.

Letters and Discipleship

Edward Carpenter's early experiences and engagements with nature, love, and mystical thought gave him a context in which to read Whitman's work, and allowed him a greater-than usual identification with Whitman. In turn, his engagement with and developing understanding of Whitman's work conditioned the way he understood these most important elements of his life—precipitating a change in the way he envisioned his vocation, his lifestyle, and his sexuality. Whitman's work, in the context of Carpenter's crises of faith and identity, became an important part of his life. But there were subtler and more profound changes to come. Between Carpenter's first letter to Whitman and his composition of his long Whitmanian poem "Towards Democracy," we begin to see just how much Carpenter's reading of Whitman structures not just his role and his social vision, but his habits of interpretation, changing how he experiences and interprets not just other works, but bodies, material objects, and his own identity.

First, Carpenter began to experience a shift in how he read Whitman's works, enabling him to construct a more solid view of the author as he represented himself. As he says in My Days and Dreams of this period, Whitman's writings

had been my companions, and had been working a revolution within me—at first an intellectual revolution merely—but by degrees the wonderful personality behind them, glowing through here and there, became more real and living, and suffusing itself throughout rendered them transparent to my understanding.

I began in fact to realize that, above all else, I had come in contact with a great Man; not great thoughts, theories, views of life, but a great Individuality, a great Life. I began to see and realize correspondingly that ‘views’ and intellectual furniture generally were not the important thing I had before imagined; that character and the statement of Self, persistently, under diverse conditions were all-important; that the body in Man (and this the Greek statuary had helped me to realize), and the quality corresponding to body in all art and behavior, was radiant in meaning and beautiful beyond words; and that the production of splendid men and women was the aim and only true aim of State-policy. By day and night the presence of this Friend, exhaled from his own book, had been with me—thus working, transforming, drawing me wonderfully to seek him. (MDD 86)

Whitman’s book became for Carpenter, as it had been for Gilchrist, a living presence, which effused something like the attraction of a human body and personality. Later, in “The Poetic Form of ‘Leaves of Grass,’” published in Carpenter’s Days with Walt Whitman, he writes that Whitman’s personality “forms the organic centre of ‘Leaves of Grass’” and that “‘Leaves of Grass’ ought to stand whole, unbroken, undivided, and grouped round the central presence of the author. ‘Who touches this, touches a man’” (DWWW 113). Later in the same essay he writes, “The ultimate form . . . of Whitman’s poems is the form of himself, of the Soul as individualised and uttered in him” (115). This underlying unity needs to be understood by the reader:

As looking at the ocean, boundless and reaching far beyond our ken, we yet recognise in each eave the form of the sea which gives it birth; so in reading “Leaves of Grass” we recognize in each poem or poemet the form and unifying law of the author. . . Every mood, at one time or another, is there and to be recognized—yet underneath, and greater than all, and illustrated by them all, the law and life of the ocean itself. (116)

In 1874, while preparing to embark on a career of lecturing on music and astronomy as a part of the University Extension program, Carpenter wrote the first of several long and revealing letters to Whitman. Like the letters of Anne Gilchrist, they are both personal confessions and professions of faith, and like Gilchrist’s criticism and letters, they reveal Carpenter’s understanding of Whitman, the poet’s position in Carpenter’s own life, and the role of his ideas in the future development of society. The letter also reveals how Carpenter, guided by Whitman, experienced the human face and form, particularly the bodies of working-class men, as not only objects of desire, but as symbols of and access-points to the divine.

“It is just dawn,” the letter begins, “but there is light enough to write by, and the birds in their old sweet fashion are chirping in the little College garden outside.” The letter is rich with metaphoric implications—the “dawn” is both that of Carpenter’s understanding and of the new age that both he and Whitman will be writing towards. The birdsong in the letter reminds one of that which acts in the poetry of both as herald of the soul and symbol for poetry and inspiration.

Carpenter attempts to assert clearly his own relationship to Whitman and his ideas. The salutation on the letter is “My dear friend,” and it is justified. After years of reading his books, Carpenter feels that he knows Whitman very well already, and that their friendship is well-developed.²⁹ He briefly recalls that friendship: “My first knowledge of you is all entangled with that little Garden.³⁰ But that was six years ago; so you must not mind me writing you know because you understand, as I understand, that I am not drunk with new wine” (WWIC 1:158). Carpenter thus presents himself not as a recent enthusiast, but as someone changed permanently by Whitman’s poetry. He writes to let Whitman know about his popularity in England: he “can’t help wishing you should know that there are many here in England to whom your writings have been as the waking up to a new day” (158-159). He shows immediately a critical understanding of Whitman’s purpose and attitude towards reception, writing that

I dare say you do not care, particularly, how your writings, as such, are accepted; but I know that you do care that those thoughts you weary not to proclaim should be seized upon by others over the world and become the central point of their lives, and that something even transcending all thought should knit together us in England and you in America by ties closer than thought and life itself. (159)

²⁹ Whitman told Traubel on giving it to him that this was “one of Carpenter’s first letters” (WWIC 1:158)—and it seems to have been the first for any purpose other than ordering books. Before this, Carpenter merely wrote to Whitman, “obtained his books from him, and occasional postcardial responses” (MDD 65).

³⁰ In a letter of 1875 to Oates, Carpenter wrote from the same place, and mentioned the same back garden again: “It is a dreadful little back garden to me—so full of reminiscences & associations, from Walt Whitman to the W. C.! I do not quite know whether I like it or whether I am afraid of it. But it is the same with all Cambridge. However I recant about the garden, for I really hold it a sacred spot, sacred over all pleasure & pain as some things are” (qtd.in Tsuzuki 27).

Whitman's role, as Carpenter has stated it, is not as a writer of verses, but a transformer of individual selves and of society—one who binds the classes and the nations together by the same kind of bands of sympathy and affection that Carpenter had begun to feel for Whitman.

Carpenter also represents Whitman as the voice of the times. The elder poet has spoken “the word which is on the lips of God today” and Carpenter believes that it is “vital” and “will grow” (159).

What actually sparked his writing, however, was more immediate and substantial, and shows how Carpenter's concern for social reform is fused with his reading of the working-class male body. Carpenter writes that people in America cannot know “what relief [it] is here [in England] to turn from the languid inanity of the well-fed to the clean hard lines of the workman's face” (160). He continues, “Yesterday there came (to mend my door) a young workman with the old divine light in his eyes,” and “perhaps more than all, he has made me write to you.”

Carpenter first understood this “old divine light” through Whitman, and it was to be a continuing concern for Carpenter throughout his writing career. Whitman had written in several poems of common men and women appearing as gods, most famously in “Song of Myself” section 42, where he presents “Lads ahold of the fire-engines and hook-and-ladder ropes no less to me than the gods of the antique wars, . . . The snag-tooth'd hostler with red hair redeeming sins past and to come” and “the mechanic's wife with her babe at her nipple interceding for every person born” (LoG 66). In “To You,” and again in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” Whitman attempted to portray a radical

democracy of the spirit—transferring the signs of divinity from the haloed heads of saints and saviors to the common man. He wrote that

Painters have painted their swarming groups and the centre-figure of all,
From the head of the centre-figure spreading a nimbus of gold-color'd light,
But I paint myriads of heads, but paint no head without its nimbus of gold-
color'd light,
From my hand from the brain of every man and woman it streams, effulgently
flowing forever. (196)

Carpenter regularly experienced a phenomenon associated with this figure from Whitman's poems. In several places in his work he attempts to explain it. His most-developed discussion of the matter, in his 1904 The Art of Creation, especially repays attention. "Who is there so unfortunate" he asks, "as not to have had the experience, in ordinary daily life, of seeing some features, perhaps those of a well-known person, suddenly transformed into the lineaments of a god—with the strangest possible sense of a transcendent Presence, only to be described by some such word?" (AC 127). The setting of this kind of revelation, as in so many of Whitman's parallel statements, is the crowd. "Why," he asks, "walking among the crowded streets amid all the rubbish and riff-raff of humanity, does a face suddenly appear, all glorified and shining, removed by a measureless gulf from those around—and disappear again in the stream?"

"What is the meaning," he asks again, "of these sudden halos and glammers?" As an example of these "glammers," he gives Dr. Maurice Bucke's first impression of Whitman (discussed in chapter three). Carpenter's explanation then, based on ideas of

race-memory is that “it was not so much the face itself that was divine . . . but that it instantly recalled to . . . memory the form of some god seen long ago, or far down in the mirror of [his] mind—to which god indeed [his] adoration and worship were due, and not to the mortal” (130).

Carpenter traces this effect, this divine projection to Plato’s “remembrance” (the idea that some people can remember the divine forms and ideas of the real world and see them “rapt in amazement; but they are ignorant of what this rapture means, because they do not clearly perceive” [qtd. in AC 130]). He then fuses the Platonic idea of the recognition of the divine with a theory of hereditary race memory and archetype that resembles that of Jung (AC 130-135).

Having had an experience that he identifies with Whitman’s poetic practice, Carpenter assumes that Whitman has the same experience—that he really sees the halo around each person. Later in The Art of Creation, Carpenter would say as much

Whitman boldly says of the men and women of the street, “What gods can exceed these that clasp me by the hand?” For him the sight of the simple human being was sufficient to wake the glow and the halo of divinity. This latest and greatest idealisation proceeds clearly from the fact that the image or object in such cases rouses the glorified consciousness—not of any one line of experience and memory, not of any particular aspect or section of the race, but of humanity itself. When the consciousness in a man has deepened so far that it is in touch with that of humanity, then clearly any human being may wake that deeper consciousness. And its awakening is accompanied by a sense of glory,

wonderment, and perennial splendour as great or perhaps greater than that which accompanied the vision of the elder gods. (AC 193-94).

Through Whitman, Carpenter had gotten a sense of the significance of the common people—a literal sense.

In the case Carpenter presents in his letter to Whitman, “the old divine light” and the “clean hard lines” of the workman’s face gave rise in this case to a reaction that was both spiritual and emotional—a reaction of recognition of something divine, but also a stirring of attraction. A nearly exact parallel can be found in “In the Drawing Rooms,” a poem from Carpenter’s “Children of Freedom” section of Towards Democracy.

In that poem, Carpenter’s speaker, disgusted by the life of polite society, catches a glimpse of a “grimy and oil-besmeared” stoker as his train stops at a way-station. “And the firelight fell on him brightly as for a moment his eyes rested on mine. / That was all. But it was enough” (TD 132). The glance is enough to call forth the “sting and torrent of Reality” (133). In the stoker’s eyes he saw “Nature standing supreme and immensely indifferent in that man, yet condensed and prompt for decisive action; / True eyes, true interpreters, striking as a man wielding a sledge strikes” (134). The stoker becomes a savior-figure,

mediating there against Necessity, wringing favors and a little respite for your
 fellows; translating the laws for them, making a channel for the forces;
 In whom through faithful use, through long patient and loyal exercise the
 channels have become clean—

[Clean and free the channels of your soul, though your body be smirched and

oily—] (TD 134)

“It is not a little thing,” Carpenter concludes, “that by such a life your face should become as a lantern of strength for men.” “Nay, it is very great,” Carpenter’s speaker declares:

I do not forget.

Indeed I worship none more than I worship you and such as you,

Who are no god sitting upon a jasper throne,

But the same toiling in disguise among the children of men and giving
your own life for them. (TD 135)

In the letter to Whitman, immediately after mentioning the workman, Carpenter turns to thank Whitman:

Because you have, as it were, given me a ground for the love of men I thank you continually in my heart. (—And others thank you though they do not say so.) For you have made men to be not ashamed of the noblest instinct of their nature.

Women are beautiful; but, to some, there is that which passes the love of women.

(160)

Now this may be a general love, a religious love, or a homosexual love. More likely, it partakes of all of them. Carpenter places this obliquely-referred-to love in the context of a wider social awakening: “It is enough to know that the longed-for realization is possible—will be, has been, is even now somewhere—even though we find it now. . . the fetters are falling from men’s feet, the cramps and crazes of the old superstitions are relaxing, the idiotic ignorance of class contempt is dissipating.” What will cause this

social emancipation is an understanding of the self and its relation to others. Essentially, what Carpenter describes is a change of attitude:

If men shall learn to accept one another simply and without complaint, if they shall cease to regard themselves because the emptiness of vanity is filled up with love, and yet shall honor the free, immeasurable gift of their own personality, delight in it and bask in it without false shames and affectations—then your work will be accomplished: and men for the first time will know of what happiness they are capable. (161)

Whitman's work is intended, Carpenter says, to give people unashamed and unaffected access to their own personalities.

Carpenter speaks of his decision to lecture “to working men and women in the North” who “at least desire to lay hold of something with a real grasp.” He ends his letter with an extraordinary closing “Farewell: wherever the most common desires and dreams of daily life are—wherever the beloved opposition is, of hand to hand, of soul to soul—I sometimes think to meet you” (161). In 1888, reading the letter to Traubel, Whitman called it “beautiful, like a confession.” He made it clear that the rapport that Carpenter felt, and the understanding that he expressed went both ways, saying to Traubel, “I seem to get very near to his heart and he to mine in that letter” (158). However, Whitman's emphasis on Carpenter's “introspection” in this letter—what he calls a “tender mood of self-examination” is very interesting. “I am afraid of it, generally,” Whitman told Traubel, “just enough of it is good, too much of it is a disease.” One must wonder what in Carpenter's letter struck Whitman so.

In 1876, Carpenter again wrote to Whitman, sending a letter that shows the evolution of his reading of Whitman's work at this period. If the previous letter had been a confession, this one would be a profession of discipleship.

Carpenter declares Whitman's works to be prophecy, one he believed in intently when reading, and wished to work towards fulfilling, but still one that he feared the world wasn't ready for. In his letter, we look over the shoulder of a young visionary struggling with the fate of visionaries, which is to "breathe their lives out after a mere visionary beauty" (WWIC 3: 415). "Will it ever be," Carpenter asks, "that human love—strong to meet with adventurous joy all chance and change—will cease to be a mere name? that men will 'understand'—eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and so be immortal?"

As he had seen the "old visionary light" before in the face of the workingman, so Carpenter sensed, as did Whitman, a latent power and readiness for change in the people, glimmering forth like a message just about to become readable:

I know that it must be, I see it everywhere—in face after face in the streets, in the sound of men's voices and in their silence—clear, unmistakable, as if just about to be disclosed, the "everywhere-equal" life; and yet the children die, hardly knowing what they hey have sought yet knowing they have not found it, and their dreams fade away, and to long suffering succeeds rest and still the distance remains immeasurable. (415)

These doubts, he writes, are banished when he remembers "what the end is," finding this end "truly present with us now underlying all thought and these words."

Carpenter speaks of Whitman's attempts to diffuse his personality among the people through his books, and to use it as a means of bringing people together and making his vision of friendship possible: "Dear friend," he writes, "you have so infused yourself that it is daily more possible for men to walk hand in hand over the whole earth." But this is not simply a change in attitude toward sex and love. For Carpenter, it is a spiritual fusion, an entrance into Whitman's own personality and spirit. Carpenter represents this infusion, Whitman's poetic and spiritual efforts, as a sacrifice of the sort he wrote of in his essay on art and religion. Whitman had "given his life" as others would for his vision. Carpenter implies that he himself might be such a disciple and successor. Carpenter explains the dream, the goal towards which Whitman has shifted society:

In the midst of the ferment of this age of material and mechanical intercommunion you have planted the seed of a spiritual union and identity above all space and time, which yet shall use the spaces and the times of this earth (while it endures) for its manifestation and expression. What have we dreamed? a union which even now binds us closer than all thought high up above all individual gain and loss—an individual self which stands out free and distinct, most solid of all facts, commensurating with all existence—love disclosing each ever more and more. (415)

"See," added Carpenter, "you have made the earth sacred for me" (415). His statement shows a well-developed understanding of Whitman's attempts in poems like "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" to bring his readers to realize a bond between the poet and reader (and

finally between the ages of all men and women) in which “distance avails not, and place avails not” (“Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” 5, LoG 137).

