

# THE LANGUAGE OF SEXUALITY: WALT WHITMAN AND GALWAY KINNELL

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IN A 1972 INTERVIEW WITH GALWAY KINNELL, James McKenzie asserted, "Whitman is someone that sooner or later almost every American poet feels that he has to come to terms with." Kinnell responded, "Yes, though of course few have done so."<sup>1</sup> Kinnell is one of those few, acknowledging boldly at every opportunity his indebtedness to Whitman. Kinnell's critical writing and interviews frequently center on a discussion of Whitman, whom he considers to be "our greatest poet."<sup>2</sup> Lee Zimmerman remarks in his discussion of Kinnell that "With Whitman, we may properly speak of influence rather than mere affinity."<sup>3</sup>

Kinnell was in his twenties before he "really discovered" Whitman, as he explained in a 1971 interview. As a younger reader, he could not fully appreciate the "mystically physical" quality of Whitman's verse. He continued, "The young are both too down-to-earth, and too spiritual, to take to that. The teenager is almost gnostic in his dualism."<sup>4</sup> Nearly sixteen years later, in his introduction to a book, which he edited, entitled *The Essential Whitman*, Kinnell elaborates more fully:

Luckily, when I was teaching at the University of Grenoble in my late twenties, I was required to give a course on Whitman. My experience of his work then was intense, the more so because, in a foreign country, it was my one real connection to my own language. Soon I understood that poetry could be transcendent, hymnlike, a cosmic song, and yet remain idolatrously attached to the creatures and things of our world. Under Whitman's spell I stopped writing in rhyme and meter and in rectangular stanzas and turned to long-lined, lobsely cadenced verse; and at once I felt immensely liberated. Once again, as when I first began writing, it seemed it might be possible to say everything in poetry.

With no hint of any Bloomian anxiety of influence, Kinnell asserts, "Whitman has been my principal master."<sup>5</sup>

Anticipating and reflecting much contemporary literary theory, Whitman and Kinnell express a preoccupation with the relationship between language and the physical world. In his essay "Walt Whitman's Indicative Words," Kinnell writes, "Whitman's love of words was not, as was Pound's, literary, referential, and etymological. Whitman loved words as physical entities. But entities can become physical only through attachment to reality."<sup>6</sup> Closely connected to his fascination with language is Kinnell's recurring emphasis on physicality and sexu-

ality in his poetry. When Kinnell abandoned traditional rhyme and meter it was because he had learned from Whitman that poetry could at once be transcendent and “idolatrously attached to the creatures and things of our world” (*Essential*, 3). Ultimately, Whitman and Kinnell are concerned with revealing the ideal within the real, the spiritual within the physical.

Whitman’s attitudes about language were confirmed, if not initiated, by Emerson. In “The Poet” Emerson asserts that the poet’s role is to “re-attach things to nature and the Whole” in an effort to explore more fully the relationship between sign and signified. He continues: “We are far from having exhausted the significance of the few symbols we use. . . . Every word was once a poem. Every new relation is a new word.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, he concludes, “The vocabulary of an omniscient man would embrace words and images excluded from polite conversation.”<sup>8</sup> As if in response, in one of his notebooks Whitman defends his choice of language and subjects in *Leaves of Grass*:

What would be thought of a surgeon or physician who should be delicate and know only the body as it appears in fashionable costume?—What is more real than sex? What is there at all the facts of existence but procreation?—These are the very things—what misses these, misses all. There is just the same reason for my poems, and what they seek to do, to include sex and procreation, as there is for the physician to include them.<sup>9</sup>

Because Whitman believed the poet was responsible for presenting human existence in its entirety, he frequently found it necessary to “breach propriety” in his works.

Kinnell’s “The Waking” exhibits a similar “breach in propriety,” a reflection of his Whitmanesque appreciation for sexual language in poetry. Clearly echoing Whitman’s use of “loveroot,” “lovevines,” “love-blossoms,” and “love-leaves”—to name a few of Whitman’s words—Kinnell speaks of lovers lying in their “love-sleep” after experiencing the “love-light” of a sexual encounter. His insistence in the following passage of the vulgar description of their lovemaking reflects Whitman’s ideas about the need for language to convey blatantly the physicality of human existence. Kinnell writes,

What has just happened between the lovers,

. . . .  
. . . is called “lovemaking.”

