

"THE FRAILEST LEAVES OF ME":
A STUDY OF THE TEXT AND MUSIC FOR
WHITMAN'S "TO WHAT YOU SAID"

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Here the frailest leaves of me and yet my strongest lasting,
Here I shade and hide my thoughts, I myself do not expose them,
And yet they expose me more than all my other poems.¹

IN HIS 1860 *CALAMUS* POEMS Walt Whitman chose the metaphor of fragile leaves to suggest not only the most naked thoughts which lie beneath his verse, but also the bond of intimacy that links poet to reader. Frail might the leaves have been, but hardy too, for such is the meaning of the calamus image—the grass which stands firmly rooted in earth, blowing freely in the wind, delicate and defiant. The calamus metaphor runs throughout Whitman's verse from the 1860s onward and with it the recurring themes of the love of comrades, the bond of male love (both erotic and platonic), the wonders of the human body, and the charge to a young nation to cast off the chains of convention and celebrate the myriad of human experiences.

One fragile calamus leaf was found among the scraps of paper that constituted Whitman's manuscript for *Democratic Vistas*: the scribbled pencil text of a nine-line unpublished poem, "To What You Said." Composer Leonard Bernstein, attracted by the cachet of mystery surrounding this lost poem, chose the text to represent the Bard in his 1976 cycle *Songfest*. The Bernstein setting (together with recent performances and recordings of the song) has underscored the puzzles of the poem: the questions concerning its dating; its addressee; the reasons for its remaining unpublished; a probing of its textual relationships to other poems; and the enhanced, revealing, and even transforming dimension music brings to meaning.

Although almost nothing has been written about the poem in any organized critical way—among the editions of Whitman's poetry the text appears only in the *Comprehensive Reader's Edition*—the assumption there and among scholars has been that it is a *Calamus* poem dating from the 1860 period; that its content is clearly homosexual; and that the very confessional nature of the lines caused Whitman to abandon them. A closer study of the manuscript itself and of Whitman's letters and diaries, a re-examination of crucial biographical events, an extensive comparative textual analysis, as well as a response to the subtleties

revealed when the written word is sung, suggest some new hypotheses about the poem's context and a new interpretation of its significance.

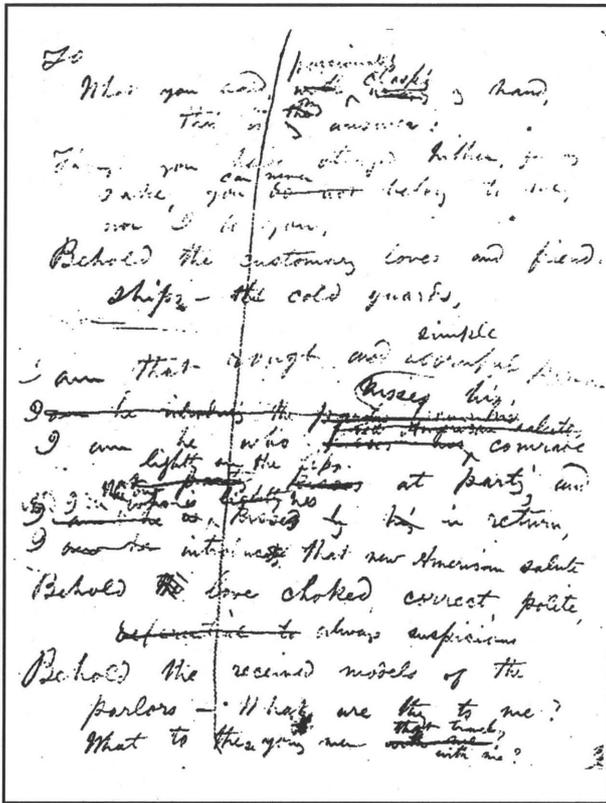


Figure 1. Manuscript of "To What You Said." Feinberg Collection, Library of Congress.

The place to begin such an inquiry is in an examination of the hard evidence—the fragile manuscript in the Charles E. Feinberg Collection of the Library of Congress (see Figure 1). The poem is nestled away on the verso of page 30 of the manuscript for *Democratic Vistas*, which was ultimately published in 1871. It is written in the poet's broad, loping hand in pencil on a 6 x 8 yellowed sheet of paper with small perforations that substitute for water marks; a portion of the bottom of the sheet has been torn off irregularly, and there are coffee stains. The recto, which contains a penciled page of *Democratic Vistas*, shows a similar hand. The top of the poem side is the bottom of the *Democratic Vistas* side, perhaps suggesting that Whitman simply grabbed a sheet from a pile of other papers and reutilized it as he was drafting *Democratic Vistas*.