In the letter, Carpenter does more than show his understanding of Leaves and attest to his faith in what he considers to be Whitman’s ideal. He is also declaring a new calling—declaring himself not just a reader and a devotee, but a disciple, who will devote his life to the work that Whitman and Leaves have begun. Even in the early flame of his enthusiasm, Carpenter retains a kind of measured consideration and sanity, an unstinting devotion that does not blind him to the difficulties ahead. This same sense of proportion would later enable Carpenter to dedicate himself to political and social causes without losing a solid sense of pragmatism. His declaration in the letter is reminiscent of what he had written of the obligation of the connoisseur of art in The Religious Influence of Art. Having understood and sympathized with Whitman’s message, he finds himself obliged to work towards living it and disseminating it:

I feel that my work is to carry on what you have begun. You have opened the way: my only desire is to go onward with it. Though it is out of all question to suppose that one generation or ten generations will make much difference in men’s minds in the direction of the ideal state, still—to contemplate that ideal and to live slowly translating it into real life and action is quite certainly the only good, and is sufficient. (WWWIC 3: 416-17)

Pilgrimage: Reading Whitman

In 1877, Carpenter made the first of two pilgrimages to visit Whitman—as years later he would go to meet and study under Indian wise men. Like those of many of Whitman’s disciples, his initial meeting was striking. In Whitman’s poems, he asked his readers to treat his book as an extension of his body or of his personal magnetism. For these men and women who read Leaves of Grass so closely, Whitman’s body, and his presence had become in itself a potent spiritual symbol, loaded with a wide range of meanings. Carpenter’s reaction is weighted with interpretation—of Whitman’s essence and of his works. Soon after meeting Whitman, Carpenter wrote a letter to “Benjamin,” a friend in England. In this letter, Carpenter presents a reading of Whitman’s physiognomy:

The thing which strikes one about his face is the great interval between his eyes and eyebrows. That ‘space in which the soul seems to move’ is very large. The eyebrows very much arched to as to make the bridge of the nose very long—the nose itself straight & well-proportioned. The mouth & chin are covered with a fall of white hair, but the forehead is clear & high. As to his eyes of course it is impossible to put them into words—the impression they produce on me is of an immense, immense, background: Yet it is very characteristic of them that the pupils are small & distinct, the likeness to Christ is quite marked. I send you a sketch (!) which will give you the idea of the proportions of the face. Put into it the extravagant prophetic look of genius, intense perceptive power, and as much

sentiment as you like, and you have something like. (E. H. Miller, Walt Whitman as Man, Poet, and Legend 156-157).

In the description of the same meeting presented in his Days with Walt Whitman, Carpenter moves past the physical details, and presents a more nuanced reading. As in his readings of Leaves, he intuits hidden depths and feels a deep sympathy:

Meanwhile in that first ten minutes I was becoming conscious of an impression which subsequently grew even more marked—the impression, namely, of immense vista or background in his personality. If I had thought before (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 impression of knowing what he was doing than he did. Yet away and beyond all this 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. (14)

Notice how Carpenter here lays to rest common misconceptions about Whitman—more likely for his audience than for himself. At that time (and afterwards), unsympathetic critics were commonly reading Whitman's poems as the work of someone unbalanced, mad, or simply egotistical to the point of ridiculousness. Bucke, would write and speak

several times to defend Whitman from charges of madness. For Carpenter, the answer to all of these charges and possible readings was to be found in the poet's manner.³¹

Of all the disciples, Carpenter had the most acute sense of Whitman's thorniness—a reserve behind his façade of openness that kept him inaccessible and lonely—and of his “turbulence”—the intensity of his emotions. Carpenter later developed a reputation (only partially self-propagated) for being an acute judge of emotions. In any event, he had certainly had enough experience of sadness, distance, and hidden reserve in his own life to judge its symptoms in others.

Carpenter was not only beginning to form an interpretation of Whitman in terms of Leaves of Grass, but an interpretation of the book in terms of Whitman's personal presence. Reading Whitman's body, observing his motions, attempting to get at his essence, Carpenter began to see deeper meanings:

As the days went by I began to see more clearly the depths which lay behind the poet's simple and unconcerned exterior. Literary persons, as a rule, write over their own heads; they talk a little bigger than themselves. But Whitman seemed to fill out “Leaves of Grass,” and form an interpretation of it. I began to see that all he had written there was matter of absolute personal experience—that you might be sure that what was said was meant. There was the same deliberate suggestiveness about his actions and manners that you find in his writings—only, of course, with the added force of bodily presence; and far down too there were

³¹ He accordingly reports on the manner in detail. These pilgrimage accounts are spiritual autobiography at removes, snapshot biography, but also attempt to provide a background of interpretation for future readers, who will not have the advantage of meeting Whitman face-to-face.

clearly enough visible the same strong and contrary moods, the same strange omnivorous egotism, controlled and restrained by that wonderful genius of his for human affection and love. (32)

If Carpenter had any doubts (and it seems he may have) as to whether or not the unusual expansions of self and spirit in Whitman were merely conventional writing, metaphor, or fiction, meeting Whitman put them out of his mind. Carpenter was certain now that Whitman wrote from experience, and that conviction would confirm Carpenter in his own search for personal religious experience, which would culminate in the writing of Towards Democracy.

Carpenter had always associated Whitman with nature, and in the later part of his trip to America he found a natural wonder that seemed to have as imposing a presence. Like many tourists of the period, Carpenter went to see Niagara Falls. He stayed there alone for four days, “looking at the Falls all the time, feeling their earth-shaking roar under my feet by day and in bed at night, and watching that strange calm sentinel, that column of white spray which, like a great spirit, exhales itself into the immense height of the sky over the roaring gulf, and which, rainbow-tinted in the sun, or glistening mysterious in the moon by night, seems to overlook the land for far and wide around” (MDD 89). This thundering sublime, which you could feel in your bootsoles, he said, was the only thing he had seen in America that matched the spirit of Whitman (89). This kind of parallel between the effect of Whitman’s appearance and personality and the sublime effect of the falls is precisely the kind of connection between seemingly unlike

but connected effects that Whitman encourages—and which Emerson encouraged before him. Emerson wrote in his “History,”

Nature is full of a sublime family likeness throughout her works; and delights in startling us with resemblances in the most unexpected quarters. I have seen the head of an old sachem of the forest, which at once reminded the eye of a bald mountain summit, and the furrows of the brow suggested the strata of rock.

(Emerson 243)

Coming back from Niagara, Carpenter was able to spend more time with Whitman, staying at the Gilchrist home, where Whitman often established himself in the room Anne had prepared for him.³² In another letter written to “Benjamin,” Carpenter says he “writes from the abode of the gods” (Miller, Walt Whitman as Man 158). Carpenter describes the effect of Whitman’s presence to his friend. Whitman brings with him “perfect rest and union” and seems to “fill out the moments as they should be filled out into something great” (159). While Carpenter was watching and interpreting Whitman’s appearance—writing that he appeared in the evenings “generally holding someone by the hand and looking like a great god in the twilight or moonlight—with his full white hair & beard & florid face & lionlike head,” Whitman in turn showed great interest in the looks of his readers, poring over Carpenter’s photo albums, looking at “people who read his books” (159). Whitman was also apparently quite taken with Carpenter’s

³² Carpenter’s impression of Anne Gilchrist in those early letters, that she is “first rate” (158), is at odds with his later account of the visit. In Carpenter’s Some Friends of Walt Whitman, written in 1924 after he had read the Harned-edited volume of Anne and Walt’s letters to one another, he writes that “the general situation was evident enough—it could hardly be concealed” and that he “saw that Anne Gilchrist was suffering” (8). Marion Walker Alcaro calls this “CAT scan hindsight” and notes that at this time Gilchrist would have been “suffering” from “exhaustion” (Alcaro 181).

appearance. Years later, when Traubel mentioned that he thought Carpenter “the handsomest of all your friends,” Whitman “fervently responded—‘That he is! That he is! I have thought it myself!’” (WWWIC 5: 405).

Carpenter’s first meeting had convinced him of Whitman’s sincerity, and had acted in large part to confirm his reading of Whitman’s poetry and enrich his understanding of the personality that he felt organized it. It would be four more years before Carpenter began to read Leaves in a specifically mystical way. Then he would find the central fact of the book not only an encounter with a particular exemplary personality, but an experience of a universal Self.

Crisis, Rereading, and the Bhagavad-Gita

By the time Edward Carpenter began to write the fragments that he would eventually assemble as My Days and Dreams, his autobiography, he had read quite widely in the developing discipline of psychology. In that book, Carpenter often provides his own explanation, psychological or spiritual, for developments in his life. Of the bubbling-up of creativity that eventually became Towards Democracy, he writes that “The soul of man is so vast, so endless that no matter on which side or sides it be hemmed in or thwarted, it will find its outlet in some fresh direction—all the more powerfully perhaps for its temporary and local obstruction” (MDD 99). Through this displacement of natural force and emotion, “the sufferings of these years, the emotional distress and tension which I had experienced, poured themselves out in poetical effusions, outbursts, ejaculations—I know not what to call them.” The composition of

the parts of the poem took place “Sometimes [while he was] lying full length in the train coming home at midnight from some lecture engagement, hardly able to move; sometimes in the morning with a sense of restoration, flying over the fields in sunlight; sometimes in my little lodging; sometimes on a long country walk” (MDD 99).

Carpenter emphasizes the spontaneity and emotional authenticity of his poetic utterances, saying he wrote “just what the necessity of my feelings compelled—formless scraps, cries, prophetic assurances—in no available metre, or shape, just as they came. In no shape that they could be given to the world; but they were a relief to me, and a consolation” (99). When he found, he said, “as it were the keynote which harmonized these disjointed utterances . . . they were mostly embodied and embedded and adapted into the structure of Towards Democracy” (99). The story of his finding that keynote and its immediate result may show the complicated and delicate relationship between reading, experience, identity, and consciousness.

In 1879, at the end of his lecturing circuit, Carpenter found himself in a period of great distress. In 1876, his eldest and favorite brother, Charles Carpenter, had died in an accident in India. In 1878, Lizzie, the younger sister who had so influenced him and whom he so adored, entered what Tsuzuki describes as “a marriage of convenience” (37). Edward’s nerves “had come to such a pass of dislocation,” he wrote, that he was “nearly breaking down” and he had “sworn a great oath” to himself to “mend matters somehow” (100).

To this end he took up outdoor manual work, began to practice a craft intermittently (making panel doors in a shop in Sheffield), and began to make

friendships with local workers: “Railway men, porters, clerks, signalmen, ironworkers, coach-builders, Sheffield cutlers, and others” (102). The most significant of these, Albert Fearnough and Charles Fox, were close friends and sometimes lovers who represented for Carpenter his “way of escape out of that dingy wilderness, that selva oscura” in which he had “wandered lost, from childhood even down to the very middle of life’s journey” (104).³³ For Carpenter, these were the “roughs” who Whitman’s poetry and the socialist ideals he had picked up at Cambridge had charged with such importance, and who his own sexual and emotional longing, shaped and given direction and definition by Whitman, had made (like the previous workman with the “old divine light” in his eyes) into images of freedom and divinity. “A deliverance,” he called them, “from the idiotic fatuous life I had been submerged in all my boyhood at Brighton, and more or less ever since.” For Carpenter, these men “represented, if nothing more, a life close to Nature and actual materials, shrewd, strong, manly, independent, not the least polite or proper, thoroughly human and kindly, and spent most part in the fields and under the open sky” (104).³⁴

They represented the life, in short, that Whitman himself had seen and loved and celebrated as embodied in the farmers and coach-drivers and soldiers and laborers

³³ Carpenter is, of course, referring here to the beginning lines of Dante’s Inferno—again, he underlines elements of spiritual experience (or experience to be understood as spiritual) by referring to them in terms of other better-known writings on the same topic.

³⁴ It is important to place emphasis on how these men were “representative” for Carpenter. Like many progressives and radicals who had, through the symbolism of the Romantics and socialists, come to associate “simpler” forms of life and rural existence with a kind of pre-existing socialism, liberalism, and down-to-earth common sense, Carpenter had previously been terribly disappointed in most of the poor people he met, and his romantic preconceptions continued to get in the way throughout his career in subtle ways. Sheila Rowbotham’s section on Carpenter’s private and political life in Socialism and the New Life shows many such occasions.

throughout his poems—what he called the “powerful uneducated.” It was a life that Carpenter set out to claim for himself. He moved in with the two (and with Fearnough’s family) on Fox’s farm at Bradway.

This new life seemed to Carpenter to “liberate the pent-up emotionality of years” (105). The exercise was doing him good, and he seemed to himself to have moved into a sort of blessed state in which the world seemed transformed, seemed a message he was entitled to read: “There was a new beauty over the world. Everywhere I paused, in the lanes or the fields, or on my way to or from the station, to catch some magic sound, some intimation of a perpetual freedom and gladness such as earth and its inhabitants (it seemed to me) had hardly yet dreamed of” (105).

Carpenter began to have symbolic visions, and was haunted by a recurring image, “a vision within me, of something like the bulb and bud, with short green blades, of a huge hyacinth just appearing above the ground.” He couldn’t interpret this vision for some time. Though he “knew that it represented vigour and abounding life” it was not until later that he understood “that in the strange emblematic way in which the soul sometimes speaks, this image may have been a sign of the fact that my life had really at last taken root, and was beginning rapidly to grow” (105).³⁵

This growth was to be precipitated by his mother’s death. This was a great emotional shock, but had a strong liberating effect on Carpenter’s spiritual and

³⁵ This kind of image of organic growth and preparation is important for Carpenter’s understanding of artistic creation. In his *Days with Walt Whitman* Carpenter quotes Whitman on how *Leaves* was produced from material that was “below consciousness” until “the time when the concealed growth had to come to light” (73). The progressive opening of a bud or flower and the discarding of husks would become Carpenter’s favorite image of social and individual development—see “Social Progress and Individual Effort” in his *England’s Ideal* (57-67).

intellectual life. “A strong invisible tie” had held Carpenter to his undemonstrative mother, and after her death, she became an important spiritual presence. Carpenter writes that he “seemed to feel her, even see her, close to me—always figuring as a semi-luminous presence, very real, but faint in outline, larger than mortal. It was an inexpressibly tender and consoling relation” (106).³⁶ He wrote that his mother’s death had what he called a “great etherealizing influence on my mind, exhaling the great mass of feelings, intuitions, conceptions, and views of life and the world which had formed within me, into another sphere” (106). Carpenter was set for a breakdown and reorganization. His emotional state was, as he inwardly full of tension, and suffering” (TD xix). The conservative influence of the restrained mother he had adored had been transformed by her death, and he was beginning to feel the first effects of a new way of life, doing manual labor with the men he cared for. The experiences he had during this period of change, and his interpretation of them, would bring about Towards Democracy. At the same time, Carpenter was starting to read Whitman no longer chiefly in terms of social change or sexual role (though he would always retain these readings), but in specifically mystical terms, bearing on his own experiences of identity.