But lovers who come exalted to their trysts,  
who come to each other from opposite directions  
along a path by the sea, through the pines,  
meet, embrace, go up from the sea,  
make love, lie crushed into each other  
under the all-golden sky already deep-blueing  
its moon and stars into shining, know  
they don’t “make” love, which is, was, will be,

but are earth-creatures chosen by moon pull  
to live and flow and—here no other word will do—  
fuck one another forever if possible across the stars.<sup>10</sup>

In a 1976 interview with Margaret Edwards, Kinnell elaborated on the connection between language and sex. Jean-Paul Sartre, Kinnell recalled, believed that people communicate most deeply “in a relationship that combines friendship with sexual love. He spoke about how language itself comes from the deepest place, from sex, particularly when love is involved” (*Walking*, 112). Thus, when Kinnell writes of lovers “in the holy days of their vanity,”<sup>11</sup> he is emphasizing the intensity of communication expressed through the body. He shares with Whitman the desire to remind humanity of the sacredness of sexuality.

F. O. Matthiessen points out that while both Emerson and Whitman agreed that the symbolic nature of language admits of a dichotomy between the material and the ideal, Whitman was more successful at bridging that gap in his verse.<sup>12</sup> More specifically, as Jon Rosenblatt explains, Whitman believed that language and the human body are equals. Drawing on the first sections of “Song of Myself” where Whitman writes “my tongue, every atom of my blood [is] form’d from this soul, this air,” Rosenblatt explains:

If the tongue, which produces speech, is physical, why should poetry itself not be physical? The poetic voice is not a mental phenomenon that enters the physical world from above or below; it is a bodily production . . . . Language is as much a body as the poet who produces language is a body.<sup>13</sup>

Whitman’s verse exudes energy drawn from his understanding of the need to convey to the reader a sense of the bodily presence of the poet. “Who touches this touches a man,” Whitman wrote, and Rosenblatt suggests that the “poem-as-body offers Whitman the possibility of purifying his own mortal body, which has failed to provide him with the guiltless sexual contact with others that he desires.”<sup>14</sup>

Whitman’s reference to the tongue is clearly alluded to in a passage from “The Waking” where Kinnell writes, “The true word, if it exists, exists *inside* the tongue.”<sup>15</sup> The need for poetry to express the physicality of life is discussed in an essay Kinnell wrote in the early seventies entitled “The Poetics of the Physical World.” The “absolutely modern” poem, he asserts, avoids poetic beauty and uses as subjects the ordinary:

[It] also discards the inner conventions of poetry—conventions whose function was to give us ways of coming to terms with our feelings. The more entrenched the conventions, the quicker they dismiss the feelings and get to the terms. Or they so imbue us with conventional feelings that we no longer feel at all.<sup>16</sup>

Sherman Hawkins asserts that in Kinnell's "Avenue C" Whitman's voice is most clearly heard; he continues, "Here at last the real and ideal are not juxtaposed in contrast or set in transcendent sequence: they blend and mingle; they become one."<sup>17</sup> While Kinnell's verse may seem to follow a Platonic pattern, moving from the real to the ideal, more accurately it should be described as discovering the mysterious within the things of this earth.<sup>18</sup>

Gay Wilson Allen discusses Whitman's evolution from Cartesian dualism, the subjugation of body to mind to which he was heir, to reverence for the physicality of life, particularly sexuality. Allen quotes from Whitman's notebook entries written around the time he was preparing the first publication of *Leaves of Grass*. The soul, Whitman claims,

is always under the beautiful laws of physiology . . . it makes itself visible only through matter—a perfect head, and bowels and bones to match is the easy gate through which it comes from its embowered garden, and pleasantly appears to the sight of the world . . . My life is a miracle and my body which lives is a miracle; but of what I can nibble at the edges of the limitless and delicious wonder I know that I cannot separate them, and call one superior and the other inferior, any more than I can say my sight is greater than my eyes.<sup>19</sup>

Early in "Song of Myself," Whitman writes, "Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul. / Lack one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen" (*Essential*, 15). He claims, in Section 21, to be "poet of the body" as well as "poet of the soul" (*Essential*, 33) and later declares, "I have said that the soul is not more than the body, / And I have said that the body is not more than the soul" (*Essential*, 73). *Leaves of Grass* openly celebrates the communion of body and soul.