Whitman's habit of reusing paper makes his manuscripts a particular nightmare for scholars, and *Democratic Vistas* is especially problem-

atic. It consists of what Whitman himself called “a collection of memoranda” with “passages of it written at widely different times.”² This is immediately apparent: there are scraps of varying size and vintage, some as small as a torn-off slip with dimensions less than 3 x 5, others written on the back of recycled printed circulars or torn-up larger sheets, and some pasted together with glue. Among the versos of the manuscript which have printed material are a flyer for the YMCA, a tax document from the City of Williamsburg, and a torn-up 1793 legal document. The group of recycled official documents clearly indicates that this was paper salvaged during his tenure in the Attorney General’s Office (it looks as if he may have scavenged the wastebaskets) sometime after 1865 but before the 1867 magazine publication of part 1 of *Democratic Vistas* and the 1868 magazine publication of part 2. All the scraps are numbered in the poet’s own hand; they were clearly assembled this way prior to the book publication of *Democratic Vistas* in 1871 and sent to the printer to be deciphered. A very rough galley was then prepared which Whitman edited, making many revisions in pencil on the printed proofs. There are also three pages that are written on the verso of notes in Whitman’s own hand: one is a large page of penciled jottings on a historical theme, the second a historical notation about Washington, and the third, on the verso of page 58, a faint but interesting fragment. It reads: “Some peculiarly candid and courageous souls there are in the States; / Them I charge to diffuse these words among the young men.”³

Whenever Whitman revised something, even the fragmentary and pasted-together draft of *Democratic Vistas*, he not only crossed out as he went along, but most often he wrote down ideas and then went back to them; this is clear from the mixture of pen and pencil on a single page and from the completed thoughts, later scratched out and reworked. In contrast, “To What You Said” appears to have been written in a single sitting; the cross-outs and corrections are made mid-sentence; an idea once begun is often not finished before the bold scratch-outs let Whitman move on to a new thought, and only in the most heavily revised middle section are there several false starts. The final version reads:

To what you said, passionately clasping my hand, this is my answer:
 Though you have strayed hither, for my sake, you can never belong to me, nor I to
 you,
 Behold the customary loves and friendships—the cold guards
 I am that rough and simple person
 I am he who kisses his comrade lightly on the lips at parting, and I am one who is
 kissed in return,
 I introduce that new American salute
 Behold love choked, correct, polite, always suspicious
 Behold the received models of the parlors—What are they to me?
 What to these young men that travel with me?

An examination of the changes Whitman made, however, suggests the poet's thought process and indicates the directions he wished to take the poem. Line 1 obviously began with "What" (capital W) and then inserted "To," raising the interesting possibility that he meant the "To" as an address to someone, then integrated it into the syntax of the revised line. The first draft read "What you said wringing my hand this is my [changed to 'the' and back to 'my'] answer"; clasping is an obvious gentling of "wringing"; "my" a gentling of the hard, cold "the." In line 2 "you do not belong to me" was replaced with the softer "can never belong"—equally firm, and clearly inevitable, but far less threatening—while the penning of the first part of that verse is remarkably sure, the possible autobiographical circumstances of someone straying never in doubt. Line 3 is also unrevised; this key idea is surely and swiftly penned in manuscript as "the customary loves and friendships, the cold guards." In line 4 "scornful" is replaced by "simple" though not crossed out—as if it were a considered alternative he never got back to, and as such it is again softer, less belligerent, more considerate of the addressee's feelings.

Line 5 bears the most intense revisions—clearly Whitman was struggling to find the correct expression for what he must have regarded as the most crucial message of the poem. What became "I am he who kisses his comrade lightly on the lips at parting" went through the following changes: (1) "I am he introducing the parting from his"; (2) ". . . the new American salute; And I am one who is kissed in return"; then further toying with (a) "And I am he"; (b) "~~that one~~ who parting kisses"; (c) "who kisses at parting and who is"; (d) "who is lightly kissed by him in return." Line 6, "I am he introducing the new American salute," became the far more aggressively active "I introduce that new American salute," while line 7, "Behold the love choked, correct, polite, deferential to . . .," grew into "Behold love choked, correct, polite, always suspicious."

In contrast to the multitude of revisions for the previous three verses, line 8 is unrevised, indicating how easily the image of "the received models of the parlors" came to Whitman. He changes line 9, "What to the young men with me?," to "What to these young men that travel with me?," thus introducing not only the metaphoric journey, but also reinforcing the theme of comradeship and including the element of distance that the demonstrative pronoun and the less personal "travel" bring.

What can one conclude about the origins and inspiration of the poem from the evidence of the manuscript itself? Certainly, a positive dating of "To What You Said" is impossible based solely on the hard copy evidence, though one can make some reasonable assumptions: (1) while Whitman reused paper regularly, the scraps (i.e., the government forms) point to the period he was actually writing *Democratic Vistas*; (2) it is not likely that Whitman carried around a *Calamus* scrap for eleven

