Whitman's Children

PETER COVIELLO

Tho' always unmarried I have had six children—two are dead—One living southern grandchild, fine boy, who writes me occasionally.

—Walt Whitman, letter to John Addington Symonds, 19 August 1890

WILLIAM H. MILLIS, A SOLDIER WALT WHITMAN HAD COME TO know in one of the hospitals he daily toured from late 1862 through 1864, wrote to Whitman in 1865, "I never will forget you so long as life should last. . . . I cant find words to tell you the love their is in me for you." A decade later, Millis took "the time & privilege of dropping a few lines to tell you that we have not forgotten you & want to hear from you. We have had a son borned since we heard from you & We call him Walter Whitman Millis in honer to you for Love for you" (Morris 236).[1] Nor was Millis the only of Whitman's beloved charges to claim for his child so singular a lineage. There was also Benton H. Wilson, who liked to sign his letters "your Loving Soldier Boy" and "as ever Your Boy Friend with Love." After some tense exchanges concerning his marriage—"I wrote to you a year and more ago that I was married but did not receive any reply so I did not know but you was displeased with it"—Wilson wrote cheerfully to the poet in 1868, "My little baby Walt is well & Bright as a new dollar" (Shively, *Drum Beats* 217, 216, 215, 221).

"The war of attempted secession," Whitman wrote some years after its conclusion, "has, of course, been the distinguishing event of my time" (*Specimen Days* 713). This is hardly surprising. Decamping from his bohemian New York City life in the winter of 1862, Whitman traveled to the Virginia front in search of his brother George, whose name he had read listed among the wounded. He found George alive and well, nursing an only slightly injured cheek. But

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2013.128.1.73 Published online by Cambridge University Press

there at the winter camp of the massive Army of the Potomac he also found an entirely "new world," dense with horror and revelation: "I find deep things," he wrote to Ralph Waldo Emerson, "unrecked by current print or speech" ("To Ralph Waldo Emerson" 68). "I now make fuller notes, or a sort of journal," he went on to say of the "memoranda of names, items, &c" he had begun to keep at the hospitals. "This thing I will record—it belongs to the time, and to all the States—(and perhaps it belongs to me)" (70).

That journal would later be shaped into Whitman's prose memoir *Memoranda during the War*, a work that vividly testifies to a simultaneous deformation and reconstitution. On the one hand, Whitman's once exuberant faith in the limitless civic and national capacities of writing, of his writing, dies with the thousands of soldiers whose graves are marked, he keeps reminding us, "UNKNOWN" (*Memoranda* 103). From a poet who claimed of the American idiom that "it shall well nigh express the inexpressible" (Pref. [1855] 25), who with disarming bravado proclaimed the nation's poets to be more crucial than its presidents, there comes in later writing a dolorous, refrain-like insistence that, as he writes in a heading added to *Memoranda* when the text reappeared in *Specimen Days* (1882), "the real war will never get in the books," Whitman's included (802). Yet what finds strange replenishment in the war, even as Whitman's expressivist utopianism shatters and dissolves, is his vision of sex. There among soldiers and presidents, in hospital wards and streets and makeshift camps flooded by an unprecedented mobilization of far-flung Americans, Whitman confirms what we might call his "Calamus" vision: of desire as an adhesive, world-making power, uncontained by socially scripted limits or roles, which Whitman says finds its "openest expression" in "Calamus" (1860), a cluster of poems of urban anonymity and eroticized "manly attachment" (Pref. [1876] 1035; "In Paths"). In the world of "Calamus," where passion kindles as much between the anonymous as between familiars and intimates, desire emerges not as the mode of relation solely proper to the marital bed but as the ground note of all human attachment and the precious force that binds together vast networks of virtual strangers into impassioned sodality.[2] "Passing stranger!," he writes in one of the "Calamus" poems, "you do not know how longingly I look upon you, / . . . / You give me the pleasure of your eyes, face, flesh, as we pass—you take of my beard, breast, hands, in return," uncannily anticipating the ardent, tender, intensely corporal devotions with which he would attend, bed by bed, to the ranks of wounded soldiers he meets and writes about so lovingly in *Memoranda* (Leaves 366). As one of Whitman's guiding premises—about writing and its nation-making capacities—founders in the war, another, about sex and its unexpended capacities, solidifies.

Following a number of fine readings of Whitman at war—especially those of Betsy Erkkila, Charley Shively, Robert Leigh Davis, Max Cavitch, and Michael Warner, who in different ways trace out the queer resonances of Whitman's hospital life[3]—I want to consider in detail how, under the pressures of the war, Whitman's vision of sex transforms and extends itself. For *Memoranda* and his other writing from the war do not simply replay the sexual-nationalist project of his "Calamus" poems, removing it from the streets of New York City to the hospitals of Washington, DC. Instead, they open that project out in new, stranger directions—directions suggested not least by the queer pairing of baby Walts with which we began. Confounding the roles of stranger, comrade, lover, and reader in "Calamus," Whitman labors to dislodge sex from its narrow enclosure in dyadic heterosexuality and the reproductive family. In these poems, where desire crackles between comrades no less than between the anonymous inhabitants of the city, Whitman seeks

