

BREAKING BOUNDS



Whitman and American
Cultural Studies

Edited by

Betsy Erkkila
and Jay Grossman

New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1996

7

Whitman's "Whoever You Are
Holding Me Now in Hand":
Remarks on the Endlessly Repeated
Rediscovery of the
Incommensurability of the Person

ALLEN GROSSMAN

Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand

Whoever you are holding me now in hand,
Without one thing all will be useless,
I give you fair warning before you attempt me further,
I am not what you supposed, but far different.

Who is he that would become my follower?
Who would sign himself a candidate for my affections?

The way is suspicious, the result uncertain, perhaps destructive,
You would have to give up all else, I alone would expect to be your sole
and exclusive standard,
Your novitiate would even then be long and exhausting,
The whole past theory of your life and all conformity to the lives around
you would have to be abandon'd,
Therefore release me now before troubling yourself any further, let go
your hand from my shoulders,
Put me down and depart on your way.

Or else by stealth in some wood for trial,
Or back of a rock in the open air,
(For in any roof'd room of a house I emerge not, nor in company,
And in libraries I lie as one dumb, a gawk, or unborn, or dead,)
But just possibly with you on a high hill, first watching lest any person for
miles around approach unawares,

Or possibly with you sailing at sea, or on the beach of the sea or some
quiet island,

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.

Or if you will, thrusting me beneath your clothing,
Where I may feel the throbs of your heart or rest upon your hip,
Carry me when you go forth over land or sea;
For thus merely touching you is enough, is best,
And thus touching you would I silently sleep and be carried eternally.

But these leaves conning you con at peril,
For these leaves and me you will not understand,
They will 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.

For it is not for what I have put into it that I have written this book,
Nor is it by reading it you will acquire it,
Nor do those know me best who admire me and vauntingly praise me,
Nor will the candidates for my love (unless at most a very few) prove victo-
rious,
Nor will my poems do good only, they will do just as much evil, perhaps
more,
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. (LG 115-17)

It seems to me that all valid poems begin at the moment when speech of
the poetic kind is seen to be the only recourse of the speaker—when, there-
fore, the criterion of speech of the poetic kind is seen to be "your sole
and exclusive standard"—all other means of response being exhausted or
unavailable (among which exhausted means may be poetry itself, before
the revolution intended by *this* poet). It is in this sense—as the last means
available for the disclosure and grounding of the incommensurability of
the person, (the residual function of poetry as Whitman understands it)—
that I take up and "hold" Whitman's poem ("Whoever you are holding me
now in hand"), and find myself addressed by it as in a primal schoolroom
of moral courtesy, like a knight upon whom a lady has laid the obligation—
the decorum—of an ordeal, or like any novice in the service of the master
of a practice.

Whoever you are holding me now in hand,
Without one thing all will be useless,

I give you fair warning before you attempt me further,
I am not what you supposed but far different.

This poem (the third of the "Calamus" sequence) presents the problem of its own use (the "holding" of it) as the discipline of the meaningful "use" of a person. What voice, then, do I hear when I hear the voice in this poem? I hear the startled outcry ("Whoever you are holding me now in hand") of the half-blind master (he cannot quite *see* you, "whoever you are")—*a master but also one who speaks with the irascibility of a subjected will, a will suddenly at the end of its resources*—precisely the "companion," certainly not in the ordinary sense a hero—an instrument, rather, a *metier*, the lyre, the book: very small, capable of being taken up and secreted about the person ("Or if you will, thrusting me beneath your clothing"), a body that cannot choose to signify or not, that speaks poetically because it has no means other than the poetic to regulate the outcome of an occasion it did not elect. The occasion being, let us say, the inevitable self-presence of the body.