years only to use its backside to scribble a page of *Democratic Vistas*. It is more logical to conclude that Whitman reused *unneeded* paper; the *Democratic Vistas* manuscript, *after* it had been printed, would itself have become scrap. This suggests that "To What You Said" was written in 1871 or later. The significance of the textual revisions raises even more interesting issues. All the changes Whitman made indicate that he was moving to soften the harshness of the poem and to transform the personal into the universal and the merely confessional into the prophetic. If "To What You Said" is addressed to someone specific, as the "To," the tone, and the unchanged boldness of the statement about "straying hither" suggest, then it was clearly gentled in order not to hurt feelings. Moreover, one sees from the manuscript that the area of greatest philosophical concern for the poet was the middle section, where Whitman fussed with how best to articulate the bond among comrades—how to shade the kissing. The changes he ultimately settled upon move the poem from a declaration of male love to a statement of an elevated act of reciprocal, soul-deep bonded affection in which the images of the American salute, the parlour conventions, and the metaphoric journey figure boldly as part of the main theme. Indeed, the journey concept is a familiar one—as old as the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*—and yet as recent as some of the late poems where the journey grows even lonelier, as in "Whispers of Heavenly Death," "Songs of Parting," "Passage to India," and "Prayer of Columbus."

Whitman recycled not only paper but also themes for his poetry. *Leaves of Grass*, after all, grew organically; "Song of Myself" was the kernel which took root and blossomed into other verse. And while it is true that virtually every major image contained in the first edition is also present in the deathbed edition, it is also true that there is an evolving pattern of images that argues compellingly against an earlier dating of the poem. The journey theme, for example, is an ever present Whitman subject but one which increases in frequency between 1869 and 1871, especially in poems like "Darest thou now O Soul," "The Last Invocation," "Whispers of Heavenly Death," "Joy, Shipmate Joy!," "Untold Want," "Portals," "Now Finalè to the Shore," "Passage to India," "Prayer of Columbus," and "Gliding Over All." All of these poems endow travel with a new metaphysical aspect. We need only examine the references to the voyage of the intellect and soul, the mystic marriage, and the journey of the soul to primal thought in "Passage to India" to understand this intensified significance. The same is true of Whitman's notions of the "customary loves," "the cold guards," and "the received models of the parlors"—which are repeatedly invoked in *Democratic Vistas*: "I should demand a programme of culture drawn not for a single class alone or for the parlors or lecture rooms . . ."; "not dapper little gentlemen from abroad who flood us with their sentiments of the parlors, parasols, and piano songs" (CPP, 962, 965).

Less frequently employed is the key image of the “new American salute.” The only place this appears at all in the same form is in the *Calamus* poem, “Behold This Swarthy Face” (“that salute of American comrades”), where we also find the lines about kissing “lightly on the lips” and “kiss[ing] in return.” This might offer a significant clue about the dating of “To What You Said” were it not for the fact that “Behold This Swarthy Face” underwent a revision process from its first printing in 1860 to the time of its final draft in 1871—a process which parallels the progressive change in Whitman’s entire body of imagery over the decade. An examination of the changes in this *Calamus* poem indicate that Whitman began in manuscript with a guarded reference to the love of comrades, toyed with revisions to make it more intimate and personal in the galleys and first changes, and eventually in 1871 returned to a more distanced approach, very much in keeping with the spirit of the revisions in “To What You Said,” where the poet added a mythical dimension to this love of comrades.⁴

Another 1871 poem, “Gods,” sheds similar light on the progression of this core theme. The poet starts with an enumeration of his gods, beginning with the personal and erotic admiration of the male body (“Lover divine and perfect Comrade”)—a theme first sounded in *Children of Adam*—and then he moves on to the Platonic notion of “Ideal Man” and then to subsequent abstractions like “Death” (the crossing) and “Ideas, Time and Space.” “Gods” serves as a summary of the evolution of the notion of the divine in the poet’s mind: a concept that begins in fleshly love and ends in the worship of the highest intangibles. That evolution from the private, personal delight of the *Calamus* poems to the integration of the love of comrades into Whitman’s larger mystical and democratic philosophy is very much a function of the poet’s post-Civil War thinking. In poems like the 1871 “The Base of All Metaphysics,” where he mentions the “dear love of man for his comrade” as well as in the innumerable citations in *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman increasingly demonstrates his concern to graft onto the initial *Calamus* usage of “comrade” the dimension of the fraternal bond—comrades as brothers and sisters as well as lovers and friends—and to place this concept within the context of a truly democratic society. This revision culminates in Whitman’s 1876 Preface to *Two Rivulets*, where he claims the “special meaning” of *Calamus* “mainly resides in its Political significance” (LG 753).

Whitman’s shifting connotation of “comrade” is reflected in the developing etymology of the word, derived from the sixteenth-century Spanish “comarada” (feminine collective noun) or “camarado” (masculine singular noun), meaning “one who shares the same room—a chamber fellow,” especially in the military context. The more abstract usage of the word to signify “associate” had been employed as early as 1601, but it was not until the nineteenth century that this more universal mean-

ing took permanent root, reinforced by the various Socialist movements that adopted the term and grafted a political significance onto it. Interesting, too, is the fact that the word was almost exclusively applied to male friendships until the nineteenth century, when women like George Eliot and George Sand, following in the footsteps of radical feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft, asserted the intellectual, emotional, and social equality of Women.⁵

Whitman clearly used “comrade” in both its senses. In *Calamus* he actually writes “Camerado” and uses the word in the context of a male bedfellow—albeit with a cachet of idealized friendship. Increasingly, though, he began to graft onto comrade the more generalized meaning as well, especially in *Democratic Vistas*, where he used the word to indicate perfect friends bonded together in solidarity. The military origins of the term may also account for the heightened frequency of the image whenever Whitman talks about his Civil War experiences, where “caritas” rather than “eros” was his motivation.