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2013.128.1.73 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to release sex into every register of sociability, to saturate the social field with the adhesive vibrancy of desire (Coviello, *Intimacy*; Moon, "Solitude"). *Memoranda* finds Whitman once more performing the role of comrade-lover, to be sure (and mining silence, once more, for the ardent intimacies he shares with the many strangers he meets). But the war prompts in him a range of other sorts of surrogacy: he is self-consciously a nurse to the men, but he is also a confessor, a sibling, often a parent—mother and father—and an intimate companion as well as a witness and scribe. All these roles he inhabits without forswearing the eroticism of his attachments. The war, that is, finds Whitman laboring to restore carnality, in its world-making force, to family and especially to parenthood: to modes of relation that by the time of the war were at once the most hallowed in a mass culture stamped by the dictates of sentimentality and the most sequestered from, and scrubbed clean of, the tumultuous life of desire. The two young men who made Whitman a kind of progenitor for their children did not do so without reason.

What comes to the fore on the national scene after the war is not quite the vibrantly carnal familial form Whitman labors to realize. He does not, for instance, envision the intractably rivalrous erotic family of Freud, which becomes, in Foucault's words, "the crystal in the deployment of sexuality" (111).[4] But the disjunction between what Whitman imagines to be possible and the forms of sexual subjectivity that will take hold around him is itself telling. Whitman occupies a peculiar, illuminating place in the American history of sexuality—a dynamic moment extending from before the codings and coordinations of modern sexuality (e.g., "heterosexuality" and "homosexuality") took hold to the scene of their near emergence at the end of his life.[5] He is neither "representative," a cipher-like embodiment of his moment, nor a kind of prophet of sex, a writer who with visionary foresight traces the outlines of what will, in later years, come to be visible as an early iteration of queer identity. Neither exemplary nor anticipatory, Whitman is better understood as a man glimpsing, through the upheaval of the war, the lineaments of a future that will not come to be.[6] The war, as we shall see, finds Whitman turning anxiously toward an unwritten, pending future, and it prompts in him a complex, eroticized regard for that future as a kind of repository, one seeded with possibilities he intuits out on the edges of consciousness and embodied experience in the war but not quite articulable there. That future is something he is eager to parent, and sex is on the scene of imagined generation. Yet Whitman shows us how an investment in futurity, even one routed through the idea of children, may not be as homophobic, or as normative, as we now believe it to be. Walter Whitman Millis is one emblem, and a fit one, of the weird, harrowing style of queer generation Whitman begins to imagine in the war.

Writing figures most prominently in the conceptual world of *Memoranda* as that which is no longer adequate: the thing that cannot accomplish what Whitman had once, in his undimmed enthusiasm, imagined it could. The idiom that can well nigh express the inexpressible finds itself confronted with a real war that, in the vast unassimilability of its carnage and suffering and loss, will never get into the books. How curious it is, then, that the act at the heart of Whitman's many ministrations in *Memoranda* is writing. Of his first visit among the wounded, he writes, "I went through the rooms, downstairs and up. Some of the men were dying. I had nothing to give at that visit, but wrote a few letters to folks home, mothers, &c" (9). Later, he "[v]isited Armory Square Hospital, went pretty thoroughly through Wards E and D. Supplied paper and envelopes to all who wish'd—as usual, found plenty of the men who needed those articles. Wrote letters" (15). Under the heading "*Letter Writing*," he describes how "[w]hen eligible, I

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2013.128.1.73 Published online by Cambridge University Press

encourage the men to write, and myself, when call'd upon, write all sorts of letters for them, (including love letters, very tender ones)" (14). More than wound dressing, or wordless gazing, or kissing, writing anchors Whitman's sense of what caregiving means. And this sits oddly alongside assertions like "Of scenes like these, I say, who writes—who e'er can write, the story?" and "No history, ever . . . [n]o formal General's report, nor print, nor book in the library, nor column in the paper, embalms the bravest" (26).

But the striking abdications we find in these assertions are more circumspect than at first they might seem—only printed or "formal" writing is abjured—and share time in *Memoranda* with differently calibrated claims and expectations. Whitman does offer strident admonitions about the collapse, in the war, of seemingly all representation. Yet these come to be qualified not just by their circumspection but also by his concluding insistence that the real war shall be written, truthfully and wholly—though only, he avers, "hundreds of years hence" (128). *Memoranda* ends on a note of strange expectancy: "And the real History of the United States—starting from that great convulsive struggle for Unity, triumphantly concluded, and *the South* victorious, after all—is only to be written at the remove of hundreds, perhaps a thousand, years hence" (133). Here Whitman emerges from bloodletting and chaos into an uncanny, we might say Benjaminian, faith in the future's capacity to restore even the lost particularities of the war to historical fullness. Clearly, Whitman sees in the conditions of the present few terms or frameworks through which the war can be comprehended without remainder, or entered in its totality into history. (The postwar essay "Democratic Vistas," with its alternation between visceral disgust and jubilant expectation, makes this plain.) And so, in gestures that graft onto genuine and expansive devastation not hopefulness, exactly, but something more like a straining refusal of resignation, Whitman turns once more toward the future: less the future that casts its shadow beguilingly back onto the present (as it does in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry") than a future that promises to invest this cataclysmic war with significances and legibilities that it cannot, in the delimited frame of the present tense, claim for itself.