As Whitman’s book changes with whomever reads it, so it changes with the intellectual context in which it is read. Carpenter had largely read Whitman in terms of Plato’s spiritualizing of love and in terms of the class conflicts coming to a head in Britain. His focus would shortly shift, though the original context wouldn’t disappear. In

³⁶ J. W. Wallace, another British mystic and Whitmanite, felt a strange connection between Whitman and his mother. The death of Wallace’s mother drove him to a breakdown and cosmic consciousness. See Bucke, CC, for the details (332-342).

1881, about the time of the death of Carpenter's mother, a school friend from Ceylon, P. Arunáchalam, mailed Carpenter a translation of the Bhagavad-Gita. Reading that book pushed him into a new understanding, gave him a "keynote" as he said, to reorganize his experience, including, apparently, his understanding of Whitman. The key was the experience of a transcendental state.

"All at once," he writes of this time, "I found myself in touch with a mood of exaltation and inspiration—of super-consciousness—which passed all that I'd experienced before, and which immediately harmonized all these other feelings giving to them their place, their meaning and their outlet in expression" (MDD 106). Former intimations, moments of quiet or romantic ecstasy in gardens and in woods, glances at strange faces, days spent reading Whitman, all became fused together for Carpenter—the fruit of many different moods came together in this new one, justified. The occasional writings "found their interpretation under the steady and clear light of a new mood or state of feeling which previously had only visited me fitfully and with clouded beams" (TD xx). In his prefatory note on Towards Democracy Carpenter explains that at this time he became

overwhelmingly conscious of the disclosure within of a region transcending in some sense the ordinary bounds of personality, in the light of which region my own idiosyncrasies of character—defects, accomplishments, limitations, or what not—appeared of no importance—an absolute Freedom from mortality, accompanied by an indescribable calm and joy. (xviii)

At the same time, he “immediately saw, or rather felt, that this region of Self existing in me existed equally (though not always equally consciously) in others” (xviii).

Years before, inspired by Whitman, Carpenter had wanted to write a book that would have a personal relation to all people. He had sought a common ground from which to write it, but had not, he said, succeeded in finding it. Now, he recognized this new mood or way of having experience as what he had been looking for:

the mere diversities of temperament which ordinarily distinguish and divide people dropped away and became indifferent, and a field was opened in which all might meet, in which all were truly Equal. Thus I found the common ground which I wanted; and the two words, Freedom and Equality, came for the time being to control all my thought and expression.³⁷ (xviii)

What particularly had struck Carpenter so much in his reading of the Bhagavad-Gita? In Barua’s view, it was the “Tenth and eleventh chapters of the Gita where Krishna reveals to His disciple and friend Arjuna, his supreme powers of identification with the universe” (Barua 134). In these sections, Krishna temporarily casts aside his human guise and shows his divinity in increasingly universal and dreadful forms—both transcendent and immanent in all things, from animals to men to gods, a ground that

³⁷ These words will come to signify for Carpenter this particular state of the soul. He will speak throughout “Towards Democracy” of passwords—ineffable, unspeakable words. He writes in section XXXII of a “secret unspoken word” (TD 43). In section XLVII, he speaks of a “word which sums up all words that are spoken? . . . for which the moon and the stars and the running waters and the universe itself subsist, to speak it. . . which if it could be uttered in a word there were no need of all these things” (68). This hidden word is both the world and the purpose of the world, which may be possessed only by the realization of “Freedom or Equality (for it comes to the same thing)” after which the reader will rise “the full-grown lover—possessor of the password” (TD 9). This seems likely to be Carpenter’s reading of Whitman’s “Pass-word primeval”—the undefined word that Whitman speaks through his poems (LoG 46).

supports the universe as well as a specific human identity within it. In one modern translation, Krishna says he is “the seed of all things that are; and that no being that moves or moves not can ever be without” him (Bhagavad-Gita 10:39, 87). Arjuna praises him as “Thou god from the beginning, God in man since man was. Thou Treasure supreme of this vast universe. Thou the one to be known and the Knower, the final resting place. Thou infinite Presence in whom all things are” (11: 38, 93). Reading this material, Carpenter again questioned the nature of the self and what lay beyond or behind the particularities of the individual identity. He also added a hitherto unknown dimension to his understanding of Walt Whitman’s own multi-layered and expansive portrayal of identity. Before, Carpenter had considered Whitman a great man. He even considered him a prophet who spread his personality out to the world to bind it together. But the recontextualization with Indian thought seemed to provide Carpenter a further layer of understanding of Whitman’s project in Leaves of Grass.

Carpenter had wondered early on about Whitman’s use of the “I” in Leaves of Grass, but when he had visited Whitman, he had not found the egotism that many critics had assumed was behind that ambiguous and all-containing “I.” In Narcissus and Other Poems, Carpenter had tried the device of poetic identification himself, in a tentative fashion, but had never taken it seriously. He engaged in it as an intellectual exercise or a poetic device, but never, it seems, regarded it as reflecting any sort of real state of feeling or being. It was not until he read the Bhagavad-Gita that Carpenter began to interpret Whitman’s all-encompassing “I” as a report of a particular state or kind of consciousness—a consciousness that, he believed, served as an experiential common

ground between Whitman and his reader—a place where they were one and the same. Soon after he understood this, it seems, he had the experience himself. However, the state or “mood” that provided an understanding of these works remained necessarily difficult to describe or explain:

if I should be asked—as I have sometimes been asked—What is the exact nature of this mood, of this illuminant splendour, of which you speak? I should have to reply that I can give no very concise and clearcut answer. The whole of “Towards Democracy” is an endeavor to give it utterance; any mere single sentence, or direct definition, would be of no use—rather indeed would tend to obscure by limiting. All I can say is that there seems to be vision possible to man, as from some more universal standpoint, free from the obscurity and localism which especially connect themselves with the passing clouds of desire, fear, and all ordinary thought and emotion; in that sense another and separate faculty; and as vision always means a sense of light, so here is a sense of inward light, unconnected of course with the mortal eye, but bringing to the eye of the mind the impression that it sees, and by means of a medium which washes as it were the interior surfaces of all objects and persons—how can I express it?—and yet this is most defective, for the sense is a sense that one is those objects and things and persons that one perceives, (and even that one is the whole universe,)—a sense in which sight and touch and hearing are all fused in identity. Nor can the matter be understood without realizing that the whole faculty is deeply and

intimately rooted on the far side of the moral and emotional nature, and beyond the thought-region of the brain. (xxi)

In “A Note,” Carpenter attempts to provide a key to his poetic practice, and to guide the reading practices and assumptions of his audience. Since his practice is so close to Whitman’s, it is fair to assume that these instructions for reading may also serve as his own methods of reading Leaves of Grass. Carpenter explains, for instance, his own use of the expansive, fluid, and all-identifying “I,” noting, “In this and other such cases the author is naturally liable to a charge of egotism” (xxi). Barua notes that the charge of mere egotism was as frequently leveled against Carpenter’s poems as it had been against Whitman’s (Barua 134-135). While owning up to “mere egotisms and vanities” in Towards Democracy, Carpenter makes it clear that any such “mar the expression and purpose of the book” (xxi). He guides and corrects the reader, asserting that the “real question” of the book is “What or Who in the main is the ‘I’ spoken of?” (xxi).

Carpenter lays to rest the sort of doubts he had felt about Whitman’s use of the “I”: “That the word is not used in the dramatic sense” – as Carpenter himself had used it in the poems of Narcissus—“is all I can say” (xxii). He declares that the expression is sincere, that “The ‘I’ is myself, as well as I could find words to express myself.” He also admits ignorance of the “what that Self is, and what its limits may be; and therefore what the self of any other person and what its limits might be” (xxii), calling into doubt both his own identity and that of his reader. He will leave it, he says, to “the science man and the philosopher” to explain, “feeling confident that what really existed in oneself would be found to exist either consciously or in latent form in other people” (xxii).

“If I have said ‘I, Nature’” Carpenter asserts, “it was because at the time, at any rate, I felt ‘I, Nature’; if I have said ‘I am equal with the lowest,’ it was because I could not express what I felt more directly than by those words.” Carpenter does not attempt to interpret, here, or explain. Rather, he claims the authenticity of immediate experience, shifts the weight of explanation to his audience, and points towards a future consensus of opinion that would support his view.

His conclusions about the objective value of these experiences remain cautious, however. He believes that the “value of such sentiments can only appear by time; if they are corroborated by others then they help to form a body of record which may well be worth investigation, analysis and explanation.” “I have not the least doubt,” he continues, “that anything which is really genuine will be corroborated.” (Corroborated, no doubt, as he himself was providing a kind of corroboration for Whitman). Later, as Carpenter entered into an intense and wide-ranging study of comparative religion and mysticism, he, like Bucke, read corroboration of his own experience not only in Whitman and the Indian philosophers, but in major figures throughout the history of religious and philosophical thought. In The Art of Creation he would be able to write of a “immense consensus” of mystics (AC viii).

But how can we understand this sudden shift of consciousness? And how did Carpenter’s reading of Whitman and the Bhagavad-Gita bring about this radical refocusing? Carpenter elaborated his views on perception and interpretation in The Art of Creation. Having considered the question of sudden changes of perspective: of “finding the cat” in a puzzle-picture, “or the wood-cock in the autumn leaves,” he

concludes, “Things, to be seen, have to be already in the mind” (72). Preconceptions are necessary to sight:

There is some way of looking at things, some preconception, already at work, in all cases, which determines or helps to determine, what we see, and how we see it. All nature thus is broken and sorted by the mind; and as far as we can see this is true of the simplest act of discrimination or sensation—the knower selects, supplies, ignores, compares, contributes something without which the discrimination or sensation would not be. (73)

Changing the preconceptions may actually change the perceptions that go with them. Much of Whitman’s verse attempts such a clearing of old preconceptions and a replacement with others, as does the Bhagavad-Gita. Reading the Bhagavad-Gita apparently allowed Carpenter to rethink his assumptions about the purpose of Leaves of Grass. But the act of reading itself would also prove to be significant in opening the way for Carpenter’s experience.

Reading, Mysticism, and the Subject / Object Barrier

Carpenter wrote about transcending the barrier between subject and object and finding a unity there. The separation between the subject and object is regularly broken and renegotiated, made fluid and unpredictable in the process of reading, as Wolfgang Iser has noted in his essay on “The Reading Process.” Amplifying and exploring some ideas of Georges Poulet,³⁸ Iser focuses on the issue of identity:

³⁸ Iser is responding to Poulet’s “Criticism and the Experience of Interiority.”

If reading removes the subject-object division that constitutes all perception, it follows that the reader will be “occupied” by the thoughts of the author, and these in their turn will cause the drawing of new “boundaries.” Text and reader no longer confront each other as object and subject, but instead the “division” takes place within the reader himself. In thinking the thoughts of another, his own individuality temporarily recedes into the background, since it is supplanted by these alien thoughts, which now become the theme on which his attention is focused. (“The Reading Process” 67)

In the reading situation, as Poulet had written, “I mentally pronounce an I, and yet the I which I pronounce is not myself” (Poulet 45). Whitman, and now Carpenter, made use of this situation, the alien “I” speaking in the place of the habitual self (which is temporarily set aside), the whole self fragmented into a part that speaks, a part that observes and judges what is spoken, and a greater, latent part which serves as ground for this exchange. In Whitman and Carpenter both, this situation becomes a microcosm of the complexities of the self and its relationship to a greater Self that acts as a ground for the whole universe, which defines it and serves as its message.

In his essay “Experience,” Emerson takes up the issue of the relationship between subject and object; between what one is, and what one sees:

Do you see that kitten chasing so prettily her own tail? If you could look with her eyes, you might see her surrounded with hundreds of figures performing complex dramas, with tragic and comic issues, long conversations, many characters, many ups and downs of fate, —and meanwhile it is only puss and her

tail. How long before our masquerade will end its noise of tambourines, laughter, and shouting, and we shall find it was a solitary performance? —A subject and an object, —it takes so much to make the galvanic circuit complete, but magnitude adds nothing. What imports whether it is Kepler and the sphere; Columbus and America; a reader and his book; or puss with her tail? (Emerson, “Experience” 489)

To Emerson, the internal drama of reading is, like all thought, discovery, and perception, subjective. While it appears that the mind has external objects, that in reading we encounter other minds, what we really find in our engagements with inspiring literature, just as what we find in our engagement with the parallel book of nature, is nothing more or less than potential parts of our selves. Like knows like. A thrill of recognition passes to the inspired reader of the inspired text. As Emerson writes in “The American Scholar,” “the character of the pleasure we derive from the best books . . . impress[es] us with the conviction, that one nature wrote and the same reads” (41). Just so in Whitman, who writes in “Song of the Rolling Earth” that “no man understands any greatness or goodness but his own, or the indication of his own” (LoG 187).

Sex, Reading, and Subject-Object

In Whitman's poetry, critics have debated whether Whitman's sexualized images of union (for example, "Song of Myself" section 5) are primarily mystical, whether they provide a figure for reading and influence, or whether they are intended to represent sexual experiences.³⁹

Carpenter's understanding of these points of ambiguity is complex and noteworthy. Unlike Bucke, who largely discarded or interpreted away the sexual readings he felt were "unworthy" of Whitman's greatness and the portion of Whitman's message Bucke preferred, Carpenter developed a view where reading, sex, and transcendental experience became one. In The Art of Creation he writes that "Love . . . whether taken in its most ideal or its most sensuous signification, is a form of the Cosmic Consciousness" (83). This does not mean, of course, that love is the same as the kind of momentary and intense experience that Bucke had, or even like the experience of the collapse of the subject-object relationship that Carpenter writes of in his "Note" and calls the state of "Democracy." Rather, Carpenter sees love, even sexual love, as gesturing towards the cosmic viewpoint and signaling participation in the universal process.

Whitman asks in "Song of the Open Road," for instance, about the attraction that certain people and objects exert on the soul. He calls this the "fluid and attaching character," the "shuddering longing ache of contact" (LoG 130). Whitman asks, "Why

³⁹ See E. H. Miller's Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself': A Mosaic of Interpretations for a small but representative sample of the debate about the meaning of section five.

are there men and women that while they are nigh me the sunlight expands my blood?"

(130). Carpenter answers this question in his own works: attraction of this sort is the humanly readable manifestation of an ontological emotion.

In Love's Coming of Age, one of his many writings on sex and love, Carpenter explains,

Sex is the allegory of love in the physical world. It is from this fact that it derives its immense power. The aim of Love is non-differentiation—absolute union of being; but absolute union can only be found at the centre of existence. Therefore whoever has truly found another has found not only that other, and with that other himself, but has found also a third—who dwells at the centre and holds the plastic material of the universe in the palm of his hand, and is the creator of sensible forms.

Similarly the aim of sex is union and non-differentiation—but on the physical plane, —and in the moment when this union is accomplished creation takes place, and the generation (in the plastic material of the sex-elements) of sensible forms. (27)

In Carpenter's idealization and interpretation of love, the truly successful lover finds the common ground of identity between lover, beloved person, and universal force of creation. In Whitman it seems to us that sexual attraction and divine longing, sexual experience and the act of successful spiritual reading, are paralleled or confused. In Carpenter's interpretation, it is because they are equivalent—they are all ways to

participate in and feel in the body and the mind the same primal act of non-differentiation and creation.