Just as Whitman, the poet, permitted his images to evolve toward a heightened mythicism and sense of sociopolitical responsibility, so, too, did Whitman, the prose writer, demonstrate his growing concern for establishing a visionary democracy—perhaps nowhere more vividly than in *Democratic Vistas*, which forms not only the physical context for “To What You Said” but, in an uncanny way, also the intellectual framework for the unpublished poem.

The theme of the prose tract is the moral crisis facing postbellum America, in need of a new breed of teachers, workers, lovers, poets, and prophets. Whitman had been reading Carlyle’s criticism of America’s democracy, as well as steeping himself in Shelley’s concept of poets as the prophets of mankind and in Emerson’s and Thoreau’s ideas that the function of the government is neither repression nor law but the training of communities to begin and end with the individual. In *Democratic Vistas* the poet speaks as reformer: he talks frequently of liberating men and women from the “fossil and unhealthy air which hangs around the parlours”; he calls for fresh sanity in literature—“America demands a poetry that is bold, modern, and all-surrounding and kosmical, as she is herself.” Then from that political-social premise, Whitman moves upward to the increasingly metaphysical—“nothing less than the mightiest original, non-subordinated Soul . . . ever can lead,” and he speaks of the Soul as the creator of literature. But in typical Whitmanesque fashion, he opts for a poetry that stretches toward the ether while also remaining rooted in flesh: he advocates the “intense and loving comradeship, the personal and passionate attachment of man to man” as the profound saviour of the nation—“I say democracy infers such loving comradeship as its most inevitable twin”—and he expands the one-to-one into a one-to-all relationship in which “the races [are] comrades, and fraternizing all . . . in Solidarity” (*CPP*, 955, 979, 981-982, 949).

At first glance the assumption that "To What You Said" dates back to the 1860 *Calamus* cluster seems sound. Its themes resemble those of *Calamus* in a generic way. Whitman's emphasis shifted in the years between *Calamus* and *Democratic Vistas*: he moves from the erotic celebrations of fleshly love in *Children of Adam* and the intimate and personal qualities of *Calamus* to a far more idealistic, pan-world vision of love. Finally, the *Calamus* poems are very rarely addressed to anyone specific; in these poems the love of comrades, however personally inspired by individuals it may have been, is most often addressed to shadowy, unnamed lovers—which is not the case with "To What You Said" with its apostrophic form. This is precisely the direction of the poet's revising in "To What You Said." Further, the tone of the poem, though gentled in its opening, grows militantly aggressive in its middle section, proclaiming the poem's affinities to the missionary fervor of *Democratic Vistas*.

All of these factors suggest that the poetic voices of *Democratic Vistas* and "To What You Said" derive from the same period and spiritual source. Into both works, Whitman has plunged his own erotic, personal—even narcissistic—love of comrades from his *Calamus* days into the crucible of the Civil War and has emerged with a new kind of awareness. In Whitman's poetry from the 1870s and 1880s the love of comrades encompasses not only emotional and sexual attachment but also the ideals of charity and democracy. Central to the poet's definition of democracy is what he called "Personalism" or the interplay of the individual with the aggregate society.

Now let us turn to the biographical details of the period surrounding the 1871 publication of *Democratic Vistas* and its subsequent reprinting in 1876 to see if any events in this period shed further light on the poem. Whitman's journal entries have been decoded by scholars to suggest that the poet resolved on July 15, 1870, to pursue Peter Doyle no more. Not long before his resolve to give up the pursuit of Doyle, Anne Gilchrist had published *An Englishwoman's Estimate of Walt Whitman* in the *Boston Radical* in May 1870—a sensitive and passionate piece of literary criticism which touched Whitman deeply. Years later he would recall to Horace Traubel: "You can imagine what such a thing as her *Estimate* meant to me at that time. Almost everybody was against me—the papers, the preachers, the literary gentlemen—nearly everybody with only here and there a dissenting voice."⁶ At first his communication to Anne Gilchrist was through their mutual friend William Rossetti, but on September 3, 1871, Anne went into the English fields near her home and poured out her soul to Whitman in a long love letter, which deeply moved the poet but bewildered the man. It took Whitman three months to respond, as he finally did on November 3, with a cautious letter in which he apologizes, saying he was "waiting for the right mood to answer your letter in a spirit as serious as its own with the same unmitigated trust and affection," and goes on to add that he is "not insensible