How do we make sense of the oscillation in Whitman's war writing between heartsick despondency and this provisional, speculative refusal of resignation? One way to begin, I think, is to pay less attention to this writing's meta-authorial declarations than to the scene of writing in *Memoranda* and to the revised purposes authorship finds for itself there. For when Whitman writes by the bedsides of his wounded soldiers, he is not acting as a national bard. Rather, his hospital writing is undertaken on behalf of a different set of self-created roles. I want to pause over those roles and the forms of surrogacy they underscore, since I think we can find there a key to Whitman's concluding turn to the unwritten future and its potentialities. My sense is that Whitman's intimation of an ampler future is tied to the emergence of a new, sexually saturated sociability, one that the war, despite its carnage and unrelenting heartbreak, allows him to glimpse—and, in certain respects, forces upon him.

Early on, Whitman works as a kind of Cyrano, less a surrogate than a conduit. The passage quoted earlier from the section headed "*Letter Writing*" continues:

> When eligible, I encourage the men to write, and myself, when call'd upon, write all sorts of letters for them, (including love letters, very tender ones.) Almost as I reel off this memoranda, I write for a new patient to his wife. M. de F., of the Seventeenth Connecticut, Company H, has just come up (February 17) from Windmill Point, and is received Ward H, Armory Square. He is an intelligent looking man, has a foreign accent, black-eyed and hair'd, a Hebraic appearance. Wants a telegraphic message sent to his wife, New Canaan, Ct. I agree

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2013.128.1.73 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> to send the message—but to make things sure, I also sit down and write the wife a letter, and despatch it to the post-office immediately, as he fears she will come on, and he does not wish her to, as he will surely get well. (14)

But this changes slightly as Whitman begins to observe the other caregivers, particularly the women, in an emulative way:

> In one case, the wife sat by the side of her husband, his sickness, typhoid fever, pretty bad. In another, by the side of her son—a mother—she told me she had seven children, and this was the youngest. (A fine, kind, healthy, gentle mother, good-looking, not very old, with a cap on her head, and dress'd like home—what a charm it gave to the whole Ward.) I liked the woman "nurse in Ward E"—I noticed how she sat a long time by a poor fellow who just had, that morning, in addition to his other sickness, bad hemmorhage—she gently assisted him, reliev'd him of the blood, holding a cloth to his mouth, as he cough'd it up—he was so weak he could only just turn his head over on the pillow. (15–16)

Whitman seems less to observe these women—these faintly angelic wives and nurses, now christened with blood—than to find in them a bearing, a whole style of relation to the wounded men, that he might learn to inhabit and to fill with his own investments.

What we begin to glimpse here is the framework in which the practice of surrogacy has meaning for Whitman: if for Whitman to be a surrogate is to stand in for an absent, more familiar companion, it is also to do so *with a difference*, to inhabit that role in ways no less supplementary (we might say metonymically) than strictly replicative. Surrogacy in this sense—an unresolving, generative play of identity and difference, or multiplying differences—comes to inflect all the bedside scenes Whitman narrates, where his attentions hover in their tenor between the comradely and the amorous, as well as the avuncular, the spousal, the paternal, and the maternal. Whitman's attachments to the men draw resonance from all these modes of intimate relation, which conspicuously blend the presumptively chaste and the potentially amorous, while granting prominence to none. Indeed, in the letters written back to the poet, nothing speaks as vividly as the multiplicity—one is tempted to say the multitudinousness—that invests Whitman's surrogacy, a manyness made plain in the array of endearments by which he was hailed: "Friend Walt," "Dear Comrad," "Dear Uncle," "Dr Frind and elder brother," "Dear brother and comrad," and, repeatedly, "Dear Father" (Shively, *Drum Beats* 107, 138, 139, 173, 206, 144). "You will allow me to call you Father wont you," Elijah Douglass Fox writes to Whitman in November of 1863, "I do not know that I told you that both of my parents were dead but it is true and now Walt you will be a second Father to me wont you, for my love for you is hardly less than my love for my natural parent. I have never before met with a man that I could love as I do you. Still there is nothing strange about it" (144). Or again, as if in answer to Fox's grading of parental care into some other, unprecedented kind of love, there is this, from a letter to Whitman from the *parents* of Jimmy Stillwell, also from 1863: "and now Dear friend again I would ask you to see to him all you can and you hear things that would interest him and help to pass away the time O if i had wings like noah Dove how soon would i fly and Sit Down by his Side but you must be mother to him" (191).