"Hit on," taken up, touched on his blind (his corporeal) side, he (or she, the gender is indifferent) pronounces nonetheless, as an archlover, that is to say as a master of representation (after the manner of Christ speaking to his apostles in preparation for the *transfiguration*: "If any man would follow me, let him deny himself and take up his cross. . . ." [Matt 16: 24ff])—pronounces a stern *ars amatoria*—the "art of love" of the body of the book considered as a person ("Who is he that would become my follower? / Who would sign himself a candidate for my affections? / The way is suspicious, the result uncertain, perhaps destructive, / You would have to give up all else, I alone would expect to be your sole and exclusive standard / Your novitiate would even then be long and exhausting," etc.) Thus speaks the book of the Whitmanian nomothetic or disciplinary master of love—the *esoteric carpenter of a new mediation*, "love of comrades," and of a new institution, "the institution of comrades"—uttering the iron law of the person in relationship: "I am not what you supposed, but far different."¹

The "result is uncertain" because the *incommensurability* criterion required by "the love of comrades" ("comrade" being the mediation that specifies equality) paradoxically entails *invisibility*. There is no image of the incommensurable, as there is no actual social formation characterized by equality, and therefore there is no image of the person. But the sufficient condition of any *actual* state of affairs ("the love of comrades") is *visibility*; and the principle of the institution of visibility is *commensurability* which entails hierarchy (the principle of institution, just so), and hierarchy (the defeat of equality) is the sufficient condition of (poetic) representation, as it is of any *actual* state of affairs (social, linguistic, or perceptual). Thus, the way becomes dangerous; and the only commissioned guide is the esoteric master of representation (poetic knowledge) who keeps the secrets of his

art. What are those secrets? They are the terms of the enigmatic negotiations between *the absolutely contradictory requirements of human value*: friendship based in equality (comradeship), and human presence based in representation (love). The "enigmatic negotiations" of which I speak are the new inactual poetics of the Whitmanian "greatest poet."

Let me put the matter in another way: equality, as Aristotle made clear in his complex theorization of the relationship of comrades (e.g., *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII, vii), is the only sufficient condition of comradeship or friendship, because it is the only just response to the claims of persons in relationship; but equality (which does not mean that persons are of the same specifiable value, but that persons are all possessed of the same incommensurable value-bearing nature) cannot be an actual state of affairs, as the framers of the American Constitution found when they undertook to *institute* the Declaration of Independence. Whitman was well aware that "to be in any form" was to be a represented image to another, and that to *be* in any form—including the human form—implied a judgment as to what could occupy the finite space of appearance. The "prudence" of the "greatest poet" is to mediate this problem. Hence the greatest poet "judges not as the judge judges but as the sun falling around a helpless thing" (LG 713). This is, however, a paradox since *to be in human form* (the only state in which justice is meaningful) requires hierarchy (injustice). All appearance casts a shadow (a "dark patch"). To be just, therefore, requires disappearance from the finite space of the actual such as Whitman's speaker (his book, presenting the greatest poet) enacts and laments. To go the way of the greatest poet (the "equable" one) is precisely uncertain of result, a dangerous way, suspicious, perhaps destructive, presided over by the subjected master (at the edge of actuality) of a paradoxical art which is at once the sufficient condition of universal justice (appearance) and is also by its nature unjust (appearance precludes other appearance): hence, an impossible art or craft, at best the exploit of a few, esoteric.

Accordingly, Whitman's "Calamus" is an *esoteric* pastoral, a narrowing of the genre of the pastoral text toward the problematic of its fundamental motive, knowledge of other minds, or more precisely, *instruction* in the knowledge of other minds.² But what would such knowledge be like? Like touch? Like reading? Like sleep? Or would it be, as William James proposes, somehow (poetic) knowledge of the unknowable ecstasy of others leading to the valorization of all mind? Would it be, therefore, justice at last? The pastoral is, in any case, the schoolroom of poetic representation of the *hetairoi*, the *alter*, the other—the comrade—as a speaker.