to your love. I too send you my love," but cautions that his "book is my best letter, my response, my truest explanation of all."⁷ From 1871 until her "trans-settlement in America" Anne wrote most of the letters to Walt, who responded much less frequently and much more cautiously, though always sending tokens of esteem and friendship—his writings, clippings, even a ring—which indicated the value he placed on her intellectual companionship. On March 20, 1872, he wrote Anne to discourage her idealization of him saying: "The actual Walt Whitman is a very plain personage and entirely unworthy of such devotion."⁸ In 1876 Anne moved her entire family to Philadelphia to join Whitman. Even though the poet's prior letters "disapprove[d] of this American trans-settlement,"⁹ Anne wrote back on March 30, 1876, urging Whitman not to warn her against a "purpose resting on strong faith since 1869"¹⁰ and saying she was determined to have Whitman "take me to your breast forever and forever."¹¹ When she arrived in Philadelphia on September 10, 1876, Whitman took John Burroughs with him to meet her and her family at their Philadelphia hotel. Finding with relief that he actually liked them all, he became fast friends with the entire Gilchrist clan and for the duration of her sojourn in Philadelphia became a frequent visitor in Mrs. Gilchrist's home, where she set aside a room for him.

During this time Whitman's visits to Timber Creek, where he carried on a tumultuous and sexually fraught relationship with Harry Stafford, balanced the time spent at the Gilchrists', though he kept these realms separate and sacrosanct. When Anne surprised him with a visit to Timber Creek, Mrs. Stafford reported that Whitman was as angry as she had ever seen him.¹² That the poet liked his friends in distinct categories is the most probable explanation, though one cannot help speculating whether the visit might have given Anne a forbidden glimpse of an intimate—and heretofore undisclosed—side of the poet's life and whether this discovery could have, in any way, prompted Anne's ultimate decision to leave Philadelphia in the spring of 1878.

While the correspondence between Anne and Whitman is copious—at least on her part—in the years 1871-1876 and then again from 1879 to her death in 1885, the documentary evidence from this Philadelphia period is scant, in part because the pair saw each other almost every day, but also because Whitman's friends all maintained a discreet Victorian silence about the relationship. Whitman's friend, Edward Carpenter, alluded to the fact that he could see "Anne Gilchrist was suffering."¹³ Herbert Gilchrist, too, chose to make no comment in his editing of his mother's papers—a task in which he was hardly helped by Whitman's refusal to part with the ones he had in his possession. "I can hardly furnish any good reason, but I feel to keep these utterances entirely to myself,"¹⁴ the poet wrote Herbert. Then, too, to complicate the epistolary evidence even further, there are uncomfortable indications in the apologetic and falsified explanation that Whitman's literary execu-

tor, Thomas B. Harned, offered in editing and publishing the Gilchrist-Whitman letters: Harned claimed Whitman could not have returned Anne's love in 1870-71 because he was in love with a married woman. Confused and vacillating, Anne decided finally to return to England, and in June 1879, she and Whitman had one final meeting before the Gilchrists left.

These biographical events make the strongest case for placing "To What You Said" in the period of his relationship with Anne Gilchrist, very possibly in the 1876-1877 Timber Creek days. The particular coincidence of events, memories, and associations of those two summers offers, as well, a very probable explanation as to why the poem is reminiscent of the earlier *Calamus* verse, without actually sharing the philosophical mindscape of the pre-Civil War collection.

Why exactly Whitman declined to publish the poem is a bit more problematic. Perhaps Whitman's caution had more to do with the personal nature of the poem. In the more generic *Calamus* works, the theme of male love supersedes any specific identification of the poems' subjects. Not so in "To What You Said," where the reader, especially after seeing the manuscript's shaping of the "To," yearns to discover to whom the poem is addressed. That the inspiration might be a man seems unlikely since the poem celebrates male companionship as an idealized contrast to another—obviously female—bond. Furthermore, Whitman's biography reveals no male who "strayed hither" for him or anyone from whom he would have wanted—during their relationship—to disengage himself. (If anything, he tried to cling to Doyle and Stafford far longer than they were willing to make commitments to the poet, and the boys in the Civil War hospitals may not have ever understood the complexity of Whitman's sentiments; their needs—convalescence or dying—were far more immediate.) That the poem could have been addressed to another woman such as Ellen O'Connor is, of course, possible, though improbable, for the likelihood of such a passion erupting after long years of placid domestic friendship seems remote. More probably "To What You Said" was addressed to Anne Gilchrist, the only person in Whitman's life who did literally "stray hither for his sake." If this is true, the gentling of the tone corresponds to the poet's sensitive dealings with her, and the hypothesis, in turn, sheds more light on dating the manuscript and on Whitman's abandonment of it.