Not for the first time we find the poet living out what we could call the logic of the *and*: father *and* mother *and* friend *and* lover *and* uncle *and* comrade. These scenes echo Louisa May Alcott's 1863 *Hospital Sketches*, in which Nurse Tribulation Periwinkle observes of a stricken soldier in her care, "[N]ow I knew that to him, as to so many, I was the poor substitute for mother, wife, or sister, and in his eyes no stranger" (41)—though Whitman concedes nothing of the poverty of such substitutions. Ed Folsom notes this phenomenon in the

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2013.128.1.73 Published online by Cambridge University Press

archive of photographs of Whitman, observing, "Instead of documenting his biological family . . . Whitman chose to construct a very different kind of family, one in which he could coterminously occupy the place of father and mother, wife and husband, lover and friend" (194). If we understand Whitman to be writing in the teeth of a long moment before the advent of modern forms of sexual subjectivity but in which the movements toward those taxonomic divisions could already be felt in a number of quarters, we can count this astounding multiplicity of roles as still another expression of his sex radicalism, realized here as an agile demurral from the drive to parse attachment into policed states of desire or nondesire. By refusing to draw a perimeter around sex, to make it the province of one exclusive set of attachments, Whitman contests, unobtrusively but powerfully, the turning of sex into a *mode* of relation, among others. What emerges instead is an insistence on sex as the foundational drive that undergirds *all* relationality, in all its expressions (Coviello, "Whitman"). Sex, as he tersely puts it, "is at the root of it all" (*Walt Whitman's Camden Conversations* 170).

Nowhere is the richness of this affective interplay more fully or gorgeously realized than in the letter Whitman wrote to the parents of a soldier named Erastus Haskell. Because of the complexity and delicacy of the roles Whitman renders there for himself, the letter is worth quoting in full. Watch, in particular, for the letter's calibrated gradations of address—its initial attentiveness to the fate of Haskell's body, its turn toward his parents, then *toward the dead boy himself*, and then back; and note, too, the shifting microclimates of tone, the suturings of journalistic to parental to amatory modes, that develop around those movements:

Washington
August 10 1863

Mr and Mrs Haskell,

Dear friends, I thought it would be soothing to you to have a few lines about the last days of your son Erastus Haskell of Company K, 141st New York Volunteers. I write in haste, & nothing of importance—only I thought any thing about Erastus would be welcome. From the time he came to Armory Square Hospital till he died, there was hardly a day but I was with him a portion of the time—if not during the day, then at night. I had no opportunity to do much, or any thing for him, as nothing was needed, only to wait the progress of his malady. I am only a friend, visiting the wounded & sick soldiers, (not connected with any society—or State.) From the first I felt that Erastus was in danger, or at least was much worse than they in the hospital supposed. As he made no complaint, they perhaps [thought him] not very bad—I told the [doctor of the ward] to look him over again—he was a much [sicker boy?] than he supposed, but he took it lightly, said, I know more about these fever cases than you do—the young man looks very sick, but I shall certainly bring him out of it all right. I have no doubt the doctor meant well & did his best—at any rate, about a week or so before Erastus died he got really alarmed & after that he & all the doctors tried to help him, but without avail—Maybe it would not have made any difference any how—I think Erastus was broken down, poor boy, before he came to the hospital here—I believe he came here about July 11th—Somehow I took to him, he was a quiet young man, behaved always correct & decent, said little—I used to sit on the side of his bed—I said once, You don't talk any, Erastus, you leave me to do all the talking—he only answered quietly, I was never much of a talker. The doctor wished every one to cheer him up very lively—I was always pleasant & cheerful with him, but did not feel to be very lively—Only once I tried to tell him some amusing narratives, but after a few moments I stopt, I saw that the effect was not good, & after that I never tried it again—I used to sit by the side of his bed, pretty silent, as that seemed most agreeable to him, & I felt so too—he was generally opprest for breath, & with the heat, & I would fan him—occasionally he would want a drink—some days he dozed a good deal—sometimes when I would

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2013.128.1.73 Published online by Cambridge University Press

come in, he woke up, & I would lean down & kiss him, he would reach out his hand & pat my hair & beard a little, very friendly, as I sat on the bed & leaned over him.

Much of the time his breathing was hard, his throat worked—they tried to keep him up by giving him stimulants, milk-punch, wine &c—these perhaps affected him, for often his mind wandered somewhat—I would say, Erastus, don't you remember me, dear son?—can't you call me by name?—once he looked at me quite a while when I asked him, & he mentioned over in[audibly?] a name or two (one sounded like [Mr. Setchell]) & then, as his eyes closed, he said quite slow, as if to himself, I don't remember, I dont remember, I dont—it was quite pitiful—one thing was he could not talk very comfortably at any time, his throat & chest seemed stopped—I have no doubt at all he had some complaint besides the typhoid—In my limited talks with him, he told me about his brothers & sisters by name, & his parents, wished me to write his parents & send them & all his love—I think he told me about his brothers living in different places, one in New York City, if I recollect right—From what he told me, he must have been poorly enough for several months before he came to Armory Sq[uare] Hosp[ital]—the first week in July I think he told me he was miles from White House, on the peninsula—previous to that, for quite a long time, although he kept around, he was not at all well—couldn't do much—was in the band as a fifer I believe—While he lay sick here he had his fife laying on the little stand by his side—he once told me that if he got well he would play me a tune on it—but, he says, I am not much of a player yet.