In “Poetic Form of ‘Leaves of Grass,’” an essay printed in his Days with Walt Whitman, Carpenter writes of the relationship between the form and the meaning of Whitman’s poetry. He parallels this with an experience that will fuse the experience of the body and the experience of other objects: “The form vanishes into the meaning; and that is what our bodies will one day do—not disappear from sight, but so glow and be suffused in what they convey, as to cease to have any separate existence”⁴⁰ (DWWW 108-109).

In “Towards Democracy” XXI, Carpenter figures the act of reading itself as sexual. He begins by eliminating two possible models of reading or transmission. “I weave these words about myself to form a seamless web without beginning or ending,” he writes: “I do not spin a yarn for you to reel off at your leisure; nor do I pour out water into pots” (TD 30). “Towards Democracy” is not to be taken bit by bit or in a leisurely fashion. It is also not to be read in a mood of passive receptiveness, the reader waiting to be filled with knowledge.

Instead Carpenter’s narrative voice claims that “This,” the poem, “is one of my bodies—of the female—which if you penetrate with true sexual power, clinging it shall conceive, and you shall know me in part—by the answer of the eyes of children, yours and mine, looking up from the grass and down from the sky upon you as you walk” (31).

⁴⁰ In a footnote to this passage, Carpenter includes a fairly lengthy quotation from Gilchrist’s “A Woman’s Estimate of Walt Whitman”—where she speaks of how words “become electric streams” in Whitman’s poetry, and she sometimes feels “as if I had not bodily strength to read many of these poems” (109).

The act of interpretation is also seen as an act of interpenetration. Unlike Whitman's work, which often figured poetic influence as spermatic or ejaculatory—his poems spread like seeds which will eventually to bring about a new birth, for Carpenter, it is the work itself that is fertilized and conceives: what is born is knowledge through a change in relations with nature.

Writing Naked

As we have seen, Carpenter's creative and spiritual moments are most often entangled with his experience of nature—and so it was with his composition of Towards Democracy. He built a “kind of wooden sentinel box” and put it in a “quiet corner of the garden, overlooking far fields”: in this humble construction, he would write “all through the summer, and into the autumn, and far away through the winter” (MDD 107).

According to Carpenter, the place of writing was vital: “The more universal feeling which I sought to convey refused itself from me within doors; nor could I at any time or by any means persuade the rhythm or style of expression to render itself up within a room—tending there always to break back into distinct metrical forms” (“A Note” xx).

He felt the necessity of writing outdoors, though inexplicable, “indubitable and insurmountable,” and claims he could “feel . . . the difference, in merely passing through a doorway.” “Always especially,” he continues, “the sky seemed to contain for me the key, the inspiration; the sight of it more than anything gave what I wanted (sometimes like a veritable lightning-flash coming down from it onto my paper—I a mere witness, but agitated with strange transports)” (xx). This sort of ecstasy (standing beside oneself)

is certainly, as Whitman would say in “Song of Myself,” permitting “to speak at every hazard, / Nature without check with original energy” (LoG 26).

While the varieties of inspiration, and the tricks by which authors attempt to get at them, are many and difficult to explain, this element of Carpenter’s composition practice must give us pause for consideration. Carpenter had, of course, a long history of spiritual and artistic associations with nature—as did many who were raised in the atmosphere of nature mysticism that pervaded the Romantic world of the day. But there seems something specifically Whitmanian in Carpenter’s account here—something perhaps conditioned, as so much of Carpenter’s work was, by his saturation in Whitman’s poetry and prose. After all, Whitman had made an explicit link between his style and the clear air of the outdoors. In “Song of Myself” most famously, he defines not only a style, but also a spiritual state of passive receptivity by the difference between outdoor atmosphere and the cloying exaggeration of indoor scents. “Houses and rooms are full of perfumes, the shelves are crowded with perfumes” but these perfumes, the distillation of experience, experience colored by artistry, would lead not to unclouded receptivity, but to intoxication (“Song of Myself 2” LoG 26). By contrast,

The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of distillation, it is odorless,
It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it,
I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,
I am mad for it to be in contact with me. (26)

“Undisguised and naked”: this state of having stripped away preconceptions, having let “Creeds and schools” slip back into “abeyance”—Carpenter clearly felt this way while

composing Towards Democracy.⁴¹ He rhapsodizes about the experience of nature while writing:

What sweet times were those! all summer to the hum of the bees in the leafage,
the robins and chaffinches hopping about, an occasional large bird flying by, the
men away at work in the fields, the consuming pressure of the work within me,
the wonderment how it would turn out; the days there in the rain, or in the snow;
nights sometimes, with moonlight or a little lamp to write by . . . (MDD 107)

But he returns to his freedom, his nakedness: “far far away from anything polite or respectable, or any sign or symbol of my hated old life” (107).

Carpenter’s writing practice may have something to do with his reading of Whitman’s “I” at this point. As we have said, the “I” had ceased to be strictly Walt Whitman—or even Whitman’s personality intended to be “infused” in his readers. For Carpenter, the “I” had taken on a decidedly cosmic character. Thus, when Whitman writes in “Song of Myself” 47, for instance, “It is you talking just as much as myself, I act as the tongue of you, / Tied in your mouth, in mine it begins to be loosen’d.” (LoG 74), Carpenter understands that Whitman’s “I” is the intercessory figure of the poet, but also an internal voice, and a representative of a greater, more transcendental “I” that includes both of them. So when two lines later, Whitman writes that “I swear I will never translate myself at all, only to him or her who privately stays with me in the open air,” Whitman is giving instructions for reading and declaring a rule, possibly, for

⁴¹ During this period, Carpenter began to make sartorial changes. Pictures from his life at Bradway show him having shed the clothes of his class, and wearing a broad-brimmed hat and open-collared shirt of a decidedly Whitmanian sort. He later gave away his evening clothes.

important conversations and interactions in the flesh, but he is also delineating place and conditions of a spiritual experience—“No shutter’d room or school can commune with me.”

Carpenter’s ideas of “rooms” were always tainted, symbolized the drawing-rooms of Brighton and their empty and petty society. The idea of “rooms” is also colored by Whitman’s usage here. In the expanded edition of his Love’s Coming of Age, Carpenter laments how “even the act of intercourse itself, instead of taking place in the open air—in touch with the great and abounding life of Nature—is generally consummated in closed and stuffy rooms, the symbols of mental darkness and morbidity, and the breeding-ground of the pettier elements of human nature” (Edward Carpenter: Selected Writings 159). Free under the sky or looking out from his little sentry box in his garden, it is no surprise that Carpenter felt more in touch with Whitman than ever before.

It is possible that Carpenter’s constant working and re-working of questions of identity—of the nature of the self or selves, and his understanding of the “I” as fluid, results from his meditations on and struggles to understand Whitman’s use of the personal pronoun in his poetry. In his “Note” to Towards Democracy, Carpenter writes

It seems to me more and more clear that the word “I” has a practically infinite range of meaning—that the ego covers far more ground than we usually suppose. At some points we are intensely individual, at others intensely sympathetic; some of our impressions (as the tickling of a hair) are of the most local and momentary character, others (as the sense of identity) involve long periods of time. (xxiii)

“Sometimes,” Carpenter wrote, perhaps having in mind either his experience of reading Whitman or of his experiences with intense love, “we are aware of almost a fusion between our own identity and that of another person.” He asks,

What does all this mean? Are we really separate individuals, or is individuality an illusion, or again is it only a part of the ego or soul that is individual, and not the whole? Is the ego absolutely one with the body, or is it only a small part of the body, or again is the body but a small part of the self—one of its organs, so to speak, and not the whole man? Or lastly is it perhaps not possible to express the truth by any direct use of these or other terms of ordinary language? Anyhow, what am I?

Carpenter would pick at the questions for years to come, and concerns of identity and self-hood would inform his writing for the rest of his career. Throughout Towards Democracy, though, he raises these questions again and again.

In the first long poem “Towards Democracy,” and in the later poems in the volume of that name, Carpenter set out to replicate the effect Whitman’s book had on him. He had understood Whitman’s technique by having been affected by it so strongly over the preceding decade, having felt his identity changed in many ways by his intimate relationship with Leaves of Grass. Now he wanted to continue its work and pass the effect it had on him on to future generations of readers, retaining the complexity and interrelatedness of its messages on social change, sexual liberation, and mystical experience.

The best evidence of Carpenter's understanding of Whitman's purposes and his manipulations of the relationship between author, reader, book and world may be found by looking closely at those techniques of Whitman's that Carpenter incorporates in Towards Democracy. Carpenter had been changed by Whitman's book in many ways. Whitman had provided a role model for Carpenter, and a model of the way in which emotional and sexual impulses could be acknowledged, interpreted, and positively integrated into religious and philosophical contexts. Whitman had provided a way to read the objects and facts of nature as revelations of and parts of the self—underlining the sense of their importance that Carpenter had felt since a child. Whitman had modeled a complex vision of the "I" which allowed him to feel a kinship with all life, and had helped induce and interpret Carpenter's crises and breakdowns, charging his experiences with mystical meaning and cosmic importance. He had provided him with an ideal to attempt to realize. He had no less importantly provided a Utopian social vision of a society of loving equals, a "City of Friends" which fueled Carpenter's hopes for a kind of classless and revolutionary group of lovers, and charged Carpenter's life with a sense of purpose that helped him to pursue his own social and political agenda. In Towards Democracy, Carpenter would attempt to help his readers accomplish the same goals. In illustrating these points, I will try to be brief. Carpenter's rhetoric in Towards Democracy, like Whitman's in Leaves of Grass includes a great deal of repetition on the treatment of important themes. Being chiefly "suggestive," the technique requires a repetition of its goals towards realization.

The Use of Materials

One of the foremost ways in which Carpenter's Towards Democracy resembles Whitman's Leaves of Grass is in their very similar attempts to change the way the reader takes his or her experience of external objects: both authors seek to expand the process of reading beyond the context of the book. Carpenter wants to turn his reader's attention to the natural world: to place him or her in a state of semiotic arousal, where the facts of nature will assume their proper significance as a parts of and provokers of the soul. At the beginning of the long poem "Towards Democracy," Carpenter assumes a cosmic "I" and addresses "You," who we will come to recognize is the cosmic "I" in the reader. He declares, "The sun, the moon and the stars the grass, the water that flows around the earth, and the light air of heaven: / To You greeting. I too stand behind these and send you word across them" (TD 3).

Here, clearly, is Carpenter speaking as universal self—the "I" is speaking from what Carpenter considered to be that state of "Equality" which Whitman's poems and the Bhagavad-Gita had opened for him. Carpenter's universal self sends word across (and through) the facts of nature. By this gesture, he designates the physical world as a medium for a spiritual message: this is an expansion of Whitman's claims that

If you would understand me go to the heights or water-shore,
 The nearest gnat is an explanation, and a drop or motion of waves a key;
 The maul, the oar, the hand-saw second my words.
 ("Song of Myself" 47, LoG 74).

In “Towards Democracy” XLIV, Carpenter continues to try to show his reader nature’s symbolic value, as Whitman made the grass a kind of spiritual token, symbol, and focus of meditation in “Song of Myself.” As Whitman’s poetry seems to have given shape and substance to Carpenter’s experiences of nature, here Carpenter’s “I” proclaims himself as “come to be the interpreter of yourself to yourself”—of the wider self manifest in all nature to the more common self. To this end, Carpenter charges the commonest sights and sounds with importance:

The dandelion by the path, and the pink buds of the sycamore, and the face of the
sweep who comes to sweep your chimney, shall henceforth have new
meaning to you, (how do you know that I am not the chimney-sweep?)

The nettles growing against the gate post and the dry log on the grass where you
stop and sit, the faithful tool that is in your hand and the sweat on your
forehead, the sound of the dear old village band across far fields—

These shall be for memorials between us, and I in them will surely draw towards
you. (TD 63)

In the end of “Song of Myself” Whitman wrote a poem that would only really assume its full power after the death of the poet himself. He bequeathed himself “to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,” stopped somewhere waiting for the reader, and announced to the reader that he should be looked for “under your boot-soles” (LoG 77-78).

Carpenter also makes nature into the medium of communication after death “When I am dead,” he writes, the “memorials” mentioned above will “deliver the words which still I had not sense and courage to speak” (TD 63). He charges the reader to hear

them. This communication from nature is a superior poem, free from the faults of Carpenter's own poetry and his individual life. "Where I was not faithful" he writes, "these shall be faithful to you: where I was vain and silly these shall look you clear of all vanity and silliness;⁴² where I was afraid to utter my thoughts dumb things shall utter for you words impossible to be misunderstood" (63). He describes this semiotic awakening that will allow the reader to understand the ineffable language of materials. The simplest of actions will open into depths of profundity: "The sun shall shine, the clouds draw across the sky, the fire leap in the grate, the kettle boil—to purposes which you cannot fathom; the simplest shall look you in the face to meanings ever profounder and profounder than all Thought" (63).

In "A Song for Occupations" Whitman deals with the use of materials in this sense—he models and defines a relationship between apparently external objects and the soul. He concludes with the "strange and hard" paradox that "Objects gross and the unseen soul are one" (LoG 81). The soul is not to be found solely in "yourself" through introspection, but to be found "in them"—in objects, to be seen by learning to read objects and understand the proper use of them and relationship to them. It is in the material, apparently external objects, writes Whitman, that "you and your soul enclose all themes, hints, possibilities" (LoG 181, 183). In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Whitman calls material things "dumb beautiful ministers": they are to be received with "free sense," used but not cast aside, to be planted "permanently within us" to "furnish" their "parts toward eternity" and "toward the soul" (183).

⁴² This of course reminds us of Whitman's use a similar figure in "Song of Myself" 13: the "look of the bay mare" which "shames silliness out of me" (LoG 36).

Carpenter believes that what will open the understanding of materials (and all experience and action is revealed as in some sense to be treated as materials) is a kind of gnosis, a initiatory knowledge-by-unity: the knowledge of “Equality” through mystical experience. Carpenter writes in Towards Democracy XXV:

The medium in which the Knowledge of Yourself subsists is Equality.

When you have penetrated into that medium (as the young shoot penetrates into the sunlight) you shall know that it is so—you shall realise Yourself—but not til then.

Hereafter, the face of Nature, the faces of the sea and the field, the faces of the animals—hereafter the faces of them that pass in the street—are changed.

Nothing escapes, the line is cast over them all, they cannot choose but yield themselves—to you, my friend—delivering the essence of their life to you. (TD 35-36)

In the state Carpenter is describing, the “Soul” joins with the body, but also with things that had hitherto only been objects. He had written in his “Note” of a sense “that one is those objects and things and persons that one perceives” seeing “the interior surfaces of all objects and things and persons” (xxi).

Carpenter figures this experience as solving the problem of attachment to one’s own desires or to external objects. Along with this understanding or perception, Carpenter writes, there is a kind of liberation from one’s own preoccupations and worries, which now seem unimportant:

Hereafter certain things, all-important before, become indifferent; certain thoughts with which you had tormented yourself torment you no longer; the chains fall off. On the other hand the ways which were forbidden and inaccessible become accessible—on all hands the doors stand open to your touch. (TD 36)

In “The Art of Life,” an essay in his collection Angel’s Wings, Carpenter writes about this sort of learning to read:

A child learning to read sees black scratches and dots on a white background, and wonders at the stupid senseless things; but the grown man sees neither scratches nor dots. He does not see the letters at all. They have become transparent, and he sees through them to the things which they indicate. So when we have learnt to read material things—the symbols of the Soul-life—we shall see through them to the things which they indicate. (216-217)

Speaking the Password

Carpenter had written in his “Note” to Towards Democracy that after experiencing the mood that served as the common ground between his audience and himself, “the two words, Freedom and Equality, came for the time being to control all my thought and expression” (TD xviii). The way that Carpenter employs these terms, and the trope of the “password” that he employs throughout “Towards Democracy,” seem to show his reading of Whitman’s “Pass-word primeval” from “Song of Myself” (LoG 43).