Schoolrooms and poems are alike in that both are sites on which instruction is reproduced, and also the possibility conditions of the reproduction of instruction—both the effects of literacy (for example) and the social formations in which literacy can be transmitted. Or, in the case of the poem, it is the site on which instruction is conveyed by a particular poetic text, and the means (as craft, for example) by which texts of that kind can be

reproduced, poems made. This functional likeness of poems to schoolrooms predicts that poems will be found in schoolrooms, and that in poems (such as Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*) schools are found. And as in every schoolroom a schoolmaster, so in every poem the master of poetic knowledge.

Hence, every school is both an exoteric (public) and also an esoteric (secret) institution. In a certain sense, schools are always exoteric, and instruction always conducted in the public light of day, *the agora*, the marketplace. But schools are also, at all times, secret, esoteric, conducted in the dark—never other than the schoolroom of the unsearchable, the most passionate transference which is also the most Egyptian (occult, Harpocratic) wisdom, the source of justice because the beginning in the person of (social) consciousness altogether. In Whitman's pastoral of "Calamus" (*the pastoral of the enigmatic invisibility of the person: highest value, the "life that does not exhibit itself"*), the transference—that esoteric power of explanation for which the speaker in this poem speaks—is constituted of the primal scene of representation itself. More precisely, it is constituted of the logic of the primal scene on the basis of which representation is put in question.

Indeed, the Whitmanian talent, exhibited in the originality of his structures, his "free" verse, consists in the capacity to scrutinize the logic of representation as he received it. This capacity takes the form of an extreme, interrogatory, phenomenological innocence: "This then is life . . . How curious! how real!" (as in "Starting from Paumanok," LG 16). Such is the primal scene in the light of which Whitman views all experience ("the wide flat space," where rises the live oak of Louisiana). In the light of that "space," Whitman undertakes that revision of the fundamental logic of representation (his new poetics, his cure of poetry by poetry) and therefore of the logic of love (since the logic of representation prevents the truth of love for the same reason that it prevents, as we have seen, the actuality of justice). Whitman's reinstatement of love by poetic means is the new thing for which we value him. Such working at (human) value, Whitman reminds us, is the basis of (poetic) value, the value of the poem and the value of the poet.

The speaker in the poem, "Whoever you are holding me now in hand," is to be accounted for as follows: at the moment when (and this is the effective moment of the Whitmanian practice) the material instrument of our discourse, which is *the person*, remembers suddenly *the logic of its own function*, and ceases to carry our messages, our own mystified reports of desire, into the world ("For it is not for what I have put into it that I have written this book") and at that moment begins as *an artifact which is also a person*, to speak for itself on behalf of its own histories—what does it say? It restates *the esoteric terror of its own making as the discipline of access to its nature*. "You would have to give up all else . . . / Your novitiate would even then be long and exhausting, / The whole past theory of your life and all conformity to the lives around you would have to be abandon'd."

To hold the "poet" in hand ("Whoever you are holding me now in hand") as poet (and not another thing)—*the poet whom you love as poet*—is to acknowledge that *the ethical logic of the man/book* to whom you have (because you love him) transferred the otherwise unsecured, secret logic of the intelligibility of your cosmos ("the whole past theory of your life") is *the same as the logic of representation, by which persons appear or do not to one another*. In effect, *the story of the love of the person who is known by reason of representation (because he or she appears) will be already written as the history of representation itself*. Why? Because the story of love always has the same structure as the representations which manifest the lover, so that the healing of the story of love consists of the overcoming of the structure of representation—the freeing of the person from slavery to representation. Such slavery is exemplified by the enforced manifestation of the slave body in parts 7 and 8 of "I Sing The Body Electric" (LG 98, 99). Insofar as the representation is of a new kind, just so far the love of the poet as poet—which is to say the love of the other as comrade, as an agent of my representation—will be love of a new kind. And the coherence of the world—its poetry—will be of a new kind—perhaps just.