I was very anxious he should be saved, & so were they all—he was well used by the attendants—poor boy, I can see him as I write—he was tanned & had a fine head of hair, & looked good in the face when he first came, & was in pretty good flesh too—(had his hair cut close about ten or twelve days before he died)—He never complained—but it looked pitiful to see him lying there, with such a look out of his eyes. He had large clear eyes, they seemed to talk better than words—I assure you I was attracted to him much—Many nights I sat in the hospital by his bedside till far in the night—The lights would be put out—yet I would sit there silently, hours, late, perhaps fanning him—he always liked to have me sit there, but never cared to talk—I shall never forget those nights, it was a curious & solemn scene, the sick & wounded lying around in their cots, just visible in the darkness, & this dear young man close at hand lying on what proved to be his death bed—I do not know his past life, but what I do know, & what I saw of him, he was a noble boy—I felt he was one I should get very much attached to. I think you have reason to be proud of such a son, & all his relatives have cause to treasure his memory.

I write you this letter, because I would do something at least in his memory—his fate was a hard one, to die so—He is one of the thousands of our unknown American young men in the ranks about whom there is no record or fame, no fuss made about their dying so unknown, but I find in them the real precious & royal ones of this land, giving themselves up, aye even their young & precious lives, in their country's cause—Poor dear son, though you were not my son, I felt to love you as a son, what short time I saw you sick & dying here—it is as well as it is, perhaps better—for who knows whether he is not better off, that patient & sweet young soul, to go, than we are to stay? So farewell, dear boy—it was my opportunity to be with you in your last rapid days of death—no chance as I have said to do any thing particular, for nothing [could be done—only you did not lay] here & die among strangers without having one at hand who loved you dearly, & to whom you gave your dying kiss—

Mr. and Mrs. Haskell, I have thus written rapidly whatever came up about Erastus, & now must close. Though we are strangers & shall probably never see each other, I send you & all Erastus' brothers and sisters my love—

Walt Whitman

I live when home, in Brooklyn, N Y. (in Portland avenue, 4th door north of Myrtle, my mother's residence.) My address here is care of Major Hapgood, paymaster U S A, cor

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15th & F st, Washington D C. (*Memoranda* 165–69; interpolations in source)

In one respect, this is desire as a kind of historiography. Whitman begins by discounting any special role for himself, other than that of concerned caregiver and intimate observer: "I am only a friend," he writes, "visiting the wounded & sick soldiers, (not connected with any society—or State.)." And yet something like national history, its sudden and painful inarticulability, is on his mind as well. We see this in his remarks near the letter's close, where he writes of Erastus, "He is one of the thousands of our unknown American young men in the ranks about whom there is no record or fame, no fuss made about their dying so unknown, but I find in them the real precious & royal ones of this land, giving themselves up, aye even their young & precious lives, in their country's cause." Whitman strikes a half-despairing note here, familiar to us from much of *Memoranda*, over what we might think of as the muteness of the war's archive: the inadmissibility, there, both of so great a volume of human loss, and of the singular contours of each of the uncountable deaths that make up that volume.

If Whitman's writing here pushes against such loss, it does so largely through its meticulous, close-grained, and ineradicably carnal attention to the person Erastus Haskell was. Desire does a kind of historical *work* here, preserving what Cavitch calls the "individuated mourning" that would be troubled by the statistical tallying of the war's mass carnage (239).[7] The letter is a small miracle of delicacy and tact: so seamless are its slight shifts of register and so gentle and yet unguardedly frank is the voice guiding it that Whitman's descriptions and declarations—"he was tanned & had a fine head of hair, & looked good in the face when he first came, & was in pretty good flesh too," "I assure you I was attracted to him much"—seem neither offensive offerings to grieving parents nor in the least coy about the desire that invests them. At the root of Whitman's tact, I think, is his presumption that the boy's parents share with him, in an untroubled way, the conviction that any less than fully carnal attentiveness, any memorialization of the young man that excludes his erotic body, would be falsifying, a further surrendering of the lost but infinitely rich particularity of Erastus Haskell. For Whitman the erotic body carries the vanished specificity of this young soldier like nothing else at all. And so he turns to that body to stanch, if momentarily, the torrent of loss this one death occasions and to preserve a small remnant of this one man's singular personhood for what he calls the country's "record." Hence his dilation, in a letter to the dead young man's parents, on a beauty that is no less "noble" for being carnal.