In *The Essential Whitman* Kinnell includes the poem most commonly known as "I Sing the Body Electric," the title Whitman gave it in the final edition of *Leaves*. Kinnell's version, however, uses the earlier title, "Poem of the Body." The poem begins with descriptions of the "expression of the body" as seen in men and women at work. As the poem progresses, however, the focus becomes more specific until in the final section Whitman catalogs the entire anatomy. "If life and the soul are sacred," he cries, "the human body is sacred," and he concludes with the assertion, "I think now these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul, / O I think these are the soul" (*Essential*, 95-96). The role of the Adamic poet, as James E. Miller, Jr., maintains in his discussion of this poem, is to teach us that "the soul takes its origin solely from the body, that the soul and the body are inseparably one."<sup>20</sup>

"Poem of the Body" appeals to Kinnell because it includes every aspect of human bodies, not overlooking "the contact and odor of them

that pleases the soul well” or “digestion” and “sweat”; Whitman praises even those body parts usually considered less attractive, such as armpits, lung-sponges, the stomach-sac, and “the bowels sweet and clean” (*Essential*, 96). In “Song of Myself,” he announces “Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and clean, / Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and none shall be less familiar than the rest” (*Essential*, 15). When he introduces “Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos,” he adds to his description, “Disorderly fleshly and sensual, eating drinking and breeding, / No sentimentalist—no stander above men and women or apart from them—no more modest than immodest” (*Essential*, 37). In that same section he defends his explicit attention to human physicality:

I keep as delicate around the bowels as around the head and heart,  
Copulation is no more rank to me than death is.

I believe in the flesh and the appetites,  
Seeing hearing and feeling are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle.

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touched from,  
The scent of armpits is aroma finer than prayer,  
This head is more than churches or bibles or creeds.

If I worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread of my own body, or  
any part of it. . . . (*Essential*, 38)

A few sections later he blasts the concept of the body as a “callous shell,” arguing instead that the human body is the conductor for the ultimate experience: the ability to come in physical contact with another person (*Essential*, 42-43).

In a 1971 essay Kinnell wrote, “The great thing about Whitman is that he knew *all* of our being must be loved, if we are to love any of it.” He goes on to say, “I have often thought there should be a book called *Shit*, telling us that what comes out of the body is no less a part of reality, no less sacred, than what goes into it; only a little less nourishing.”<sup>21</sup> Repeatedly Kinnell’s poetry echoes sentiments he shares with Whitman regarding the sacredness of the human body. In “Primer for the Last Judgment” he hypothesizes that the end of the world may come through wars “Exploding flesh off the innocent bones,” but more likely it will happen more slowly and in “crueler ways”; human existence will be destroyed, he asserts, by “Dread of the body, the passion to subdue.”<sup>22</sup> Lines from several of his poems reveal humanity’s aversion to natural functions of the body; in one the persona hears the “TV groaning at the smells of the human body,” and in another the television screen announces that we should avoid “a body that sweats,” “sweat that has odor,” and “armpits sprouting hair.”<sup>23</sup> Kinnell mocks that

attitude, pointing out that humanity has a warped sense of the relationship between body and soul. "Flying Home" illustrates this point when the persona recalls standing in the airport men's room and noticing that men "washed their hands after touching / their penises—when it might have been more in accord / with the lost order to wash first, then touch" (*MAMW*, 70). In the more somber tone of these lines memorializing his dead brother, Kinnell shows that individuality is possible only through the physicality of human existence. "It is true," he writes, "that only flesh dies, and spirit flowers without stop":

But an incarnation is in particular flesh  
And the dust that is swirled into a shape  
And crumbles and is swirled again had but one shape  
That was this man. When he is dead the grass  
Heals what he suffered, but he remains dead,  
And the few who loved him know this until they die. (*Avenue*, 99)

Elsewhere Kinnell affirms, "The mind / Can only know what the blood has accomplished" (*Avenue*, 63). Regardless of their beliefs about the immortality of the soul, the living will feel pain over the physical loss of loved ones since the body made love possible to begin with.