All of which is to say that when you "hit on him"—take him in hand, hold him—the one who is the companion utters the laws of his own making: not the laws of procreation (the laws, by and large, of the "Children of Adam"), but the laws of representation or, more precisely, the laws of the instrument of representation as the principle of life. The soul of the carpenter is the statute of his rule, the "calamus." In Virgil's *Eclogues*, where the calamus is at home—"Pan was the first to make many reeds [*calami*] one with wax. / Pan cares for the sheep and the shepherds of the sheep" (*Eclog.* II, 34, 35). The making of many into one (*calamos . . . coniungere pluris*), of nature into representation, kills in one sense and quickens in another. In rhetorical terms, our poem—"Whoever you are holding me now in hand"—is an *ekphrasis* upon Whitman's book as a whole: "These leaves conning you con at peril." In the *ekphrasis* on the artifact, the artifact utters laws—always: "You must change your life" (Rilke), "Beauty is truth" (Keats), "Death is now the Phoenix nest" (Shakespeare).³

Indeed, the originary moment of Whitman's new pastoral—his new genre ("paths untrodden") exploratory of presence unmediated by representation and therefore appropriate to the celebration of the "need of comrades," acknowledged now for the first time as the vocation of the poet hitherto concealed even from himself ("clear to me now . . . that the soul of the man I speak for rejoices in comrades")—lies deep in the prehistory of poetry in the West. It is identical with the prehistory of the practice of any poetic speaker as such, any speaker whom we love as poet and not as any other thing, any messenger whom we value not for *this* message or *that* one, but for the possibility of all messages. Consider, for example, Hermes's salutation to the tortoise in the "Homeric Hymn to Hermes" (the earliest text in Western poetic theory) as it supplies the paradigmatic structure of the mediation signified as "comrade," and tells *the tragic history of which I*

speak. In the hymn, the *hetairos* (the comrade) is none other than the musical instrument carved from the shell of a living tortoise, the lyre, at the moment of its first making. Hermes greets the tortoise whom he is about to destroy in order to make the first lyre in these words: "Hail comrade of the feast (*daitos hetaire*), lovely in shape, sounding at the dance. . . . Living you will be a spell against deceptive witchcraft. But if you die, then you will make sweetest song" (11.51ff.).

Whitman's companion-master (*hetairos*, lyre, book) who speaks by the convention of the artifact in *ekphrasis* and says, "Whoever you are holding me now in hand," remembers the first making of the instrument of representation itself and is a singer (always) of inveterate, tragic histories structured hypotactically upon the violent constraints of exclusive "or," this but not that, *life or sweetest song*—the monologic rhetoric of the master who must be a "sole and exclusive standard." You will notice that Whitman's characteristic *parataxis* signified by the inclusive "or"—"Or else" (1.13); "Or possibly" (1.18); "Or if you will" (1.22)—is suspended in our poem like a dream in school *within* the hypotaxis of the tragic story (that is to say, between 11.1–12 and 11.27–37). How then (since his syntax of justice, paratactic order, is still captive within the hypotaxis of exclusion) can Whitman's song be new?

The originality of Whitman consists of a poetic discourse which presents itself as none other than the speech of the principle of representation which, casting off all other messages, utters in the uncanny language of liminality (Whitman's "free verse" considered as unmeasured, neither unmanifest nor manifest: subvocal, as it were virtual) the logic of its own history (life of one sort in place of life of another sort). In effect, the Whitmanian *poetry of last recourse undertakes what can only be done by poetic means, the cure of poetry by means of poetry of another kind*, the reinvention of representation through the overcoming of representation with the intention of producing by poetic means a "human form" that is truly human because free.