But more is at work here than memorialization or the invocation of the carnal body as the richest index of a dead soldier's ineluctably singular personhood. Consider again the audience for this writing: the parents of a child killed at war, hopelessly far from them, their care, and their capacity to intervene. In some respects, Whitman appears to comfort the Haskells by, in effect, becoming them. He reassures them, first, that their son did not die without an intimate, loving presence near to hand—though in that same gesture he also, however gently, supplants them. But the dialectics of substitution and supplement grow stranger still at the end of the letter, where the address abruptly turns to Erastus and where Whitman writes an achingly tender love letter to the boy, for whom his grieving parents are now, themselves, surrogates. Do we imagine the Haskells to be pleased, moved, or discomfited by this peroration and by the quality of attention it describes? For if Whitman's care is emulative—if his exacting, bodily rooted, gazing, tender, worried, and unwavering care for the boy delineates, once more, his fluency in the role of substitute parent—his gaze marks too the muted and delicately rendered

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2013.128.1.73 Published online by Cambridge University Press

but unforsworn desirousness that invests that role. Whitman is parental here, but he enjoys the freedom, as a surrogate, from any of the prohibitions that might be imagined to come with that office.

Here, then, is another of the war's strange revelations. In what I have called his tact, Whitman intimates, and then elaborates on, an imagined affinity between himself and the Haskells, a common desire to mourn Erastus in the grain of a flesh that he tacitly assumes they, as parents, knew and cherished down to its smallest corporeal details. Parenting, Whitman seems to assume, is no less carnally invested than, for instance, nursing. As Whitman understands them, both activities combine scrupulously attentive bodily care with modes of attachment from which elements of desire can no more be excised than can those of tenderness or worry or hope. In the scenes reenacted in hospital after hospital, he glimpses a new thing: the possibility of a familial relation as vibrant with desire as the love of comrades had been.

Family itself—that bastion of middle-class propriety and sentimental enshrinement—opens itself up in the war to new, or newly explicable, carnal dimensions. As others have noted, Whitman's own familial relations, particularly with his mother and his siblings, provided him with rich training ground for his discoveries and elaborations (Moon and Sedgwick; Roper). That the Civil War is what brings into relief for Whitman the need to recast familial structure is not surprising. In a war whose governing trope for the sectional conflict roiling the nation is a nuclear family turned violently against itself—brother versus brother, a house divided—Whitman takes to the field in the best way he knows. Just as he had earlier labored to make citizenship a state of erotic relatedness, he now feels his way toward a national mending at the root of which is a scripting of familial life as enlivened and solidified by the desire that traverses it. It makes an oblique kind of sense, then, that Whitman should find himself so strangely hailed after the war by those two young men he loved—not only as namesake and grandparent but also as father and mother to children who carry his name into the unwritten future. With its inescapable figures of familial rupture, the war clarifies for Whitman what a carnally saturated family might look like and broaches, too, the prospect of a mode of generation that is sexual, though not quite normatively heterosexual nor normatively reproductive.

We could think of this other war project as something like the eroticization of the sentimental family, though that formulation, recalling as it does both the Freudian family and Foucault's accounts of its appearance, misappraises much of the idiosyncrasy of Whitman's investments. In the first place, Whitman's vision as we have seen it here is less a "project" than an intimated possibility, unballasted by the sustained coherence or achieved form of the war poetry or, for that matter, of *Memoranda*. And it gives us, too, a misleading sense of Whitman as a kind of prophet, or harbinger, of new emergences. The sexualized familial form Whitman feels as a live possibility in the war looks, after all, very little like the rivalrous, sex-stricken ensemble Freud would describe. Whitman's relation to time is too strange and dense to be merely prophetic. If it does nothing else, his letter to Erastus Haskell's parents, which so conspicuously conjoins the tasks of surrogacy with those of archive making, reminds us how the prospect of this style of sociability, and in particular this familial structure stripped of its sexual prohibitions, might give solidity to Whitman's expectancy, his emphatic hopes for a moment, hundreds of years hence, that will offer ampler room for meaning to the war he keeps insisting cannot, in the present tense, get into the books. His own queer progeny could read as one measure of this future's dawning possibility. Families, in this register of Whitman's thought, make futures.

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We are well equipped today to diagnose the epistemological and ideological blindnesses this explicitly familial futurism risks. Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* is only the strongest of the works that show us how such turns in Whitman might back him away from the more radical intimations of his war writing (about the intimacy of sex and negativity, say, that a nonreproductive queer sexuality renders unmaskable). We have learned, that is, to regard with suspicion visions of a future tied to the order of generation, of what Judith Halberstam calls the "time of inheritance": a "generational time" organized around biological reproduction and its presumptive sexual logics (5). Without discounting these kinds of inquiry, I would say that it may be possible to approach Whitman, and a range of writers who share his moment, at a different angle. Whitman's war invites us to wonder if there may not be some slender gap, an other-than-seamless overlap, between reproductive futurism and an investment in the future as such—to wonder, say, if a future can be something you parent, with and through sex but not heterosexual reproduction. Such an orientation may indeed be delimited by disavowals of the death drive, just as Edelman suggests, disavowals in which homophobia is often an indispensable element. But it may suggest as well something of the errancy, of the "sideways growth" Kathryn Bond Stockton identifies with and in queer childhoods, though in the context of Whitman's writing we would need to stretch Stockton's sense of sideways growth so that it frames not a single bounded lifetime but several of them, bundled into series (11–17). What in some readings may look suspiciously like generational time, marked by the pairing of children and futurity, Whitman may want to think of, instead, as a kind of seriality (Moon, "Solitude"; Fenton and Rohy).[8] He helps us make room, in all, for visions of sociality and its possibilities that are not tuned to the notes of queer negation and the shattering force of the death drive but are not for that simply liberal, redemptive, normative, nonqueer.[9] Not unlike contemporaneous figures like Henry David Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, even the Mormon founder and prophet Joseph Smith, Whitman harbors visions of sex and its possible futures more idiosyncratic than such parsings quite allow. And in his glimpsed hope for the emergence of a carnal family, one neither captivated by sentimental propriety nor splintered by sexual rivalry, he takes his place as still another writer who imagined a future for sex that would not quite come to be.