In a 1988 documentary on Whitman, Kinnell observed that Section 5 of "Song of Myself" "describes a sexual act that is as explicit as you can possibly get." Elaborating on the subject, he continued:

Whitman had one overriding ambition . . . to get sex and the body into poetry. And he couldn't do it as explicitly as I think he would have liked; the amazing thing is that he did it at all.<sup>24</sup>

Sexuality is, for Kinnell and Whitman, the most sacred dimension of human physicality and the ultimate means of communication between two individuals. "I think it's the opposite of what Plato thought," Kinnell commented in an interview: "I think that if people know each other only mind to mind they hardly know each other at all" (*Walking*, 109). In that same conversation, he states that "language itself comes from the deepest place, from sex" (*Walking*, 112). In "Song of Myself," Whitman poses the rhetorical question, "What is less or more than a touch? / Logic and sermons never convince, / The damp of the night drives deeper in my soul" (*Essential*, 44). Elaborating on this idea, Kinnell affirms in "Flying Home" that it is "good—and harder—" for lovers of many years to hold each other:

. . . to need  
the whole presence of the other  
so badly that the two together  
wrench their souls from the future  
in which each mostly wanders alone

. . . . .  
[and] find they hold,  
perhaps shimmering a little,  
or perhaps almost spectral, only the loved  
other in their arms. (MAMW, 70)

Thus, Kinnell's verse echoes Whitman's not only in its claim that the soul is not to be revered above the body but in its understanding of humanity's need to realign itself with the rest of creation. In "Poetry, Personality and Death," Kinnell refers to the "closed ego of modern man, the neurotic burden which to some degree cripples us all":

I mean that ego which separates us from the life of the planet, which keeps us apart from one another . . . which thwarts our deepest desire, which is to be one with all creation.

This separation, however, is self-inflicted:

Our alienation is in proportion to our success in subjugating it. The more we conquer nature, the more nature becomes our enemy, and since we are, like it or not, creatures of nature, the more we make an enemy of the very life within us.<sup>25</sup>

Kinnell's personae struggle to understand that part of their being which is animal in nature and to recognize sexuality as an ultimate expression of their kinship with the rest of creation. And while this is just one area in which Kinnell is indebted to Whitman, our understanding of this shared theme leads to a more accurate reading of Kinnell's verse and helps place this major voice in contemporary poetry firmly within the Romantic tradition in American literature.

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## NOTES

1 "To the Roots: An Interview with Galway Kinnell," *Contemporary Poetry in America: Essays and Interviews*, ed. Robert Boyers (New York: Schocken, 1974), 247.

2 McKenzie, 247.

3 *Intricate and Simple Things: The Poetry of Galway Kinnell* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 8.

4 *Walking Down the Stairs: Selections from Interviews* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1978), 21. Subsequent references are noted within the text as *Walking*.

5 Walt Whitman, *The Essential Whitman*, selected and with an Introduction by Galway Kinnell (New York: Ecco, 1987), 3. Subsequent references are noted within the text as *Essential*.

6 *The American Poetry Review* (March/April 1973), 9-11. Rpt. in *Walt Whitman's Autograph Revision of the Analysis of Leaves of Grass (For Dr. R. M. Bucke's Walt*

*Whitman*), ed. Quentin Anderson and Stephen Railton (New York: New York University Press, 1974), 53-63; *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*, ed. Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom, Dan Campion (Minneapolis: Holy Cow!, 1981), 215-227.

7 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 229.

8 Emerson, 229.

9 Michael Rowan Dressman, "Walt Whitman's Study of the English Language." Diss. (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1974), 234.

10 *The Past* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), 49.

11 *Mortal Acts Mortal Words* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 61. Subsequent references are noted within the text as *MAMW*.

12 F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), 522.

13 Jon Rosenblatt, "Whitman's Body, Whitman's Language," *Walt Whitman: Here and Now*, ed. Joann P. Krieg (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1985), 103.

14 Rosenblatt, 104.

15 *The Past*, 49.

16 "The Poetics of the Physical World," *Iowa Review*, 2.3 (1971), 117.

17 Sherman Hawkins, "Galway Kinnell: Moments of Transcendence," *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 25(1963), 63.

18 Hawkins, 60.

19 Gay Wilson Allen, "The Realm of Whitman's Ideas: Nature," *Critical Essays on Walt Whitman*, ed. James Woodress (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983), 286.

20 James E. Miller, Jr. *A Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 42.

21 "Poetry, Personality, and Death," *Field* 4 (1971), 70.

22 *The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ Into The New World* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), 23. Subsequent references are noted in the text as *Avenue*.

23 *The Book of Nightmares* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), 42.

24 "Walt Whitman," prod. Jill Janows, et al. *Voices & Visions*. PBS.

25 "Poetry, Personality, and Death," 61.