The words “Freedom” and “Equality,” in Carpenter’s poetry from this period do not simply signify abstracts: they are his way of referring to a particular mood or state that he finds otherwise unnamable. Throughout “Towards Democracy,” Carpenter speaks of passwords—ineffable, unspeakable words that grant the person who can utter them. In section XXXII, “a voice comes in the cool of the evening” that charges the reader not to disbelieve in a “secret unspoken word”—which is not just a word, but “sacred, and the first almighty Thing” (TD 43). In section XLVII, he speaks of a “word which sums up all words that are spoken? . . . for which the moon and the stars and the running waters and the universe itself subsist, to speak it. . . which if it could be uttered in a word there were no need of all these things” (68). This hidden word is made to represent the primal act of creation that is expressed in the world and is the purpose of the world—the word that the poet is unable to speak while alive, but which he will speak from materials after his death. Carpenter makes the realization of this word, the achievement of “freedom” or “equality” all important as he addresses the reader:

Do you understand? To realise Freedom or Equality (for it comes to the same thing)—for this hitherto, for you, the universe has rolled; for this, your life, possibly yet many lives; for this death, many deaths; for this, desires, fears, complications, bewilderments, sufferings, hope, regret—all falling away at last duly before the Soul, before You (O laughter!) arising the full grown lover—possessor of the password. (TD 9)

Carpenter speaks then of “The path of Indifference”—the equal acceptance of all that will occur when “the use and freedom of materials” dawns on the reader.

Through Carpenter's use, it becomes clear how he must read "Song of Myself" 24. When Whitman declares, in his ecstatic flight through suddenly opened doors, that he speaks "the pass-word primeval," gives "the sign of democracy," he must be entering into this realization of "Freedom" and "Equality" which Carpenter has felt in the composition of the poems (LoG 46).

Mirrors and Laughter

In his chapter on Carpenter's autobiography, "A Double Nature: The Hidden Agenda of Edward Carpenter's My Days and Dreams," Oliver S. Buckton makes an unusual claim about the use of direct address in Carpenter's Towards Democracy. "It soon becomes clear," he writes, "that Carpenter's questions and apostrophes are addressed not to another reader but to himself—specifically to an earlier self that has not experienced the great life change that enables the creation of the poem itself" (178-179). Buckton is right, but only in a subtler way than he had anticipated.

In order to understand, we must look at the conception of the book itself, and of the reading process, that's presented in Carpenter's poems. In the long poem "Towards Democracy" Carpenter figures his book as a mirror: "These things I, writing, translate for you—I wipe a mirror and place it in your hands" (3). Carpenter had been fascinated for a long time with the conception of the literary text as a mirror, and also with the idea of other people—friends and lovers—acting as reflections. The subject of the title poem of Carpenter's first book of poetry, Narcissus and Other Poems, showed this fascination. Tsuzuki explains the book's dedication to Carpenter's favorite sister, Lizzie, by asserting

somewhat cryptically and without explanation that she was “‘the fair nymph’ under whose curse Narcissus fell in love with his own image reflected in the waters” (28).

There’s a truth here, too. Certainly, in another poem in Narcissus, “To L. C.,” Carpenter used this sister, one of his earliest role-models and the person who had introduced him to music, art, and literature, as a mirror to critique his own life:

AH! When I think of thee, and how my life
 Is set apart from thine that is so pure,
 So much to be desired, on my soul’s strife
 There comes a calm; for then I am most sure
 God is, in whom our sundered days draw nigh
 --Else were’t not good to live or gain to die. (182)

This poem seems slight, but there’s something important here. The image of the beloved sister is a kind of mirror-reflection in whom Carpenter sees the lack of purity in his own life. They have been “sundered” into observer and observed—and as in Carpenter’s theories of love and perception in general (developing at the time of the poem’s composition), their separation will be reconciled in an all-encompassing divine “in whom . . . sundered days draw nigh” (82). Carpenter’s contemplation of the distance between the two convinces him of the necessity of an eventual union. Reflection seems always to gesture towards unity for Carpenter: what is seen in the other is always an aspect of the self that by recognition may be reincorporated.

A book may act as a mirror in several ways. As we have seen, in his Oxford years, after his break-up with Beck, Carpenter had found the image of his own longing

and of his own unhappy love-situations in Whitman's poetry of romantic disappointment. But Whitman presented images of the reader not only to build identification and sympathy, but as a spur to change. In a short poem from 1860, "A Hand-Mirror," Whitman had attempted to frighten his audience by presenting them with an image of the dissolution of their own flesh and the death of their own spirit. He had commanded the reader to "Hold it up sternly—see this it sends back, (who is it? is it you?)/ Outside fair costume, within ashes and filth" (LoG 225). Whitman uses his extraordinary claim to know and see his reader to make a direct accusation of decay and insensitivity—"Blood circulating dark and poisonous streams, / Words babble, hearing and touch callous, / No brain, no heart left, no magnetism of sex; / Such from one look in this looking-glass ere you go hence" (225).

Carpenter uses the same device in "Towards Democracy" XX, claiming like Whitman to "see you quite plainly" directing the poem towards a typical middle-aged, middle-class male British reader, focusing more on convention than failing bodily health. Carpenter's authorial voice claims to see the "tangles of social claims," the "fine soft-carpeted house, array of servants, failing and failing health, growing and settled sadness, ennui, wearisome pleasures, hypersensitiveness/ . . . / Careful obediences; sleek hat and well-brushed coat, blameless deference to public opinion. . . . (TD 28-29).

In "Towards Democracy" XXV Carpenter revisits the mirror theme with a more clearly religious implication: "The dust, the wretched blur and distortion are but for a moment" he promises, "They are no more than they are. When you shall behold yourself in the clean mirror of God you shall be wholly satisfied" (35). What exactly

constitutes the “mirror of God”? The answer shows how Carpenter incorporated his early conceptions of Indian spirituality.

A hint to an explanation may be found in a letter Carpenter had written in 1873, explaining his understanding of Indian philosophy. Carpenter tells his friend, Oates, about the subject-object or mind-body divisions: “I fancy,” writes Carpenter, “that there is a crack down all creation so” [a drawing of two nearly parallel lines, bowing together but not touching at the center] and the more nearly people come to understanding creation the more they feel this crack in themselves” (132). Carpenter goes on to write a brief and not terribly serious version of a Hindu creation myth, apparently partially borrowed from a commentary by F. D. Maurice:

Still, I think the Eastern philosophy right—which says that Brahma, the God, being tired of being alone went out one day behind himself—thus [pencil drawing—a circle with arrows going clockwise at each side, an upper case B on the top left, a lower case b on the top right] and came up on the other side. Thus producing a crack between Himself ‘B’ and his reflection ‘b’; that He then perceived himself as not Himself which thing was the beginning of general existence; and that He was so amused at this bit of self-deception that He laughed—which laugh is the world! (qtd. in Barua 132)

In response to this primeval mirroring, the recognition of oneself as an object of one’s own perception but still oneself, the world was created. Something like this moment of recognition, this laughter in the mirror, is what Towards Democracy is meant to produce.

Throughout Towards Democracy, Carpenter uses not only the image of the mirror, but a reference to this laughter—what Barua calls “an image of creative at-oneness and millennial fulfillment” (133). The “O laughter!” that pops up in “Towards Democracy” seems to be the ecstatic laughter of realizing “Freedom” in a mystical moment, but is also an echo of the primeval productive laughter out of which the universe exfoliated, and possibly a direct address—as the lower case “you” is a creation of this laughter. “Depend upon it,” Carpenter wrote, “The crack is not to be taken wholly seriously. Only by a furtive laugh do you assert your kinship with Brahma” (132). Nature, other people, or the book itself may be the mirrors in which one sees oneself as Brahma—a manifestation or the universal self.

In The Art of Creation, Carpenter returns to the mirror image. He first tells of ancient man, who, seeing himself reflected in the surface of shells or in water, must have considered himself tangled in the things that he saw—and only have understood reflection in a sort of revelation “that He was different, and by no means to be confused streams and shells” (80). This discovery of self-consciousness and difference would be paralleled by and remedied by another revelation:

As the civilised man who has learned what reflection is can now see his own face almost anywhere he will—in pools and rivers and polished surfaces—nor thinks it only confined to some mystic shell or other object, so our true Identity once having been learned, our relation to our body having been completed, we shall find that the magic of one body is no longer necessary, since out of the great

ocean of Nature we can now pick up our own reflection (or make ourselves a body of some kind) practically anywhere. (AC 80)

As a child watching its reflection in a growing pool of water, gradually seeming to grow, so

Each new thought, each new experience that is added to the Me, is like a drop of water that is added to the pool, till it becomes large enough—the Me becomes sufficiently universal—to reflect the universality of the I. The vision of the true Self at last arises, with wonder and revelation and joy indescribable: the vision of a self that is united to others, that is eternal. The thoughts connected with separation and mortality—the greeds, the fears, the hatreds, the griefs fall off—and a new world, or conception of the world, opens—life is animated with a new spirit. (81)

This is the kind of mirroring that Carpenter intends Towards Democracy to represent, and to help bring about. It is the kind of mirroring, almost certainly, that Leaves of Grass provided for him.

Ideals

A book may also serve as a mirror by showing a figure for the reader to emulate and to desire. Whitman had served as a role model and personal ideal for Carpenter, enabling him to form his own personality and to transform himself. In Towards Democracy, Carpenter does not seek to present himself as such an exemplar. He seems uneasy in such a role. He may be seeking to avoid the charges of egotism and vanity

that haunted Whitman, or he may want to avoid paying undue attention to that part of his identity that is exclusively local and particular. In any event, Towards Democracy doesn't contain any gesture of identity equivalent of Whitman's declaration of himself as "Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son" (LoG 45). Instead of his own individual identity, Carpenter offers the reader Whitman's image, and explains the function and importance of that image. Carpenter starts by stating how curious it is how much "the disentangling of self. . . depends upon Ideals!" (TD 40). The Whitmanesque figure he presents is a mixture of the Whitman as he presented himself in Leaves, the fantastic savage ideal sketched out in "Song of the Answerer" and other poems, the open-collared Whitman of the 1855 frontispiece engraving, and the flesh-and-blood but still symbolically-charged Whitman who Carpenter describes in Days with Walt Whitman, at ease in the crowds of his native streets, the friend to everyone he knew. This figure is "easy with open shirt, and brown neck and face—the whites of his eyes just seen in the sultry twilight . . . Grave and strong and untamed, / This is the clear-browed unconstrained tender face, with full lips and bearded chin, this is the regardless defiant face I love and trust; / Which I came out to see, and having seen do not forget" (40, 41).

Here Carpenter not only presents an ideal of physicality, attitude, and manner (or re-presents the one found in Whitman)—he also makes it clear how such ideals function in the development of society and soul. Moving through a city garden, the Whitmanesque figure becomes the focus of the desires of the people around him. Carpenter explains how "the pale student eyes him" and "envies his healthy face and

unembarrassed manner” (perhaps not unlike Carpenter, on first reading Leaves) how the “delicate lady,” on seeing him “secretly now loathes her bejeweled lord and desires piteously the touch of this man’s muscular lithe sun-embrowned body”:

Curious! how all the poetry, the formative life, of the scene—the rushing scent of
the lime trees, the evening light, the swaying of the foliage, the rustle of
feet below,

The yearning threads of the fine lady’s life—how the sympathy of the little
public

by the fountain—all gathers round this figure.

There was a time when the sympathy and the ideals of men gathered round other
figures;

When the crowned king, or the priest in procession, or the knight errant, or the
man of letters in his study, were the imaginative forms to which men
clung;

But now before the easy homely garb and appearance of this man as he swings
past in the evening, all these others fade and grow dim. They come back
after all and cling to him.

And this is one of the slowly unfolded meanings of Democracy. (42)

In “Towards Democracy” LIX, Carpenter shows how these ideals are intended to serve not only as focuses of desire, but also the same purposes as nature, love, and the reader’s own soul—as acting as guides and spurs to the realization of Equality. In a list of those things that influenced him that may influence the reader in turn, he includes “the

companionship of the dead;” (possibly having in mind his own sense of his mother’s presence while writing Towards Democracy) and “The savage eternal peaks, the solitary signals—Walt Whitman, Jesus of Nazareth, your own Self distantly deriding you— / These are always with you” (90).

By the time he wrote The Art of Creation, Carpenter believed that ideals of heroes, like gods, were present in a sort of racial-memory. The germs of this idea seem to be present in Towards Democracy. Carpenter’s language fuses conceptions of Platonic forms with that of evolutionary science and psychology: the ideal resides in the blood and the plexus of nerves. As a Lamarckian, however, Carpenter believes that the nerve and the blood are subsidiary to and formed by human desires and needs (which are expressions and modifications of a more universal desire and process of creation). By refocusing desire, Whitman and Carpenter are attempting to change human history. By each act of love and affirmation that penetrates to the area of the transcendental, humanity is changed. By each act of belief and creativity, new ideals, and new forms of the divine are being created. Carpenter writes in “Towards Democracy” XXXI of the results of the actions that take place in the heart:

When Yes has once been pronounced in that region then the No of millions is
nothing at all; then fire, the stake, death, ridicule, and bitter
extermination, are of no avail whatever;

When the Ideal has once alighted, when it has looked forth from the windows
with ever so passing a glance upon the Earth, then we may go in to
supper, you and I, and take our ease—the rest will be seen to;

When a new desire has declared itself within the human heart, when a fresh plexus is forming among the nerves, then the revolutions of nations are already decided, and histories unwritten are written. (TD 42-43)

Preparation of Stores for Future Wants

I said earlier that Buckton was right in a very particular way when he said that Carpenter was really writing to a less experienced version of himself in “Towards Democracy.” It is because he is. But this audience is not as Buckton supposes, the person who Carpenter was before he had the experience that enabled him to write the poems he is writing to (though that is doubtless model which he uses to understand his real audience). Instead, Carpenter’s true audience is that person who he will be. In My Days and Dreams, Carpenter, at seventy, wonders why he continues to work for social change when he will soon be dead. His answer is quite interesting:

I cannot personally be comfortable in a society which makes a fetish, say, of what H. G. Wells calls The Misery of Boots. Therefore I work for a future society where people shall go barefoot or freely wear such footgear as suits them. But by the time such a state of society arrives, where shall “I” be? That is the question. What is the good of my working for a state of things will certainly not come in my lifetime? What is the impelling force which causes me so to work when it would be so much easier not to work, and merely to let things slide? If, as one must suppose, it is something organic in Nature, it must be that I “myself” will be there. I, the superficial one, am working now for the other “I,” the deeper

one—who is also really present even at this moment (although he lies low and says nothing about it) and who in due time will consume the fruits which he is now preparing. (MDD 307)

This other “I,” I “myself,” is clearly Whitmanian—like the watching and neutral representative of the greater whole from “Song of Myself,” “both in and out of the game” (LoG 29).