Coda

"Tho' always unmarried," Whitman wrote in a letter of 1890, "I have had six children—two are dead—One living southern grandchild, fine boy, who writes me occasionally" ("To John Addington Symonds" 73). Thus did Whitman punctuate a nearly twenty-year correspondence with John Addington Symonds, who had pressed him, in more and more exacting terms, on the question of whether the comradeship envisioned in "Calamus" might include what he called "ardent and *physical* intimacies." As Michael Robertson neatly summarizes the famous exchange, "Never have two sentences spurred so many biographers to such futile investigations" (161).

There is certainly a winking disingenuousness in Whitman's forceful refusal of Symonds—"My first instinct," he tells his young companion Horace Traubel of the letters, "is violently reactionary—is strong and brutal for no, no, no"—though we go not much further than Symonds himself in recognizing in his response something to do less with timidity, or for that matter a sudden want of erotic nerve, than with a committed, even flirty, evasiveness (Traubel 76). Symonds would write to Edward Carpenter of his impression that Whitman "wanted to obviate the 'damnable inferences' about himself by asserting

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his paternity," reminding us that Whitman's "answer" was itself designed to be disbelieved, even by its immediate recipient (819). Eve Sedgwick notes aptly that a series of disconnects separates British men like Symonds (and Carpenter and Oscar Wilde) from the poet across the Atlantic:

> [E]ven assuming that what Symonds was "driving at" was in fact, as genital behavior, also something Whitman had been driving at in his poetry, still the cultural slippage of the Atlantic crossing meant that the sexual-ideological packages sent by the Kosmic American were very different from the ones unpacked by the cosmopolitan Englishman. The most important differences lay in the assumed class contexts in which the sexual ideology was viewed, and in the standing of women—both of "femininity" and of actual women—in the two visions. (204)

For Sedgwick, Whitman's "no, no, no" is the mark not of some underprocessed internalized homophobia, some insufficiently expurgated shame, but of the steep difficulty of translation, a gendered translation rooted, for her, in a crossing of continents and classes.

And yet these may not be the only, or the most crucial, differences at play here. To my ears, Whitman's refusal speaks most emphatically to the historiographic point to which his writings have, in their entanglements with expectancy, returned us again and again: that of the arrival, at the end of the century, of a mode of conceptualizing sexuality that would not redeem his earlier visions so much as fall aslant them. For what Symonds offers Whitman, with an eagerness for comment and confirmation, is a model of nascent modern homosexual identity. Symonds was after all a keen student of German sexology—"His discovery of the German sexologists had a revelatory effect upon Symonds," Robertson notes (159)—and it was from Karl Heinrich Ulrichs that he gleaned his preferred conceptual framework for men who desire men, sexual inversion. Ardent reader and impassioned devotee of Whitman that he was, Symonds brings to the poet a reading of his work adapted to the medical language that would prove to Symonds, and to many men following him, useful and even liberating, a linchpin for the discovery first of a defense, and then of a community, and then of a larger-scale politics rooted in same-sex desire. If Symonds's badgering approach to his idolized Whitman can seem at times like an interrogation, it can also, from different angles, look like the awkward proffering of a gift.

And Whitman, as we know, was having none of it: no, no, no. But we can see now how his refusal, so plainly disingenuous, may be tied less to a fear of making his physical love of men public than to a distrust of the distortion his erotics suffer in their translation into Symonds's taxonomies. Think of the specificities of Whitman's vision of the world-making power of sex. A national citizenry bound by circuits of anonymous desire, a public life dense with an intimate commerce that resolutely does not exclude sex, a family form made vibrant and binding through carnal exchange: none of these modes of imagining desire and its force squares easily with "sexual inversion" or the forms of identity that might follow from it. We can see in the violence of Whitman's repudiation the mark not only of class misrecognition, as Sedgwick suggests, but also of time's unspooling, of the dawning of a future that does not quite accord with the vision Whitman had of it. We can see, that is, something of Whitman's untimeliness. (As Friedrich Nietzsche puts it, "I write for a species that does not yet exist" [*Will*].[10])

So perhaps Whitman's famous reference to his children and the achieved masculine potency they represent is not solely the dodge that Symonds suspected it to be. Perhaps Whitman's disingenuousness is more playful than defensive, and so not simply deceitful. Perhaps we do well to read these late-in-life boasts about heterosexual fecundity less as a

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kind of self-closeting defensiveness than as an unwillingness to have the intimacies he imagined and enacted redescribed in the falsifying terms of a rapidly solidifying latter-day sexual taxonomy.