A case can be made for Whitman's having penned the poem some time after his receipt of Anne's September 3, 1871, letter and his November 3 reply. At that point, the *Democratic Vistas* manuscript would have just been returned to him from printers and might well have been lying around for scrap paper; his November 3 letter, for all the cogitation it cost him, was remarkably forthright and mostly unrevised in the original draft; could Whitman have experimented with the sentiments in any other form before writing the final epistle? A second, more con-

vincing possibility is that the poem was written some time later during the 1871-1876 correspondence with Anne. The fact that many of the poet's letters to Anne are missing (Anne alludes to correspondence or responds to letters that do not exist in the Harned or Feinberg collections) suggests that the poem might have been a verse draft of a missive intended for her during those years. What mitigates most tellingly against either of the above speculations is the line "though you have strayed hither." The third and best supported hypothesis is that the poem was written in 1876-1878: Anne had literally strayed hither in 1876; the relationship with Harry Stafford was passionate and emotionally consuming; the Timber Creek/Calamus symbolism could not have been lost on an aging poet with erotic memories/desires—all of which were set in sharp relief by his first serious intellectual and emotional attachment to a woman not one of his relatives. Anne was no one to dismiss; her determination, her intellect, and her devotion to Whitman prompted the poet after her death to tell Traubel: "I have that sort of feeling about her which cannot easily be spoken of ... love."¹⁵ And while almost a conspiracy of silence surrounds the intimate details of the Gilchrist-Whitman friendship, a watershed clearly occurred in their relationship in 1877-1878, an event that led her to accept—as the tone of subsequent correspondence indicates—the truth that a carnal bond was never to exist between them. Her departure from Philadelphia, her initial silence thereafter, and then her gradual coming to terms with a new kind of friendship—one interspersed with nostalgia and fueled by a deepened comprehension—demonstrates that by 1879 Anne had made her peace with whatever revelations or epiphanies she had shared with Whitman and that she was prepared, despite any disappointment she may have endured, to remain his best critic and warmest champion until her death.

Still, accepting the hypothesis that "To What You Said" was penned as a response to Anne Gilchrist does not explain why Whitman never published the poem—or, as far as can be ascertained, ever sent any version to her. The notion that it was too personal a homosexual declaration—both for public consumption and for Anne's sensibilities—does not seem viable. First, as already argued, other *Calamus* poems are equally, if not more, revealing and explicit. That he might have hesitated to address such a subject to someone who could easily be identified (surely not only Anne but also his friends would have recognized the intended recipient) might have been a partial motivation—a function of Whitman's delicacy toward a woman he respected and for whom he cared deeply. But surely he could not have wished to hide the truth from a soul as near to his as Anne Gilchrist's, and a closer examination of Anne's letters challenges another of the frequently-asserted scholarly misapprehensions about the relationship: that Anne's unrequited love for Whitman was a scenario of pathetic proportions in which an overly

romantic Victorian widow entirely missed the sexual inferences of the *Calamus* poems. Rather, it seems clear that Anne understood very well indeed from first to last the meaning of these poems, and Whitman appreciated her courageous acceptance of the wholeness of their message. "Mrs. Gilchrist insisted, even to the last, that 'Leaves of Grass' was not the mouthpiece of the parlors . . . no, but the language of strength, power, passion, intensity, absorption, sincerity,"¹⁶ he told Traubel after her death. In her *Estimate* Anne defines the theme of *Calamus*—"what it means for a man to love his fellow-man? . . . These 'evangel poems of comrades and of love' speak, with the abiding, penetrating power of prophecy, of a 'new and superb friendship'"—and goes on to defend the concept without which

the *brotherhood* of the human race would be a mere flourish of rhetoric. And brotherhood is naught if it does not bring brother's love along with it. If the poet's heart were not "a measureless ocean of love" that seeks the lips and would quench the thirst of all, he were not the one we have waited for so long. Who but he could put at last the right meaning into that word "democracy" which has been made to bear a burthen of incongruous notions?

Anne understood the love of comrades in all the myriad ways which Whitman did, though she placed special value on the idealistic, democratic aspects of the concept. Nonetheless, she was aware of the so-called "shocking" implications of the idea, and as a true child of the Romantic era, she responded with passionate, radical conviction that the poet were no poet "if he were not bold and true to the utmost, and did not own in himself the threads of darkness mixed in with the threads of light, and own it with the same strength and directness that he tells of light."¹⁷

If her reference to the dark and light aspects of personality foreshadows Jung, her actual point of reference was William Blake's doctrine of contraries: those opposing dynamic forces whose counterpoint becomes a holistic coexistence when man is prepared to set aside what Blake considered the hypocritical dualism of Christianity: good vs. evil, body vs. soul. Anne, who had completed her husband Alex's biography of Blake, surely embraced the poet's bold assertions that "Energy is Eternal Delight, Shame is Pride's Cloak," and that "The Head Sublime, the Heart Pathos, the Genitals Beauty, the Hands and Feet Proportion."¹⁸ From Blake to Whitman she traced a spiritual bond that defied the conventions of Victorian morality, though she was also a prudent enough woman of her age to caution and try to protect her beloved Walt. As late as the year of her death she advised Whitman to order his new edition of poems by placing in the first volume his poems of sweeping social import in order "to prepare the reader, lift him up to the true point of view and make him all your own, before he comes into the inner sanctuary of *Calamus*. . . ."¹⁹ Anne may have feared others would

misunderstand, but she never did. She never negated the intimate sexual meaning of the *Calamus* poems, nor did she find the homoerotic implications incongruous with the possibilities for heterosexual love (in this she believed firmly in Whitman's own assertion that he was both mother and father, male and female—the androgynous and all-embracing bard). More importantly, she shared with Whitman the belief that comradeship—whatever its manifestation—was the highest human calling. Even in the years when her correspondence was most passionate, the love she offered the poet was far too comprehensive and compassionate to be merely romantic or sexual: in an 1874 letter she articulated a vision of devotion that was a combination of domestic caring and intellectual sharing. At the height of Whitman's infirmity she promised a

Mother's love that cherishes, that delights so in personal service, that sees in sickness & suffering such dear appeals to an answering, limitless tenderness—wife's love—ah, you draw that from me too, resistlessly—I have no choice—comrade's love, so happy in sharing all, pain, sorrow, toil, effort, enjoyments, thoughts, hopes, aims, struggles, disappointment, beliefs, aspirations.