The speech of the esoteric master (we now see) is the speech of the founder by new poetic means of the institution which is the "institution of comrades," the successor institution to the institution of representation: "I hear it was charged against me that I sought to destroy institutions, / But really I am neither for nor against institutions . . . / Only I will establish . . . the institution of . . . comrades" (LG 128). "The institution of comrades" is intended to satisfy the equality criterion of the Declaration of Independence. *The originality of the companion as "greatest poet" is the articulation of the structural possibility-conditions of equality.*

Entrance into the institution of comrades—the polity of "love"—occurs by way of interrogation of the *askesis* (discipline) of representation, the logic of which is specified in the story of the construction of the lyre: "But if you die, you will make the sweetest song." The comrade is the principle of song—not the song of *Love*, but insofar as it is a case of representation, the song of all the love there is—the principle, in effect, of access to *you*. The

"long-dwelling kiss"—the kiss prolonged—is the loving acknowledgment of another, acknowledgment which has been made free (or as free as poetic originality can make it—"long-dwelling," not eternal) of the tragic implications of appearance.

To obtain such access ("kiss") is to throw oneself upon the represented body (the nature of which as representation is the esoteric knowledge of the master) as if it were a vital afterlife (a secular eschatological sleep with death left out) of which the dream is "touch" (as in the playing of an instrument). "For thus merely touching you is enough, is best, / And thus touching you would I silently sleep and be carried eternally." This is the dream in the schoolroom dreamed by the esoteric master, the master of representation who is also a master of love.

The poem disseminated ("carried eternally") shows us what it might mean to "throw oneself upon the represented body" with the confidence of one who understands its terrors and by understanding would defer forever its fatality: "And thus touching you would I silently sleep and be carried eternally." But this "sleep" is also a death, for life in representation other than which there is no life is death-in-life (cf. "Song of Myself," stanza 50).

Who, then, is the follower of this master? Only the ascetic poet, strong enough to enter into the logic of his metier (and, by refraining from representation, live on) can hear this speaker, the schoolmaster of the schoolroom of the esoteric pastoral. ("The way is suspicious, the result uncertain, perhaps destructive.") What then, when it speaks on its own behalf, having put off the mystifications of our messages, does Whitman's book teach? What is the one thing without which all this will be useless? It is in a sense the esoteric truth (continually rediscovered, and hidden again, throughout the history of the world, and throughout the history also of every day, hour, and minute of human intercourse)—the truth of the incommensurability of the highest value—that is to say, *the truth of the incorporeality of corporeality as corporeality enters into the construction of human presence* which is what erotic love means to Whitman, the truth of it.

I will express this discovery as a set of four Whitman principles:

The first Whitman principle is that the person is the esoteric, that the esoteric is love which exacts acknowledgment of the invisible ("I am not what you supposed, but far different"), and that the school of the person is the esoteric school of the blind mirror of radical transference by which the invisible comes to be acknowledged as source, as first experience. The enactment of this acknowledgment is "the long-dwelling kiss" of the new husband, the comrade, which is prolonged within the context of the grammar of *scarcity*: the syntax of parataxis and inclusive "or" suspended within the syntax of hypotaxis and exclusive "or."

How is this "long-dwelling kiss" extricated from the actual state of affairs? By means, as I have indicated, of the paratactic countergrammar (or logic) of infinite resource—of which the determinator is the inclusive "or"

("Or else," "Or possibly," "Or if you will") which supplies the structure of the parataxis—the dream in school of that counterinstitution—the institution of comrades which is constructed by the speaker, the companion, the *metier* personified, the lyre, *the voice you hear*. The inclusive "or" is the signature in Whitman of the subjunctivity (counterfactuality, virtuality) of the discourse which takes itself into consideration as capable of justice and puts in question the fatality of representation.

The second Whitman principle is that all mediation is hierarchical (whether open or closed, free or bound, paratactic or hypotactic). "Nor will the candidates for my love (unless at most a very few) prove victorious." The book as speaker—stern master of the esoteric truth of the invisibility of the person—is also unmistakably the archetypal erotic subordinate, the one who is taken up and held, the lyre, the lover carried by the grace of the other into the absence of the other ("Carry me when you go forth over land or sea"), the beloved *hetairos* who dies, departs as air, waits patiently.

