

WHITMAN'S DEBT TO THE MUSE

When, in "Song of Myself," Walt Whitman as persona exclaims, "And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men," one would be hard pressed to deny that Whitman is a muse poet paying tribute to the lunar goddess or earth mother in the tradition outlined by Robert Graves in *The White Goddess*.¹ When in the *Calamus* poems Whitman writes of "We two boys together clinging," one would hardly be able to refute that something beyond what we usually associate with the rites of male bonding is taking place. We see, then, throughout Whitman's poetry, a not-so-ambivalent attitude towards worship of the male and female. Specifically, we see acknowledgment of the importance of the female dutifully given in worship that is more mechanical than it is emotional; worship by a man who knows that escaping from the inevitable superiority of Woman is futile, for tribute must be given to repay the debt of birth and to avoid angering Woman who ultimately holds the key to rebirth, whether this be in the form of children or poems, or whether it involve the precursory death necessary. Woman is mother, bride, and destroyer: the triple goddess (Graves, 24).

In Whitman's poetry we see also the worship of the male, and it is impassioned, free of a forced indebtedness accompanied by resentment hardly kept in check. Whether such free-spirited worship of the male in the long run is destined to be stiflingly sterile, and thus need the occasional infusion of Woman, is another issue, one which Whitman in his poetry must continuously deal and live with. This tension of male and female vying for supremacy has serious creative implications—at times Whitman is writing under the thrall of the White Goddess or the lunar goddess, while at other times Whitman is writing by the matrix of Apollo, the sun god. We can examine this conflict of psychic and sexual allegiance by looking at Section 11 of "Song of Myself,"² which I read as a beautiful encapsulation of Walt Whitman's inspirational dilemma in the realm of the interrelated sexual and psychic act of worship as it pertains to the creation of poetry.³

The surface plot of Section 11 is summarized easily enough: a woman who for years has led a sheltered life in a house on the banks of a body of water joins a group of men bathing in the water without them ever becoming aware of her presence. An unidentified narrator, presumably Walt Whitman as persona, observes the entire scene, and it is through his eyes that we experience the events of the poem.⁴

In discussing this section within the framework established by my introduction, we must first examine the way in which men are portrayed. The narrator, in commenting on the woman's view of the bathing men, says, "Ah the homeliest of them is beautiful to her."⁵ Surely the words "homeliest" and "beautiful" could be words used to describe women. Similarly, when the young men float on their backs in the water and "their white bellies bulge," an image of women, that of young pregnant women, is evoked. Also, the ambiguity of reference in the first stanza allows us to read "Twenty-eight years of womanly life and all so lonesome" as referring not only to the woman described in the poem, but also to the fact that the young men who have been together for twenty-eight years without any outside interruption are womanly. We see,

then, through the eyes of the woman of the poem, whose view is filtered through Walt Whitman, men who might be said to be surrogate women. In this situation, there is no need for Woman, and if she enters the picture, she would be an intruder who would supply the characteristics traditionally associated with the male: aggression. As we shall see, Whitman does introduce this powerful outside source into the group of men; her arrival is inevitable, as history, myth, and literature have repeatedly shown.

The woman in Section 11 of "Song of Myself" is an aggressor, a woman of masculine qualities. She is the one who seeks out the men, who are enjoying bathing together: Whitman refers to her as the twenty-ninth bather.⁶ An outsider, she is an irregularity from a numerical standpoint: the number twenty-eight is mentioned three times in succession before the number twenty-nine appears. The woman is also intrusive and aggressive in that she lets her hand run across the men's bodies. Worse, they are not even aware of this act of transgression and aggression: the woman behaves much like a submarine invading underwater territory that is off-limits. The narrator's question, upon seeing the woman head for the water, is accusatory: "Where are you off to, lady? for I see you."