And again in the same letter she adds: "I ask nothing more of time and of eternity but to live and grow up to that companionship that includes all."²⁰

Whitman felt keenly Anne's sympathy: after her death he called her "a human miracle" and told Traubel "she was subtle: her grasp on my work was tremendous—so sure, so all around, so adequate."²¹ He believed the spiritual bond between them to have been one of the truest in his entire life. While he would never have wanted to wound her, he would never have shied from honesty in his dealings with her. Thus, if "To What You Said" contains a response to Anne Gilchrist—a real or imagined conversation or epistle—there can be several hypotheses as to why he never published it. One is that Whitman simply did not consider the poem good enough. The manuscript indicates that the text was written in a short space of time, revised as he went along, but never returned to with the kind of scrutinizing attention he paid to other works. The direction that the revisions lead is from the personal to the mythic. Did Whitman lack either the time, the desire, or the momentary ability to treat the theme with the universality he would have wished at that point in his career? Or were his reasons more practical: had the poem served as a draft for a letter now lost or a communication delivered in private? Or had he discarded the text because he had been able to utter its words in some other manner? Was there no longer any need to express the sentiments contained therein? The themes had been raised in other poems in more polished form, and perhaps this hastily scribbled document of the moment had become redundant. Somewhere between 1876 and 1878 Anne came to understand consciously what she had already

perceived in the more metaphorical sense. The idealized and real Whitmans merged, and the strength of her understanding stilled into superfluity the poet's voice.

Taken in the light of the documentary, textual, and biographical evidence presented above, "To What You Said" emerges—despite its unfinished form—as a highly complex poem that eschews any single simplistic explication. Just as "To What You Said" is not a mere confession of sexual preference, nor a simple unsent letter to an anonymous subject, so must it not be regarded as a failed poem. Rather, the spontaneous nature of the text, discarded but whole in its first flush of inspiration, should be viewed as a fruitful grappling with ideas that are central to Whitman's entire body of thought.

Of these the first is the notion of the American salute—the kiss of man to man on perhaps intimate terms, but also of friend to friend, democrat to democrat, human being to human being. The salute is a symbol of the love of comrades—of men loving other men, but even more importantly, of men loving mankind, of the solidarity and brotherhood of those striving together as kindred spirits. And for those souls who resist the confines of convention, the fetters of the parlor, and who insist on an energetic, unique expression of love that defies any boundaries, be they sexual, political, or spiritual, the poem becomes an affirmation of the right to be different: the right of the individual to express his uniqueness and the right of the democratic whole to be comprised of innumerable unique parts which somehow—through solidarity and love—coalesce. In these terms, it becomes Whitman's declaration that he must belong to this larger truth, that he cannot belong to the addressee of the poem for what may be personal reasons, and beyond this, that he can belong to no one person because as Prophet-Poet he must be the representative voice of all.

In many ways, "To What You Said" is a crystallization of Whitman's sense of self as well as his boldly gentle and joyful celebration of his creative calling as Poet, as the One able to inhabit all living souls and become a transmigrating spirit who is the sum of all contraries. Furthermore, the poem is a statement of the poet's ability to take a singular experience and fashion that into a communal one, while still retaining its essential core. That Whitman chooses a kiss as the poem's central metaphor is significant, for the kiss, erotic as its roots may be, here takes on a far more comprehensive symbolism. In "To What You Said" the American salute of comrades embracing becomes a statement of the courageous commonality among all living creatures.

This commonality born of differences is the very theme of Leonard Bernstein's 1976 *Songfest*, a cycle composed for the nation's Bicentennial. In *Songfest* Bernstein sought to set to music the words of a divergent group of American poets, whose heritages, roots, persuasions, and experiences all helped define the melting-pot ethic of American culture.

Accordingly, the composer's musical idioms vary to suit the poems' speakers, and the entire cycle has that distinctive American trait of eclecticism—born of the multifarious inspirations of the songs and poems.