As in so much of Carpenter, this idea has roots further back. Ralph Waldo Emerson, in “The American Scholar,” writes of the strange familiarity which one feels when one finds matters “close to [one’s own] soul” in the writings of poets who lived “in some past world.” For Emerson, this effect may have two implications:

But for the evidence thence afforded to the philosophical doctrine of the identity of all minds, we should suppose some preestablished harmony, some foresight of souls that were to be, and some preparations of stores for their future wants, like the fact observed in insects, who lay up food before their death for the young grub they shall never see (Emerson 42).

The reader may feel that the author has personally provided for his or her coming, and laid out provisions for his or her foreseen need. Or, alternately, the reader can be driven to realize that the soul that written is the soul that reads, and that soul is one, and in some way timeless. Carpenter, believing in “the identity of all minds” as Emerson calls it, is, in a very curious way, writing to his future self.

Whitman, of course, had also intentionally invoked the feeling that he’d prepared his book in advance for his future reader as well. In the most direct case, “Crossing

Brooklyn Ferry,” Whitman’s speaker turns to the reader, and makes the claim, “What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you –I laid in my stores in advance, / I consider’d long and seriously of you before you were born” (LoG 138).

Carpenter makes the same gesture numerous times in the poems of Towards Democracy, playing as Whitman does the voyeur of reading, but sometimes with a greater emphasis on what Emerson called “the unity of minds.” In the first section of “Towards Democracy,” Carpenter, “seated here, thick booted and obvious yet dead and buried and passed into heaven unsearchable” turns to address the reader, asking “How know you indeed but what I have passed into you?” (TD 3).

Language, Evocation, and Context

Andrew Elphenbein notes in his “Whitman and the English Clerisy” just how central Carpenter was in mediating the reading and reception of Whitman in Britain. Carpenter was “less an imitator than a translator” and “actively reshaped Whitman to meet English desires” (81). While his focus is mostly social, Elphenbein has argued that Towards Democracy incorporates traditional religious language in order to ease “the path from traditional Anglicanism to the religion of socialism” (95).

Much of Carpenter’s later work can be seen as an attempt to help the reader link Whitman’s revelation with Platonic philosophy, Greek ideas of comradeship, Indian and Christian mysticism, evolutionary science and the emerging discipline of psychology—the contexts which Carpenter had gathered in order to understand it himself.

Whitman's disciples often felt that Whitman didn't provide enough context to be intelligible to a wider audience, or that Whitman was frequently read in the wrong context. Whitman's originality of language and his determination never to make derivative poems often left his audience baffled. Carpenter's translation of Whitman into the local idiom, his post-Anglican Indian-influenced context, and a less-idiosyncratic language may, as Elphenbein argues, be explained by this desire to make Whitman understood to a wider British audience.⁴³ This change of idiom also helps ensure a religious interpretation. However Carpenter may have had an additional purpose in using older, more traditional images and verbal formulas (as his repetition of and refiguration of the formula "Son of Man" in the first "Towards Democracy" and his occasional use of phrases that echo biblical or previous literary formulations.

As Carpenter developed his proto-Jungian theory of recollection, he came to another understanding of the usefulness of particular verbal formulations, which bore on his ideas of race-memory and the layers of universal consciousness:

In all early peoples writing is confined to the few; and to the many, for generation after generation, it is surrounded with such an atmosphere of wonder, that at last it comes to partake of the supernatural. The Bibles and other writings of such peoples largely owe their sacredness to this fact—often more to this than to the value of the matter which they contain. And more than this, it is probable that actual forms of words used in such writings—in Bibles, poems, prayers,

⁴³ Carpenter had criticized Whitman for the labor he put into ignoring "all stock-poetic and classic forms and allusions whatever (a practice which cripples him at times)" and coining whenever possible "various hybrid and denationalised words, like Camerado, Santa Spirita" and so on. (DWWW 133) It's natural that Carpenter should avoid these practices himself.

recitations, incantations—used over and over again for scores of generations—
 come at last to carry with them a volume of race-memory and race-consciousness
 so great as to give them a quite different value and force from ordinary language.
 How much of the magic which surrounds certain collocations of words in poetry
 is due to this fact—that they recall threads of ancient experience woven, as it
 were, in our very blood? (AC 176)

Carpenter goes on to speculate that the symbolic formulation of ritual and magic spell
 may act as keys to unlocking areas of consciousness associated with them—as he hopes
 that his own words may act to awake a universal self. Carpenter’s later additions to
Towards Democracy would use proportionately more allusive or familiar formulations.

The Freemasonry of Comrade-Love and the Great Celestial City

Carpenter felt called by Whitman’s writings to become the older man’s disciple,
 and to carry on his work, spreading the awakening of spiritual consciousness, political
 change, and emotional liberation that he’d experienced himself. Like Whitman,
 Carpenter attempted to transmit the charge to others through his poetry. In several
 poems in the later editions of Towards Democracy, Carpenter proposes, as Whitman had
 in his utopian poems of comrade-love, a future community bound together by “robust
 love” (LoG 113). Carpenter proposed small groups bound together by love and shared
 spiritual enlightenment. The book both represents and proposes to create this group.

In “The Elder Soldier in the Brotherhood to the Younger,” Carpenter’s speaker
 addresses the reader as a “Dear Comrade,” with whom he is about to part, possibly “to

be seen no more” (TD 262). But while in “Towards Democracy” the poet promised to return to speak from material things, in “The Elder Soldier,” the speaker will return as a sort of ideal figure to be found in the reader’s future friends and lovers, the personal “I” of the speaker to be distributed to others of humanity. The reader’s love for the speaker will be distributed into love of others, ensuring a kind of succession of desire that is also the author being fused with the life of his followers:

Here I give you my charge, that afterwards remembering and desiring me,
 You may find me again in these others,
 Slowly out of their faces I will emerge to you—lo! I swear it,
 By the falling rain and dimpled thunderclouds in the East I swear it—
 [To become your life whom I have loved so long]
 With love absorbing, Joy and blessedness enclosing,
 I will emerge to you. (262)

A perpetuity of friends, “you now to other comrades, and these again to others,” may “bear the glad covenant, perfected, finished.” Carpenter here seems to have in mind almost a secret society, “a brotherhood unalterable,”

Far-pervading, fresh and invisible as the wind, united in Freedom—
 A golden circle of stamens, hidden beneath the petals of humanity,
 And guarding the sacred ark. (262)

This goes further than Whitman’s vision of a “new city of Friends,” in poems like “I Dream’d in a Dream” and others, but is essentially a development of them.

Whitman had early attempted in his poetry to raise and to mobilize his "kosmos en-masse," had tried in poems like "Song of the Open Road" to steel his readers' resolve, and send them out as rootless missionaries for endless struggle and "active rebellion" (LoG 134), so Carpenter imagines his band of future comrades progressing

Through heroisms and deaths and sacrifices,
 Always for the poor and despised, always for the outcast and oppressed,
 Through kinship with Nature, and the free handling of all forms and customs,
 Through the treasured teaching of inspired ones—never lost and never wholly
 given to the world, but always emerging—
 Through love, faithful love and comradeship, at last emancipating the soul into
 that other realm (of freedom and joy) into which it is permitted to no
 mortal to enter—
 Thus to realise the indissoluble compact, to reveal the form of humanity.

(TD 262-63)

In another of these later comradeship poems, "Into the Regions of the Sun" Carpenter figures the way in which the loves of a small group would alter the whole:

By our love poured out, by the manifold threads and strands of attachment to
 others—which cannot now be severed;
 By not one inwardly refused or disowned whom we have ever met;
 By the dear arms of lovers circling each other all night long, by their kisses and
 mingled breath,

And love night and day—thinking of each other when absent, rejoicing to be so
near;

By tramps over the hills, and days spent together in the woods and by water-
sides; (264)

Individual acts of love and acceptance, friendships and longings, in Carpenter's vision, will bring forth a "life-long faithful comradeship now springing on all sides, the Theban band⁴⁴ henceforth to overcome the world—its heroisms and deaths—." Figuring with these other forces of love to transform the world will be Whitman, "him who gave the calamus-token first" (264). Whitman's doctrine of comrade-love as interpreted by Carpenter (and by Traubel in America) provided an ethical base, a model of organization (in the groups of loving friends), and an emotional basis for solidarity to a variety of radical groups.⁴⁵

Throughout his career, Carpenter developed the theory that "inverts" or "intermediates"⁴⁶ were a special evolutionary and cultural development of mankind, uniquely suited for particular roles in human society. In his Intermediate Types Among Primitive Folk, Carpenter looked to the studies of mythology and religious practice among a wide variety of societies, order to prove that homosexuality and androgyny had

⁴⁴ Carpenter refers to the Theban Band, formed by Gorgidas (the account is found in Plutarch's Lives). The group was a picked "army of lovers" made up of pairs of soldiers. The theory had been that lovers would fight more fiercely beside one another, caring for one another's welfare more than family members or fellow citizens, and fighting honorably in order to impress their beloved.

⁴⁵ See Bryan K. Garman's " 'Heroic Spiritual Grandfather': Whitman, Sexuality, and the American Left, 1890-1940" for an overview of Whitman's influence in this respect.

⁴⁶ These are two of Carpenter's more common terms for homosexuals—the classicist in him loathed the mixed Greek and Latin roots in "homosexual," and often used the term "homogenic" as an adjective instead.

been incorporated in past cultures, and seen as weaknesses or defects. The book argues that a mixture of masculine and feminine roles and behaviors has marked the priests, medicine men, prophets, and innovators of many cultures. Carpenter's figure of the ideal invert is clearly developed with reference to his own Whitman-inspired style of sexuality and feelings of social responsibility and spiritual vocation. It is also influenced by the writings of K. H. Ulrichs, an Austrian author on homosexuality. Ulrichs used the term, "Urnings"—derived from "Uranian," to designate homosexuals and lesbians. In the chapter treating "The Intermediate Sex" in his book of essays Love's Coming of Age, Carpenter presented his own image of "Urnings" or "intermediates" as a privileged third gender, having the positive characteristics of both male and female, being a kind of fusion of both, transcending their limitations. Urnings of both physical sexes may have, he writes, "through their double nature, command of life in all its phases, and a certain freemasonry of the secrets of the two sexes which may well favor their function as reconcilers and interpreters" (Love's Coming of Age 140). As with most of Carpenter's theories, this had a personal base. Carpenter prided himself in his later life on being a confidant and negotiator—almost a relationship counselor—between his heterosexual friends.⁴⁷

As Carpenter worked to develop the precedents and the theoretical basis for a new social role for people of homosexual or lesbian temperament, so he began to dream of an organization of those individuals, based on an emotion like Whitman's comrade-love. Barua writes of Carpenter's desire for a kind of brotherhood, somewhat on the

⁴⁷ We may find in Rowbotham's account of his private life numerous cases that partly give the lie to Carpenter's belief that he really understood the relations between women and men.

model of freemasonry, whereby men, bound by the ties of affectionate comradeship, could help one another survive in and resist the culture that didn't understand them.

Carpenter writes to his friend Oates in 1887,

We are going to form by degrees a body of friends, who will be tied together by the strongest general bond, and also by personal attachment—and that we shall help each other immensely by the mutual support we shall be able to give each other. The knowledge that there are others in the same position as oneself will remove that sense of loneliness when plunged in the society of philistines which is almost unbearable. (qtd.in Barua 186)

Carpenter believed both in the identity of all selves and their equality in participation in the divine. He came to believe that a spiritually whole identity, whether of a body or a universe, was made up of a union of equal participants. In The Art of Creation he argues that the cells of the body have life and awareness that is subsumed in the human awareness, just as peoples, species, and the universe as a whole formed selves wholly made of individuals, with the individuals wholly participant parts:

every local or individual self exists only by reason of its being an outgrowth or prolongation or aspect of the universal Self, and that conversely that universal self has no definite expression or existence except in so far as it is individual and local in some degree or other. The true and ultimate Self therefore in each of us is universal and common to all beings, and yet it is also individua[1] and specialized in a certain direction. (AC 218)

Like Whitman, Carpenter's cosmology was related to his model of individual relations—and like Whitman, a small devoted band or a pair of friends might serve not just as a symbol for, but as a metonymy of and method of access a more universal union, also held together by love—the universal communion of souls he called a “Celestial City of equals and lovers” (AC 83).

Final Impressions of Whitman

Anyone who's read much of Traubel's With Walt Whitman in Camden has seen the kinds of conflicts over politics and interpretation of his poems that frequently arose between Whitman and even his closest disciples. While seldom revealing his position baldly on the poetry, seldom interpreting himself, Whitman often corrected or hinted to his followers, checked or encouraged certain readings. On Carpenter's second (and last) trip to visit Whitman in 1884, the question arose of “concealed” meanings in Whitman's poetry. Whitman began one of his more revealing but exasperating discussions of the underlying depths of Leaves. He explained to Carpenter,

What lies behind 'Leaves of Grass' is something that few, very few, only one here and there, perhaps oftenest women, are at all in a position to seize. It lies behind almost every line; but concealed, studiously concealed; some passages left purposefully obscure. There is something in my nature furtive like an old hen! You see a hen wandering up and down a hedgerow, looking apparently quite unconcerned, but presently she finds a concealed spot, and furtively lays an egg, and comes away as if nothing had happened! That is how I felt in writing

‘Leaves of Grass.’ Sloane Kennedy calls me ‘artful’—which about hits the mark. I think there are truths which it is necessary to envelop or wrap up. (Days with Walt Whitman 43)

This is the kind of explanation that raises more questions. What truths are these, exactly? And why “oftenest women?” Whitman is nearly just “foxy” in this conversation as in his books.⁴⁸ It is often assumed that Whitman might have meant something about sex or his own sexuality. But Whitman had certainly not hidden the sexuality of the poems of the “Children of Adam” sequence, despite suggestions by Emerson and even Carpenter himself that they might be better wrapped,⁴⁹ and we couldn’t say that Whitman’s homoeroticism was most often recognized by women. Carpenter, still fresh from his breakthrough with the Bhagavad-Gita, “replied that all through history the old mysteries, or whatever they may have been called, had been held back; and added that probably we had something yet to learn from India in these matters” (43).

Whitman neither affirms nor denies the general drift of Carpenter’s interpretation. But he does object to what he seems to see as a backwards-looking focus on India, and to “the old mysteries”—which Whitman perceives as looking backwards,

⁴⁸ See Richard Porier’s 1999 essay “Elusive Whitman” for a good understanding of some of intricacies of Whitman’s evasion of commitment in relationships, statements, and identities. Porier calls the poet the “foxiest and most manipulative of American writers” (34), and I am tempted to agree, though that is a hard company to compete in.

⁴⁹ In his 1876 letter, Carpenter wrote to Whitman expressing regret “that there are things in your writings which make it difficult, sometimes impossible, to commend them to some who might otherwise profit by them,” but ends by affirming that he feels “it is best that they should be there” (qtd. in WWWIC 3: 416). Whitman, speaking about the letter to Traubel, says that “Carpenter seems to have been just a bit dubious about the Children of Adam poems then: just a trifle: staggers, reels, wonders, just a little: comes back at once, of course: recovers—stands up: but the question was there—whether certain things were advisable or not: the suspicion was there” (418).

the kind of nostalgia he most often denies. He answers that he doesn't think there "is anything more to come from that source; we must rather look to modern science to open the way. Time alone can absolutely test my poems or any one's" (44). He adds, mysteriously enough, "Personally, I think that the 'something' is more present in some of my small later poems than in the 'Song of Myself'" (44). Carpenter does not present an interpretation or explain how he understood Whitman's almost-teasing hints.