Finally, we can see the woman as aggressor and dominator by examining the line, "Twenty-eight years of womanly life and all so lonesome." Robert Graves points out that Osiris ruled for twenty-eight years (381).⁷ Osiris traditionally was associated with fertility rites, and though most often thought of as a male god, in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* Osiris has been identified with or actually called a woman as well.⁸ What is important in drawing this parallel is that Woman is a power worthy of worship, and the motive for this worship comes from the realization that worship is ultimately necessary, much in the same way procreation is necessary for the continuation of mankind. In *Adonis, Attis, Osiris*, J. G. Frazer quotes Plutarch, who writes of Osiris the fertility god being associated with the moon "because the moon, with her humid and generative light, is favourable to the propagation of animals and the growth of plants. . . ." ⁹ Graves speaks of the lunar goddess, traditionally associated with the rites of vegetation, as the muse who is mother, bride, as well as destroyer. The connection between Osiris and the lunar goddess, both of whom have a regenerative function, is easily made, and it is just as easy to understand the immense power this goddess or muse holds, who, according to Graves and Campbell, has throughout history been embodied in Woman who walks the earth. In Whitman's poem, we see this goddess and her temple: "She owns the fine house by the rise of the bank, / She hides handsome and richly drest aft the blinds of the window." This goddess has fallen upon times of neglect, as her "Twenty-eight years of womanly life" have been "all so lonesome." The narrator also comments that she stays stock-still in her room. Soon, however, she enters into motion, as the cyclical tradition of nature's seasons would have her: "Dancing and laughing along the beach came the twenty-ninth bather."

In examining the inevitable coming together of Woman and the twenty-eight men who are bathing, we must believe the notion that the physical act of sexual intercourse is representative of a man being inspired by a woman who is also a muse. We must also bear in mind Graves's widely accepted assertion that ancient society was matriarchal and it has been our movement away from it that

has resulted in a patriarchal society, which in turn has proven unhealthy in its rejection of Woman as the earth goddess. Graves too has commented that the exclusive company of males, such as seen in the form of Platonic or Socratic love, is really nothing more than “intellectual homosexuality,” the turning away from paying homage to the moon goddess, who has been providing poetic inspiration all along (11-12). An understanding of the concept of intellectual homosexuality and its exclusive male company enhances one’s understanding of why the men in the poem are not aware of being visited by a woman in the water. “They do not think whom they souse with spray” and might just as well be spraying only each other because they have forgotten Woman.¹⁰ Walt Whitman the watcher, however, is aware of the woman’s presence in the water. And he, a poet, a man apart from the many, accepts woman as a necessary interruption in the commerce between men if rebirth is to occur. For this rebirth or rejuvenation of the artist to occur (necessary if he is to write poetry worth its blood), a magical threshold must be passed. In mythology, according to Joseph Campbell, this passage into a sphere of rebirth is frequently associated with the womb image (90). In Whitman’s poem, water represents the womb as well as rebirth. This popular motif of rebirth is generally associated with the passage into its sphere as a form of self-annihilation as well (Campbell, 91). The rite of rebirth or fertility in the poem has at its center the woman.

According to Frazer, in fertility rituals to honor Osiris, a young woman representing Osiris was frequently slain, and her separate body parts were scattered up and down the land, much as the thirteen pieces and phallus of Osiris were scattered in the Nile (438-441). In Whitman’s poem, the woman is everywhere (scattered) in the water among the men, as they are not aware of her presence, yet spray her. When they spray her—and the spray of water represents the spurt of semen during orgasm—they are experiencing a sort of death, which initially is necessary for rebirth to occur. The entire act of the men spraying the woman can also be interpreted as being part of homeopathic magic. Frazer in *The Golden Bough* makes repeated references to acts of imitative magic among primitive cultures that were designed to bring fertility to a couple unable to produce offspring.¹¹ Such rituals of imitative magic would certainly fit the attitude Whitman shows towards male and female sexuality in his poetry: Emotionally charged ecstasy applies to the relationship between two men, whereas procreative energy, such as that summoned and spent as part of a ritual or invocation to ensure the continuation of the species, appears, hardly disguised, as energy of calculation. Whitman, in acknowledging the powerful position of Woman, portrays himself to be a true poet, who in turn is blessed by the muse.

In Section 11 of “Song of Myself,” Whitman describes twenty-eight men and one woman bathing. On the shore watching, the poet inevitably reveals himself in the process: in a moment of conditional gratitude, he acknowledges that Woman is the source of poetic inspiration and the poet cannot escape paying the price. Woman will intrude on a happy group of men bathing, and this will be a blessed curse at best. But there is a reward to be had in this potentially destructive relationship. The male bathers who have been floating under the sun, or Apollo—who according to Graves inspires poetry written much like an exercise—are pulled under by the clinging woman, whose lunar

affiliation will inspire poetry written in a trance. Whitman, who has had several diplomatic swims with the muse, has every reason to pay tribute to her or at least acknowledge her presence. The irony here should not be lost on any of us; it was very likely not on him: Whitman wrote some of his best poetry—emotionally, sexually, and physically charged—about men when under the thrall of the muse.