The third Whitman principle follows: All mediations are *techne* and all *techne* is nonethical, or (as Whitman prefers to express it) symmetrically ambivalent more or less: "Nor will my poems do good only, they will do just as much evil, perhaps more." Therefore representation, like all *techne*, in order to be put in service of the person, requires regulation. The regulative mimesis of this poem (it is after all a lecture), and the source of the speaker's despair ("Put me down and depart on your way," "Therefore release me and depart on your way"), is the always questionable problematic of the school: instruction considered as the paradoxical teaching of the regulative principles of nonethical representational technology: *what to do with what you hold in hand*—an ambiguous lesson in courtesy.

Whether you understand it to be the lyre, the calamus, or the book, there must be a regulative principle to contribute the *wisdom*, the ethical destination and the deeply Whitmanian courtesy of the *techne*, the sexual delicacy of the new husband, his human form: "Here to put your lips upon mine I permit you." The regulative principle, the *wisdom*, is exoteric and public, as the *techne* is Hermetic and esoteric. The former (the exoteric, the public, the ethical) dwells within the latter (the esoteric, the secret, the nonethical) in Whitman's text. That is, the Whitmanian paratactic reconstruction of public culture in the interest of abundance and intersubjectivity dwells structurally within, and is dependent on *the equally Whitmanian hypotactic culture of scarcity and monadological solitude*. Further, the hypotactic is prior—that kingdom of scarcity, that "wide flat space" in which is found the live oak of other mind.

The fourth Whitman principle is, in fact, the impossibility of teaching these principles ("Therefore release me and depart on your way")—these principles of the esoteric master, in whose school of love the instruction (by the nature of the lesson) *always* concludes with the sentence: "I am not what

you suppose but far different." Such is the unassimilable lesson—desolate and fruitful—of the incommensurability of the person, the esoteric lesson, impossible to learn, and taught if at all by the esoteric master who is impossible to satisfy, which produces, nonetheless, the silent moment—the silence of unanswerability—to which I referred as the valid moment of the poetic intervention at the beginning of these "remarks" when I said: "It seems to me that all valid poems begin at the moment when speech of the poetic kind is seen to be the only recourse of the speaker—when, therefore, the criterion of speech of the poetic kind is seen to be 'your sole and exclusive standard.'" That standard—the poetic standard—establishes the difference of the person which is in the end always "far different." A difference by its nature always too far. But what is the insatiate *logic* that grounds and impels the Whitmanian confrontation with the impossibility of which the poem speaks? It is, perhaps, none other than the logic of the desire to prolong *this kiss*.

Notes

1. Whitman's sense of the word "companion" derives, by whatever route, from Greek, *hetairos*, fundamentally the subject-other who dies—as in the case of Achilles's Patroklos, or Gilgamesh's Enkidu, or Hesiod's tortoise in the "Homeric Hymn to Hermes" (see discussion later in this essay), but also Dante's Beatrice or James's Milly Theale. This "companion" figure is in the position of the discursive other, the other by reference to whom (and as a consequence of whose death) the self becomes real. The companion (*hetairos*) of tradition may be either male or female. The "carpenter" is of course a reference to Whitman's pictured self-image placed (instead of a signature or printed authorial name) opposite the title page of the first edition of the *Leaves of Grass*. Christ, like Whitman, was a (part-time) carpenter.