It is possible that Carpenter may have had a more intimate encounter with Whitman during his second visit, though the evidence for it is anecdotal and contradictory. In 1924, Gavin Arthur (Chester A. Arthur III), the grandson of the former U.S. President, visited Edward Carpenter, who was then nearly eighty. Arthur eventually wrote two accounts of this meeting, one of which he published in the second edition of his book on sexual types, The Circle of Sex, in 1966. The other account, differing significantly in a number of details and more sexually explicit, he gave to Alan Ginsberg the next year, in 1967. This second account was published in 1978. In both accounts Carpenter, before or after having sex with Arthur, claims to have had sex in a similar way with Whitman.

The specific claims differ considerably, as do many other aspects of the two narratives. In the first account, Arthur has Carpenter say when asked about sleeping with Whitman "Of course I slept with him, on Mickle Street in Camden" and then "growl . . . at the absurdity of the question" (Arthur, Circle of Sex 136). In response to the same question, in the second account, Arthur has Carpenter answer "Oh yes—once in a while—he regarded it as the best way to get together with another man. He thought that

people should ‘know’ each other on the physical and emotional plane as well as the mental” (Arthur, “The Gay Succession” 324).

If Carpenter actually told Arthur that he had slept with Whitman at the house on Mickle Street (and wasn’t misremembering, simply trying to impress the young man, or having fun with his constant questioning), the encounter could only have happened during Carpenter’s second trip to visit Whitman, from June 17-June 20 1884. During the previous visit in 1877, Whitman was boarding with his brother George at 431 Stevens Street, and staying at the room prepared for him at Anne Gilchrist’s home in Philadelphia.

A close look at the chronology of Carpenter’s second visit, as he lays it out in Days with Walt Whitman doesn’t entirely rule out the possibility that the two might have had sex, but it begins to seem very unlikely that Carpenter could have been physically intimate with Whitman “Now and again,” as he says in one of Arthur’s accounts. On the first day, June 17, Carpenter and Whitman speak at the Mickle Street house. Carpenter is staying at Crowell’s hotel in Philadelphia, where Whitman meets him at noon on the next day, and they go to lunch and speak about Carlyle, free trade, and open emigration, then took the bus to Fairmount Park (40). On the 18th, Carpenter dined at Whitman’s house on Mickle Street with the poet, Mr. and Mrs. Lay. He describes the latter as “homely decent people, rather dull and quiet”(40-41). Afterwards, Whitman, Carpenter, and Folger McKinsey, “a young Philadelphian of literary leanings,” discussed Shakespeare, touching on the Bacon / Shakespeare question and then on death. A few hours later, the three went for a walk through the streets of Camden. After a stroll,

Whitman abandoned the two at the corner of the street, “with that queer brusque manner of his which so often offended his friends—just coldly saying ‘Ta-ta,’ and going off as if he didn’t care if he never saw us again!” (42). The next day, June 20, Carpenter met Whitman for the last time. The date is misprinted in Days as June 30, but the chronology is clear, and is attested to as well in Whitman’s Daybooks and Notebooks for the period (337). Carpenter notes in My Days and Dreams that his visit with Whitman was “three or four days.”

Meeting at the Mickle Street house, Carpenter and Whitman spoke together about hidden meanings in Leaves of Grass in that exchange above, with Whitman telling Carpenter that it was to the future, and not to the ancient writings of India that he should turn. Arthur’s account gives a quite different and indeed quite conflicting account of that meeting. He has Carpenter say “After I had been with Walt a year, he told me to go to India and find me a guru who would express the other side of the Earth’s magnetism, or rather, the magnetism of the Earth’s mind—the Yin side of it. ‘And then go back to England,’ he said, ‘and write a synthesis of the two’” (Arthur, Circle 138). Whether this embellishment was on Arthur’s side or Carpenter’s, it is clear that this doesn’t gibe with Carpenter’s written account in Days with Walt Whitman.

Since Arthur’s accounts have been treated as reliable accounts of Whitman’s sexual practice by some critics, it is probably worth while to focus on the sex in the two versions: in both, Arthur has Carpenter acknowledge that the sexual practices in Whitman and Carpenter’s encounter was the same as Arthur and Carpenter’s—but the sex in each is quite different.

In the Circle of Sex version, the sex is limited to caressing touches, and “At last the diffused ecstasy became almost cosmic in its out-of-this-world dimensions. There was no orgasm in the sense of spilling seed, but a far more intense orgasm of the whole nervous system in which oneself, as a unit, reunites with the Whole” (135). Arthur identifies this with the tantric practice of karezza—a sexual practice where the energy that would have been expended in orgasm is re-routed for spiritual purposes, which Carpenter had written about. Arthur asks, after his encounter with Carpenter “And he [Whitman] was just like you were with me, wasn’t he? Blessing you all over with his hands and worshipping you as a tangible microcosm of the Macrocosm we call God?” (136). Carpenter’s response to this rather wordy question is to “growl his approval” and pat Arthur’s hand.

In the second account, Arthur asks “How did he make love?” and Carpenter answers “I will show you. . . . Let us go to bed” (“Succession” 324). The second account features oral sex and ejaculation (by Arthur) and a second lovemaking session.

The dialogue and ordering of events in the two accounts differ markedly. A reader of Carpenter might suspect that much of the oddly stilted dialogue is cribbed from Carpenter’s books. This of course needn’t mean that the events never happened. Neither do the inconsistencies, necessarily. Arthur was quite likely tailoring the second account, filling in what he thought Ginsberg might like, and emphasizing both the elements of ordination and the sex. But Arthur may also have been tailoring the public account in Circle for publication. More than forty years had passed between the meeting and the

writing of the two accounts, and it is reasonable to assume that under the best of circumstances, Arthur would be filling in a great number of blanks in his memory.

In both accounts, Arthur carefully links himself into the ideas of spiritual-homosexual community and succession that Carpenter disseminated, and shows himself as a student and would-be disciple of Carpenter. By distributing his story, Arthur figured himself as a successor of an important spiritual line of spiritualized homosexual relations of the sort that Carpenter had outlined in some of the poems in Towards Democracy. Arthur describes sex with Carpenter both as a kind of initiation into a succession, and a kind of spiritual experience. In the first account, the non-ejaculatory full-body orgasm links him to and makes him aware of the cosmic Whole. In the second, Arthur feels a more personal union and identification with Carpenter at the moment of orgasm: “I had the distinct feeling that he felt my coming as if he were himself—that in that moment he was me.” In the second account, Arthur plays up the succession element, having his younger self think, “This is the laying on of handsWalt. Then him. Then me” (324). In that account, he has Carpenter say after sex, “When I was a clergyman I thought at Communion I was at one with God. But I realize now that this is a much more intimate communion—for is not Man made in the image of God?” This second account, the keepsake to Ginsberg, was written directly to one who felt himself to be another successor in that line.

Jonathan Katz has evaluated the evidence for the Arthur stories in his chapter “A Much More Intimate Communion” from his Love Stories: Sex between Men Before Homosexuality. Katz considers whether or not the account given to Ginsberg might be

“wholly invented or grossly exaggerated, a kind of classy piece of literary-spiritual pornography” and whether or not “the whole meeting between Arthur and Carpenter could be a figment of the American’s admittedly fertile imagination” (Katz, Love Stories 327). Katz produces letters documenting the visit between Arthur and Carpenter, which show that Arthur had made the pilgrimage in order to become a kind of disciple, and be “to Ireland what Walt Whitman was to America and what [Carpenter was] to England” (qtd. in Katz, Love Stories 327). Katz concludes that it is “possible, but doubtful” that Arthur’s accounts of Carpenter’s beliefs could have come exclusively from Carpenter’s books and letters. It seems almost certain that Carpenter and Arthur met. It seems less certain but fairly probable that they shared physical intimacies. But the evidence for the second-hand account of Carpenter and Whitman’s sexual encounters remains problematic. In any event, it is impossible to separate facts from false recollections and embellishments in the account (whatever their source). These very embellishments, however, may show the importance of Carpenter and Whitman among later generations, and give us an insight into the importance of the “Gay Succession” that the account establishes—at least its importance to Gavin Arthur and Alan Ginsberg.

Any spiritually significant sexual encounter between Carpenter and Whitman in 1884 similar to what Arthur wrote seems especially unlikely since Carpenter wrote that his second trip to visit Whitman had been disappointing—hardly the reaction to be expected had the Arthur accounts been true. Carpenter wrote that this second meeting “did not help me so much as the first time” (MDD 117). Whitman “was very friendly” Carpenter wrote, “he gave me introductions to Dr. Bucke in Canada, and to W. Sloane

Kennedy, and was generally kind; but his self-centeredness (arising no doubt largely from physical causes) had increased, and seemed difficult to overcome” (117). It seems that Whitman longer quite lived up to Carpenter’s ideal of him. But by this time, Carpenter had embodied that ideal himself.

Tsuzuki suggests that part of Carpenter’s feeling of Whitman’s “self-centeredness” may have come from an increasingly evident split between the two poets’ politics, or because there is no record of Whitman and Carpenter discussing Towards Democracy (Tsuzuki 56). Carpenter sent Whitman copies of each edition produced while the older poet was alive, but Whitman’s reaction to the volumes seems guarded at best. The closest we come to seeing Whitman’s opinion of Carpenter’s book comes in Traubel’s With Walt Whitman in Camden. Traubel, Bucke, and Whitman were discussing a volume of Whitmanesque poems written by Marshall Williams, and Bucke said that they were “very good imitations: they are certainly better than Edward Carpenter’s” (WWWIC 4: 278). Whitman asked Bucke “Do you say that, Maurice? you who are so close to Edward—know him so well?” When Bucke apparently assented, Whitman said, “I do not know but that I understand what you say of Edward’s work, Maurice—yes, and more or less agree with it: but Edward is young: his time is still to come”⁵⁰ (278). While Whitman frequently had this sort of guarded agreement with

⁵⁰ Bucke apparently had a change of heart about Towards Democracy later, perhaps after Carpenter and he corresponded and he read later editions. In Cosmic Consciousness, Bucke lists Carpenter as one of the greater and more certain cases of cosmic consciousness. Of the fourth edition of Towards Democracy, Bucke writes, “No better book can be read from which to obtain an idea as to what Cosmic Consciousness is and in what it differs from self consciousness” (240).

whichever disciple was nearest, it seems to indicate that he was hardly an enthusiastic fan of Carpenter's verse.

In Days with Walt Whitman, published in 1906, Carpenter considers Whitman's role as a prophet. The readings in the book show the strong influence of Bucke's Cosmic Consciousness, Gilchrist's "A Woman's Estimate" and John Burroughs' Birds and Poets—showing how a critical consensus on how Whitman should be read was developing in the disciples' interpretive community. Carpenter follows Bucke's lead by providing a prophetic and religious context for Whitman's interpretation though his arguments are generally more tactful and cautious. Like Bucke and Gilchrist (and many of his other followers), Carpenter places Whitman in the succession of the great prophets of mankind. He quotes Whitman's "To Him That Was Crucified" as support that Whitman is "in the line of those who have handed down a world-old treasure of redemption for mankind" (75). This tradition, "charge and succession," Carpenter asserts, "have certainly descended out of dim obscurity from the earliest times" (76). Whitman's message, while new for a new time and era, and distinguished for its universalism and the unprecedented breadth of its audience, is still to be read as "continuous with" those who came before (78, 77).

Carpenter also shares with Bucke an idea of the importance of Whitman's illumination to Leaves. He calls it "the most vital of all" points "but impossible to be adequately seized or expressed" (60). He continues:

"Leaves of Grass," of course, would not have been written without it; it runs behind every page—"the vision and the faculty divine." This perception in the

universal, this power of seeing things apart from the mundane self, and independent of their relation to that self, appears to be a kind of transcendent faculty in man; which occasionally manifests itself, and which brings him—it may perhaps be said—into relation with another order of existence.

He continues by emphasizing that Whitman's poetry was grounded in a real experience:

This faculty of perception of the universal must not be looked upon as a mere intellectual discrimination of certain facts or objects; it is rather, I take it, a conscious identity with the object (“I am the mash'd fireman with breastbone broken”); in which consciousness the emotional and sensational elements are fused with the intellectual, just as they are in the consciousness of one's own existence and actions. It is a universal light which falls as it were on the interior side of all objects, enabling the person that moves along it to penetrate to their very essence and to perceive their abiding relation to each other. And the faculty begins to develop itself normally in those (as one would expect) whose emotional and intellectual nature is becoming universal. When sympathy and intelligence on the ordinary plane have grown so far as to bring the man into free and unprejudiced relation with almost every phase of existence, then this new perception dawns upon him; the scales fall from the eyes which have always before seen by the light of the self, and he sees by the light “which never was on sea or land.” (63-64)

Carpenter also accepted to some extent Bucke's placement of Whitman's greatness in a context of evolutionary development:

In many ways Whitman marks a stage of human evolution not yet reached, and hardly suspected by humanity at large; but in no respect is this more true than in respect of his capacity of Love. If you consider Whitman's life you will see that Love ruled it, that he gave his life for love. There were other motives no doubt, but this one ultimately dominated them all. It permeates like a flame his entire writings. (56)

Carpenter's writings about the evolutionary development of "intermediates" as a special type, however, give this passage ambiguous implications.

Carpenter continued to develop his thought throughout a very long and productive career. He expanded Towards Democracy, following Whitman's lead in Leaves—though while Carpenter added many poems, he did not so drastically revise his older work as Whitman had. Towards Democracy formed what Tsuzuki calls justly "the starting-point and essence of all his later work" (48). For the questions that Whitman had raised, Carpenter found newer answers, or perhaps it is better to say that Carpenter found newer terms in which to explain those intensely felt answers that Whitman had enabled him to seize during the initial writing of Towards Democracy. Carpenter made several trips East, to sit at the feet of Indian holy men—whose methods for achieving transcendental states he compares in several places with Whitman's—contrasting Whitman's means of experiencing cosmic consciousness by extending sympathy and love with the gnani's (Indian ascetics') means of transcending by withdrawal of specific sympathies and the willed cessation of cosmic thought.

Carpenter articulated the component parts of his scheme of human development, of social progress, always championing the need for the reform of feeling and sex. He adopted and further developed some of the ideas Bucke had proposed in Cosmic Consciousness, proposing cosmic consciousness as a third state of man's mental development that would eventually change the world. He continued to propose a model of homosexual identity that transcended the divisions of traditional gender, and was, he believed, destined to promote the growth and progress of society and perhaps find its place as workers in spirituality. He also proposed an idealistic socialism that was close to anarchism, based on the experience of the spiritual unity of all men and the transcendence of class facilitated by the diffusion of the emotion of comrade-love. Carpenter's ideas were important to more than a generation of British men and women: social activists and spiritual seekers, as well as poets and novelists. They spoke of him eloquently and passionately.

But Whitman's own comments on Carpenter are often as enthusiastic as that of Carpenter's most eloquent friends. Whitman saw Carpenter not chiefly as a writer but as a recipient of Whitman's ideal, Whitman's dream, who could then live his own interpretation of it, and act to realize it in a way that Whitman perhaps could not:

He is a man who shares the views of Jesus, of Bacon, —who says, don't let us talk of faith any longer—let us do something. Any man can jabber, tell a story—any fluent-tonguey man can do that. But the man who can live the virtues, needs no courier, announcers—is the fact other men only dream of—he is the man we

want—the man to absorb morality—to become it! Carpenter has the keenest sense of all that. (WWWIC 6: 317)

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: THE MATERIALS OF PERSONALITY

what he really sang for was not there only,
Nor for his mate nor himself only, nor for all sent back by the
echoes,
But subtle, clandestine, away beyond,
A charge transmitted and gift occult for those being born.