Perhaps Whitman does, after all, have children in mind—even if only obliquely, and even if not the ones for whom biographers long have hunted.[11] I think again of the paired baby Walts with which we began, namesakes from the great and terrible war. These children, if we imagine them to be the progeny ghosting somewhere around Whitman's winking invocation, are not emblems of heterovirility. They are instead the evidence of a species of queer generation: a style of queer world making and queer future making. That future, every day nearer to Whitman at the century's end, may have seemed to have less room for such a style than he had hoped.

Notes

1. Morris comes by these stories through the work of Shively (*Calamus Lovers* and *Drum Beats*).

2. Hence Whitman's insistence that "the special meaning of the 'Calamus' cluster . . . mainly resides in its political significance": desire, as he portrays it there, makes national coherence, inasmuch as nationness is for him an ardent connectedness among strangers (*Poetry and Prose* 1035).

3. My sense of Whitman's erotic nationalism is informed by other readings as well (Moon, *Disseminating* and "Solitude"; Pollack; Maslan; Coviello, *Intimacy* and "Whitman"), though I am perhaps most aligned with Davis's understanding, in *Whitman and the Romance of Medicine*, of the critical history of Whitman's war years. Appraisals, Davis rightly notes, have tended to be divided between those emphasizing "the failure of America's democratic experiment," as exemplified by the war, and those that stress an "optimistic strain." Davis himself follows the optimistic path, arguing that Whitman "also discovered sexual and political promise in [the war] . . . and he faced the uncertainty of a deferred or conflicted Union with much greater hope than is usually recognized" (152). My reading differs from Davis's not least in stressing the often eerie simultaneity of Whitman's devastation and his exuberance, though like Davis I think that whatever relief from despair Whitman finds after the war gathers in the new possibilities he discovered there for sex and eroticized sociability.

4. Tracking the staggered transition from a model of social organization rooted in the homeostatic imperatives of familial alliance to one rooted in a differently structured deployment of sexuality, Foucault writes, "In the family, parents and relatives became the chief agents of a deployment of sexuality which drew its outside support from doctors, educators, and later psychiatrists . . . provid[ing] an opportunity for the alliance system to assert its prerogatives in the order of sexuality" (110–11).

5. "[W]hat historically distinguishes 'homosexuality' as a sexual classification," Halperin writes, endeavoring to specify what it is about the invention of "modern" sexuality that fascinated Foucault, "is its unprecedented combination of at least three distinct and previously uncoordinated conceptual entities: (1) a psychiatric notion of a perverted or pathological *orientation* . . . (2) a psychoanalytic notion of same-sex *sexual object-choice* or desire . . . and (3) a sociological notion of *sexually deviant behavior*" (42).

6. In my emphasis on reading moments in the history of sexuality as neither strictly "representative" nor strictly anticipatory—and on the dividends of regarding scenes from a presexological past as strivings toward broken-off, uncreated futures—I am informed by a rich archive of emerging Americanist work on queer temporalities, particularly that of McGarry; Freeman; Luciano; Castiglia; and Stein. As Stein suggests, "[T]he history of sexuality can and should be written in relation to texts and experiences *that fail to be represented at the manifest level of discourse*" (214; my emphasis).

7. "Statistics enabled detachment and psychically rewarded the habit of quantification that had emerged in the course of market revolution as a national characteristic" (Cavitch 239).

8. I am particularly influenced here by Fenton and Rohy's wonderfully suggestive remarks on presidency and succession as modes of imagining time and futurity that complicate "the trope of heteronormative familiarity" (245).

9. Though homophobia may characteristically route its visions of the future through the banalized image of the child, it does not follow that invocations of children, or the future, or even children as the future are all irreducibly homophobic.

10. For related meditations on the untimely, see Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*, esp. "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" (57–123). I am indebted here too to Grosz, who reads Nietzsche's investment in the possibilities of the untimely as part of his endeavor to write "for a future that the present cannot recognize" (117).

11. Katz 272–87 and Martin read Whitman's exchange with Symonds to purposes different from mine. Recently, Erkkila turned to a related point. In *Walt*

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2013.128.1.73 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Whitman's Songs of Male Intimacy and Love, she writes, "[G]iven the languages of paternal, maternal, and familial affection in which Whitman carried on his relationships and correspondence with Fred Vaughan, Peter Doyle, Harry Stafford, and some of the soldiers he met during the war, including Tom Sawyer and Lewis Brown, one might argue that Whitman was thinking [in his response to Symonds] of some of the 'illegitimate sons' he adopted, fathered, and mothered over the course of his life" (148). In my reading, Whitman is thinking less of the "sons" than of the children that, through them, he has parented. My work here could be said to involve a close explication of the logics—historical, textual—by which one might imagine such a vision of Whitman's patrimony.

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