2. "Calamus" as a whole book within Whitman's Book is a reinvention of the genre of pastoral within the epic-scriptural discourse of *Leaves of Grass*. Pastoral, from Virgil's time at least, presents the relationship of two at the moment of the loss of the social conditions which make "comradeship" actual, that is to say at the moment of any person's entrance into history—*comradeship* being the just mutuality of two, sufficient knowledge of another mind; and *history* being the state (in representation) which renders comradeship unjust and therefore impossible, the state of representation as such. Whether the actual is figured as imperial appropriation (e.g., Virgil, *Eclogue* I), or as the death of Lycidas which the muses cannot prevent, because that death is the shadow entailed by representation itself which the muses signify, in either case, in pastoral *one person of two in relationship* has always already been displaced or destroyed. Whitman's "new" pastoral is an effort to return out of history to the prehistoric pastoral *topos* reconstructed as the life rid of the fatality of appearance—reconstructed, that is to say, as "Escaped from the life that exhibits itself" (LG 112). In effect, the pastoral is a schoolroom of the recovery *per impossibile* of knowledge of the friend.

3. *Ekphrasis*. A poem about an artifact in which (in the end) the artifact

declares by speaking (somehow) the rules of its own making *as if they were ethical imperatives*. Modern examples are: Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" ("Beauty is truth, truth beauty, That is all / Ye know on earth, and all Ye need to know."); Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo" (*Du must dein Leben ändern* / "You must change your life"); Shakespeare's "Phoenix and the Turtle" in which the emblem speaks the meaning of its construction, "Death is now the Phoenix nest." Whitman produces this poem ("Whoever you are holding me now in hand") constituted entirely of the speech of the artifact (his book, *Leaves of Grass*) personified as the masterwork which knows the rules of its own construction and promulgates them. Since in Whitman's poem the book is personified, such rules are rules of access to the meanings ("I am not what you supposed, but far different") and the incommensurable value ("already . . . I have escaped from you") of other persons. The artifact may of course signify sexually (cf. Rilke's "Archaic Torso"), but is not gendered (as artifacts are not). Anyone may join (of whatever class, sex, or gender) the institution of comrades provided they can endure the abstractness of the discipline which promulgates the principle—not freedom but justice. The abstractness of the discipline of just personal presence is what makes the way "suspicious," "uncertain," "perhaps destructive." Such is, in fact, Whitman's "breakthrough."

8

Errata sobre la erótica, or the Elision of Whitman's Body

JORGE SALESSI and JOSÉ QUIROGA

"[A]nd believe it, gentlemen, or believe it not, when I got up next morning I had no more *slept* with Socrates, within the meaning of the act, than if he'd been my father or an elder brother. You can guess what I felt like after *that*. I was torn between my natural humiliation and my admiration for his manliness and self-control, for this was strength of mind such as I had never hoped to meet."

Alcibiades in *The Symposium* (104)

The voice in italics is Argentinean, the second voice may be Cuban. The first voice will narrate an erotic encounter mediated by a book.

It was Petronius's Satyricon, a scholarly reference at this point and in this context, but at that time a handbook of amatory desire between men, read for different literary values than the ones we might speak of in this essay. But maybe not. Then as now, Petronius was the intertext of dreams, the replication of an unending sexual urge that I (that Argentinean I) was desperate to share with schoolmates, especially with my "best (male) friend," the Giton of my Argentine Rome (Giton, the lover). But the reaction of my native Giton disappointed me. "You are funny" he said, and maybe it was true, sharing Petronius under Perón (Perón, Evita's husband). But I (that Argentinean I) persisted, and wanted to look for a way out of this more than textual impasse. Then I found Whitman (one always finds Whitman at this time), and invited my friend for a textual romp in a tree house. There, fondling and embracing more than Whitman over Leaves of Grass, but also above them, it worked. "I celebrate and sing myself," he said, and I said (he said). "And what I assume you shall assume." Line by line, a double voice emerged, Whitman a duo, translating, resurrecting, eroticizing, a certain Whitman (Walt, the hemispheric poet). The body of Whitman (the body of the father figure called Whitman) was the body that we could imagine being seduced by.

These Argentine bodies implicitly asked a question about Whitman; they assumed a certain knowledge of their body and of their desire by the medi-