—Walt Whitman, “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking”

Conclusions

In A History of Reading, Alberto Manguel comes perhaps the closest of any modern critic to capturing the wonder and peculiarity of the way Whitman, his book, and his readers interact and intersect in the act of reading:

For Whitman, text, author, reader and world mirrored each other in the act of reading, an act whose meaning he expanded until it served to define every vital human activity, as well as the universe in which it all took place. In this conjunction, the reader reflects the writer (he and I are one), the world echoes a book (God’s book, Nature’s book), the book is of flesh and blood (the writer’s own flesh and own blood, which through a literary transubstantiation become

mine), the world is a book to be deciphered (the writer's poems become my reading of the world). All his life, Whitman seems to have sought an understanding and a definition of the act of reading, which is both itself and the metaphor for all its parts. (168)

Manguel points out the idiosyncrasies with which Whitman manipulates the act of reading, and emphasizes the weight and variety of the transactions he sets up in his work. Manguel implies how that act of reading can spread out from the book, radiate out into the life of Whitman's reader, implicating all interpretation and experience. It is an unusual alchemy, and one that is sometimes difficult to discuss. In an unpublished manuscript, Whitman wrote:

It is not that the realities of all these things are in the books themselves—in the poems etc. The realities are in the realities only, in the earth, water, plants, animals, souls, men and women. Poems are to arouse the reason, suggest, give freedom, strength, muscle, candor to any person that reads them—and assist that person to see the realities for himself in his own way, with his own individuality and after his own fashion. (Notes and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts 1563)

What is real, what must be engaged, is to be found outside the poem, and the fulfillment of the poem is to be found in the reader's attitude towards and interaction with these realities.

Reading is, or can be in some of its strangest and most intense cases, a spiritual experience in itself. It can change the kinds of experiences we have and the way we understand them. It can transform us, can open us up, can change the terms in which we

can feel and think. Michel de Certeau, writing of the works of the mystics, called on the historian to respect what he called the genre's "power to induce departure" (Heterologies 83). That is the power that Whitman most desired his poems to have, and at least in some cases, they did. Leaves of Grass did transform Anne Gilchrist, Richard Maurice Bucke, and Edward Carpenter. More accurately, Whitman's book enabled them to transform themselves.

If, following Whitman, we treat the reader's reaction as integral to his poetry, we might say that there are as many versions of Leaves of Grass and of Walt Whitman as there are readers and admirers of both. The versions produced by Anne Gilchrist, Richard Maurice Bucke, and Edward Carpenter all have some things in common. For each of them, Leaves was an "endless book"—an open work that drew them in, focused their attention, demanded reading and re-reading, and produced layers of meaning and significance that fulfilled some of the central needs of their lives.

In response to their intellectual needs, Whitman provided a model of the universe that squared with the science of the day. All of them felt a distance from the institutionalized Christianity of their day—felt a gap between their need for belief and their scientific world-views that made it impossible for them to access the traditional outlets of faith available to them. While not a scientist himself, Whitman presented a worldview that combined the possibility of spiritually meaningful experience with the optimistic and progressive conceptions (and the hopes of an all-embracing system) that informed nineteenth-century science. Gilchrist, Bucke and Carpenter were all affected by what we would probably call a social and metaphysical Darwinism—though the

particularly Darwinian strain of evolutionary theory had relatively little influence on them. They were attracted instead to that Lamarckian view of evolution that allowed hope, desire, and a sort of artistic creation, rather than bare competition, to drive the development of nature, humankind, and the universe. This model, shared by Whitman, allowed emotion and intuition to become important ways of knowing and being, and gave shape and significance to a wide variety of inner experience. It also placed more importance on the strivings (internal and external) of each individual and afforded the individual a participation in the whole. Through love, sympathy, sex, intuition, and artistic creation, one could participate in and gain intimate knowledge of both the individual self and what was universal.

This participation and this possibility of intimacy with the world helped Whitman's readers fulfill their emotional needs as well. If Whitman was a teacher for Carpenter, Bucke, and Gilchrist, he was also a lover, a friend, an example, and a second self. Reading Leaves of Grass restructured and redirected the disciples' emotional conceptions and attachments. In that book, Whitman presented himself as a focus for desire and emulation. In Gilchrist, he aroused a passion for his person and his soul—stirred an urge to spiritual progress and physical and spiritual union. Bucke, too, felt the pull of love or sympathy. Bucke's attraction took the form not of sexual longing (he was a fairly conventionally heterosexual male), but of hero-worship and an emotional identification. For him, Whitman became a kind of demigod, the embodiment of everything Bucke admired or wanted to be, a symbol of a man who could live without

the fear and doubt that Bucke so despised in himself.¹ For Carpenter, the experience was blended. Whitman seemed to have experienced the same wants and needs, problems and disappointments, hopes and dreams that Carpenter felt in himself. They shared a sympathy of temperament. While Whitman's view of the "kosmos en masse" helped Carpenter form his own personality and role, Whitman's image of the unself-conscious, spontaneous, and uneducated vigorous working man helped Carpenter shape his sexual ideal and enabled him to see his desires as significant and even sacred. Whitman's book provided an emotional connection with the poet himself, but also made possible emotional connections with others—modeling a particular kind of love and acceptance.

All of these disciples, steeped in a faith in evolution, believed also in an evolution of faith. Informed to varying degrees by the increasingly historicized view of religion and philosophy, they believed that mankind needed new revelations for new times. In Whitman they found the fittest prophet of their age. The comparisons they drew between Whitman and Christ have often seemed ridiculous or blasphemous to later scholars and critics. Given the belief in progress shared by these three, it is natural that they should believe that the revelation of the past would have been less complete or less adapted to the conditions of modern times than Whitman's current prophetic writings. Carpenter's theory of "exfoliation," a model of growth by which layers are constantly

¹ Bucke's view of the fearless Whitman might very well have come from Whitman himself. The poet told Traubel, "I never get nervous: have heard about it in others: it never affects me. I remember, my friends always remarked it, that in crises, I never was disturbed or gave out any consciousness of danger—as, indeed, I did not feel it" (*WWWIC* 5:259). Whitman was careful to point out, however, that he was still "susceptible—few more so: alive to all acts, persons, influences" (259).

forming and opening to reveal new layers underneath, is a useful model here.² The suitability of a religious belief is not due to its age or its conformity to older views or revelations. Though the disciples would generally feel that Whitman was to be interpreted as a prophet among prophets, they thought of his teachings as continuous with, as a progression of—or even as a correction of—those who had come before, and not as exactly equivalent. They did not judge him by the past. They judged him by how well his message matched the concerns of their age. As most people do, they equated the concerns of their age with their own concerns. Whitman provided a ground from which they might resist those elements of the modern day that they felt were not vital or living, which entrapped, restrained, and imprisoned them. All three disciples believed that the essence of religion was something to be experienced experimentally, something grounded in personal, direct human experience.

The disciples believed in social progress, as well. They struggled against those elements of society that they felt were choking and stifling new growth. Their level of political action varied. Gilchrist wrote eloquently about the situation of women, but never became an activist. Bucke believed that cosmic consciousness would eventually abolish class distinctions and a new mobility would abolish regional and national identities, and worked to secure more humane treatment for the insane. Carpenter was the most politically active of the disciples I have dealt with here (Horace Traubel, of course, was just as involved in America as Carpenter was in Britain). His activism on a wide variety of subjects, from marriage reform to reform of policy towards

² See “Social Progress and Individual Effort” in *England’s Ideal* for one of several accounts of the process in Carpenter (57-60).

homosexuals, from pollution control to anti-vivisection, from economic and land reforms to reform of British policy in India, makes him a prototype of the modern radical. His version of socialism, flavored with anarchic appreciation for the individual and for human relationships, and based on metaphysical unity and comrade-love, was influential for a time throughout Britain. Eventually, though, his homosexuality and spirituality removed him from a labour movement that was moving away from a focus on individual relationships and an idealization of nature and towards what E. M. Forster called the ideal of a “State-owned factory attached to State-supervised recreation-grounds” (Beith 78). The disciples’ politics were intimately tied to their spirituality and their emotional life.

All of the disciples dealt with here were unusually intense readers, and more often self-educated or unconventional in their reading than not. Though their reading before they discovered Whitman varied, it seems to have acted as stepping-stones towards accepting the poet. All of them had a general background in evolutionary theory and in Romantic poetry. As often as not, they knew Emerson quite well, though their esteem for Whitman sometimes made them prone to overlook the influence of the former. They took Leaves seriously, and read it constantly, progressing through multiple layers of meaning and questioning their earlier interpretations. They read it as mirror and lover, as prophecy and promise.

Carpenter, Bucke, and Gilchrist believed in Whitman the ideal, the persona that the poet had so painstakingly created—even though Carpenter, for instance, clearly understood that it was an ideal and a poetic persona. Coming to Whitman’s books

before they came to his person, these disciples experienced Whitman's bodily presence in a way that was conditioned and contextualized by the ideas in his writings.

As they experienced Whitman's presence in a way that was mediated by Whitman's work, so Whitman's work mediated and structured their other experiences, including those experiences that were most significant to them. When Gilchrist underwent what we might call an emotional and physical breakdown (which has been interpreted by others as depression or love-sickness), she read that experience as her body beginning to fail under the heat of a remaking. She believed the strain on her body and emotions to be caused by reading Leaves of Grass. Bucke interpreted and related his "cosmic consciousness" experience in terms of Whitman, then used that experience to interpret Whitman. Edward Carpenter did much the same in terms of his own feelings of unity with a universal self. For Carpenter and Gilchrist, emotional and passionate feelings gained meaning and context through Whitman's work, became guideposts to or fragments of the experience of what they considered to be an ultimate good. This contextualization made a wide variety of experiences significant for Whitman's disciples—made cosmic consciousness experiences possible as cosmic consciousness experiences.

By considering these readers, their readings, and the theories of reading that they developed to conceptualize and explain Whitman's influence on them, we find something that may prove very important indeed. By studying these people on whom Whitman's writing had its most profound effects, we find that many of the more intense effects of Whitman's verse are associated with ways of reading that may be barred to us

by our adoption of our own beliefs about the function and possibilities of poetry.

Though reader-response criticism can help us begin to understand, we lack an adequate critical vocabulary to talk about the kinds of exchanges, enthusiasms, absorptions, and infatuations these readers experienced. We have to make do often as not with older and less precise terms: “love,” “conversion,” “mysticism,” “identification.”

We must note that the audience outlined here is not, most probably, the audience that Whitman dreamed of, either in size or in nature. Early in his career Whitman imagined himself as the prophet of the mass of healthy, pioneering Americans, workers with their hands, newly literate spiritual “roughs.” None of the disciples really fits that conception. None of the three treated here was born or raised in the United States (though Bucke believed, as Whitman had, that Canada would eventually be annexed). For Carpenter and Gilchrist, the cachet of the exotic, the very idea of Whitman’s foreignness may have strengthened their impression of him. (Through Whitman, his British disciples often gained a curiously mythical view of America.)

If the disciples were not the American audience Whitman had imagined, they were, perhaps, often like the Whitman who wrote the 1855 Leaves of Grass. They were conflicted, enthusiastic, bookish, lonely, passionate, and radical. They had an urge to change.

As twenty-first-century critics reading the works of these disciples, we find that for all our sometimes-superior knowledge of the poems and our more critical view of Whitman and his life, we may be somewhat less suited to participate in its most radical effects, to give it the reading that Whitman may have intended. Or if we are suited as

the disciples were suited, needy as they were needy, we often lack the vocabulary to speak of it. Who we are, how we are, and what we need are vital parts of our reading. Our readings are affected by, and may even depend on, emotional responses to the text and its author, may depend on beliefs about the possibilities of poetry, language, and communication, may depend on how we contextualize the act of reading in relation to a view of how the universe itself works. When we historicize these reactions, we see the extraordinary ways in which politics, religion, and desire are, or can be, of a piece. We see how the order of influence, the movement of ideas is always a human order and movement. These are not bad things to remember.

About mysticism, the stories of the disciples can tell us (if we doubted it) that mystical experiences do not come unprepared-for, do not come outside of a context of reading (among literate mystics), thinking, doubts, desires, fears, crises—a context that's not just intellectual or historical, but personal. A close look at the cases of Bucke or Carpenter might point us to a number of possible “explanations”—historical, political, psychological, even medical—but we must be careful not to let the explanation substitute for the details, the particular intersection of experience, need, and interpretation. While there are things here that we cannot know, what we can know is, to borrow a word from Whitman, “suggestive.”

Other Cases

A dissertation is of course just the start of this sort of project. Other of Whitman's disciples had essentially mystical reactions to his work. A more complete

study, which I have started to sketch out, would include at the least studies of the life and reading of Horace Traubel and J. W. Wallace.

Horace Traubel came from a secularized household. His ethnically Jewish father had, when young, renounced his heritage and religion dramatically—throwing the Torah into the fire and leaving his father’s home forever. Traubel found in Whitman, and through Whitman in the crowds of common people, something he came to regard as more sacred than any bible. Traubel had two recorded mystical experiences associated with Whitman’s work, which have been recorded in Bucke’s Cosmic Consciousness (345-351). Like Carpenter, Traubel became a political radical who took the messages he found in Whitman to extremes that Whitman sometimes found uncomfortable. He also came to experience Whitman’s love of comrades in both a physical, political, and spiritual sense.³ Eventually, he too wrote Whitmanesque poems. His Optimos continues the elements of Whitman’s work that Traubel believes to be most valuable. Critics who have treated Traubel have focused so closely on his authorship of With Walt Whitman in Camden, the extraordinary multi-volume record of Whitman’s last years, that his religious, literary, and even his political life have received a relatively short shrift.

J. W. Wallace, the head of the “Eagle Street College” at Bolton, has received much critical attention in recent years. Like Carpenter, Wallace experienced an intense spiritual experience at the time of his mother’s death.⁴ And like Carpenter, Wallace, a mystic and a social progressive, gathered a broad array of followers and friends. The

³ See, for example, Traubel’s heartfelt and romantic letters to Marsden Hartley, collected in William Innes Homer’s volume Heart’s Gate.

⁴ Wallace’s account of the event is recorded in Bucke’s Cosmic Consciousness under the initials “J. W. W.” (332-42).

Bolton “College” became the closest thing to a “church of Whitman” to be established in one place. There is yet much of value to be learned from the use of Whitman’s writings (and the writings of people influenced by Whitman, like Edward Carpenter and J. William Lloyd) in the spiritual, political, and sexual life of this small group of men.

There are other early readers of Whitman who might repay this treatment as well. By seeing how each reader fills in the gaps in Whitman’s poems, how he or she makes the poems fit or find them failing to fit his or her background and experience, we begin to understand more about those gaps, and more about reading itself. Jorge Luis Borges (who had gone through a Whitman enthusiasm himself) wrote of Whitman that he

made of the hero of Leaves of Grass a trinity; he added to him a third personage, the reader, the changing and successive reader. The reader has always tended to identify with the protagonist of the work . . . Walt Whitman, as far as we know, was the first to exploit to its extreme, to its interminable and complex extreme, this momentary identification. (Selected Non-Fictions 447)

It is the third part of this trinity which we often know the least about.

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