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NOTES

1 *The White Goddess* (New York: Farrar, 1966).

2 Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley, eds., *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition* (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 38-39.

3 For a contextualization of approaches pertinent to my reading, I am gratefully indebted to Edwin Haviland Miller's excellent book, *Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself": A Mosaic of Interpretations* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), which I paraphrase and quote from below. John Snyder, in *The Dear Love of Man: Tragic and Lyric Communication* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), addresses the "specific paradox" of Section 11. Snyder suggests the sexual union between the woman and male bathers is real only as a paradox, like the Christian Incarnation and Resurrection. "God cannot be born a man and man cannot die as God, yet such are the meanings of Incarnation and Resurrection. The rich lady cannot get what she wants and have it; she cannot possess the unpossessible. Her fulfillment would be the death of the young men's freedom, and the death of their freedom would be the death of her desire, which is her life as a woman" (60).

4 Likely the first critic to note the marked frequency with which Whitman takes the "feminine point of view," Frederik Schyberg in *Walt Whitman* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951) states that Whitman is the woman watching and that the section is a "most deeply personal confession" of Whitman's (119-120).

5 E. H. Miller, in *Walt Whitman's Poetry: A Psychological Journey* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), comments on Whitman's transferring of the pain to the spinster, and auto-eroticism: Section 11 culminates in "a bisexual image of the impregnated womb and sexual arousal, a bittersweet conclusion appropriate to the only gratification fantasy permits, autoerotic release" (94). Stephen A. Black, in *Whitman's Journeys into Chaos—A Psychoanalytic Study of the Poetic Process* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), points out that, "Like the poet himself, the lady confines her sexual experience to her imagination" (105). Roy Harvey Pearce in *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961) states that Whitman "has a woman look for him . . . it is as though the procreant urge of the self to create and transform itself is not yet quite powerful enough" (78).

6 Addressing the significance of the number 28 in Section 11, James Davidson in "Whitman's 'Twenty-Eight Young Men'" (*Walt Whitman Review*, 12 [1966]: 100-1) points out that this number is the cycle of the moon, less one day, and thus the tide. Twenty-eight days is also the female fertility cycle. Furthermore, February has 28 days except in a leap year when it has 29. In leap years, the twenty-ninth bather, the woman, is allowed to become an aggressor who seeks her mate. But every year she must remain hidden behind blinds and Victorian clothing (100-1). E. H. Miller records in *Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself": A Mosaic of Interpretations* that twenty-eight may also be an

as-yet-unidentified symbolic or occult number (75). Commenting on the sexual behavior in Section 11, Harold Aspiz in *Walt Whitman and the Body Beautiful* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980) recognizes a “conspicuous oedipal warp.” “An object lesson in misdirected sexuality,” the woman may be “the central figure of an adolescent and voyeuristic fantasy in which a wealthy and mature female aggressor—or possibly the male persona who has identified with her sexual yearnings and gropings—commits watery rape upon the passive young men” (223).

7 Speculating on sources for Section 11, Esther Shepard, in “Possible Sources of Some of Whitman’s Ideas and Symbols in *Hermes Mercurius Trismegistus* and Other Works” (*Modern Language Quarterly*, 3 [1953]: 60-81), suggests the Egyptian deity Osiris (74-75). Sadakichi Hartman in *Conversations with Walt Whitman* (New York: E.P. Coby, 1895) reports Whitman’s maybe having come into contact with Osiris lore on a visit to Abbott’s Egyptian Collection in New York; a friend of the poet stated that Whitman compared himself to Christ and Osiris (46).

8 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Princeton University Press, 1968), 369.

9 James George Frazer, *Adonis, Attis, Osiris* (London: Macmillan, 1906), 295.

10 Discussing the “spray” (sperm) of Section 11, Robert K. Martin in *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979) points out that the twenty-eight men climax and shower their sexual partners and the sky with sperm. The spray becomes “a token of the value in multiplicity of the world.” Whitman, acting against the nineteenth-century medical theories of conservation of energy achieved through the withholding of sperm, proposes a radical redistribution of that energy through the release of sperm. “To the ‘capitalism’ of heterosexual intercourse (with its implications of male domination and ownership) Whitman opposes the ‘socialism’ of nondirected sex” (21).

11 James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: Macmillan, 1951).