In its original 1976 version, *Songfest* was an orchestral score for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, E-flat clarinet, two B-flat clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, piano, celesta, electric keyboard and bass guitar, harp, timpani, and twenty-five other percussion instruments plus the usual complement of strings; Bernstein followed the October 11, 1977, Kennedy Center premier of these twelve songs for six singers with the publication of the piano-vocal edition. Of all the songs in the cycle, "To What You Said" comes closest to being a pure "mélodie"; its deeply persuasive lyric inspiration survives in the subtly colored piano transcription as well as in the careful nuancing for the voice. The song opens with a bold introduction that modulates into a sweeter, softer deployment of the piano to serve as an accompaniment to the poet's gentled refusal and his quiet affirmation of the beauty and nobility inherent in his choice. The C major prelude transforms itself into the dissonance of F# to signal the startling revelation, while an ostinato on low C maintains a confident sense of equilibrium before resolving itself, following the extended postlude, into final serenely transcendent *ppp* cadence. The effect is of individual musical moments—each verse a unit of thought that requires a different musical world, each phrase a baring of the composer's and the poet's souls.

What drew Bernstein to this little known poem which a friend brought him in a newly published Whitman paperback edition? According to his colleague, Jack Gottlieb, Bernstein was drawn to "To What You Said" because it was unpublished and because it would be new to his listeners. But what struck a very special chord was that he saw in Whitman's text "a repressed poem on a repressed subject" that appealed to him in the time of his own identity crisis in 1975-1976.²²

Not only does *Songfest* demonstrate a multicultural ethos, but each individual song reflects the prismatic facets of the composer's own personality: Leonard Bernstein as husband, father, lover, comrade; Bernstein, the leftist and radical; LB, the defier of convention; and Lenny, the beloved creature of contraries; all responded to Walt Whitman's impassioned plea for a human decency that would be unchained from Puritan morality. Like the poet, the composer was both pragmatist and idealist, realist and mystic; like Whitman he was able to capture and convey in his art a blend of challenge and confidence, all the while creating an illusion of perfect intimacy. In "To What You Said" one glimpses the LB willing to revel in unabashed emotion, unafraid of the chiarascuro of Dionysian and Apollonian. One senses the composer's irresistible attraction to the mysterious inner life of the poem, his desire to become one of Whitman's "peculiarly candid and courageous souls"²³ and to

disclose its secrets in a musico-poetic statement that clothes naked truth in transcendent harmony—one which demonstrates irrefutably not only the mammoth complexities of this forgotten Whitman text, but also the singular gift of song to supplement the inadequacies and ambiguities of the word with the cohesive dimension of melody.

If these leaves, penciled tentatively and unpublished as they are, are among the frailest Walt Whitman ever penned, their musical setting, like the calamus grass which sprouted in the poet's youth and grew to philosophical maturity in his nonage, is ever hardy, ever confident—ever proof that the verbal mystery of poetry can elicit instant and intuitive response when encased in the permanence of music.

NOTES

1 Whitman, *Collected Poetry & Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), 283. Hereafter *CPP*.

2 *CPP*, 940.

3 Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, MS Charles E. Feinberg Collection, Library of Congress, verso 58.

4 The revisions of "Behold This Swarthy Face" are complex. The original opening lines—"Mind you the timid models of the rest, the majority? / Long have I minded them, but hence I will not—for I have adopted models for myself, and now offer them to The Lands"—were discarded, taking off a political edge.

5 *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

6 Walt Whitman to Horace Traubel, quoted in Thomas B. Harned, ed., *The Letters of Anne Gilchrist and Walt Whitman* (Garden City: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1918), Introduction, xxx.

7 Walt Whitman to Anne Gilchrist, November 3, 1876, MS Thomas B. Harned Collection, Library of Congress.

8 Walt Whitman to Anne Gilchrist, March 20, 1872, MS Charles E. Feinberg Collection, Library of Congress.

9 Walt Whitman to Anne Gilchrist, March 17, 1876, MS Charles E. Feinberg Collection, Library of Congress.

10 Anne Gilchrist to Walt Whitman, March 30, 1876, MS Harned Collection.

11 Anne Gilchrist to Walt Whitman, September 3, 1871, MS Harned Collection.

12 Philip Callow, *From Noon to Starry Night* (London: Allison & Busby, 1992), 344-345.

13 Quoted in Justin Kaplan, *Walt Whitman: A Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980), 366.

14 Herbert Gilchrist, *Anne Gilchrist: Her Life and Writings* (London: T. Fischer Unwin, 1887), Preface, n.p.

15 Walt Whitman to Horace Traubel, quoted in Harned, *Letters*, Introduction, xxxi. The excision of the word before love may have been made either by Traubel or Harned.

- 16 Walt Whitman to Horace Traubel, quoted in Harned, *Letters*, Introduction, xxxi.
- 17 Anne Gilchrist, *An Englishwoman's Estimate of Walt Whitman* in Harned, 9, 11.
- 18 William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (New York: Viking, 1946), 250-255.
- 19 Anne Gilchrist to Walt Whitman, January 21, 1885, in Harned, 239.
- 20 Anne Gilchrist to Walt Whitman, July 4, 1874, in Harned, 112-113.
- 21 Walt Whitman to Horace Traubel, quoted in Harned, xxxviii.
- 22 Jack Gottlieb, quoted by Craig Urquhart in telephone conversation, March 9, 1994.
- 23 Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, MS Feinberg Collection, verso 58.