



# Herrero Brasas, Juan A. Walt Whitman's Mystical Ethics of Comradeship: Homosexuality and the Marginality of Friendship at the Crossroads of Modernity [review]

Gary Schmidgall

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JUAN A. HERRERO BRASAS. *Walt Whitman's Mystical Ethics of Comradeship: Homosexuality and the Marginality of Friendship at the Crossroads of Modernity*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2010. ix + 206 pp.

Juan Herrero Brasas is a lecturer in ethics and religious studies at California State University's Northridge campus, and this book fulfills his first foray into Whitman studies—and into English (his previous books, including one on the construction of queer culture in Spain, have been in Spanish). The first chapter, “Literature as Religion: Whitman’s Messianic Project,” tantalizes with the prospect of a religious studies scholar taking Whitman at his word in his remark to Horace Traubel, “after the claims of my religion are satisfied nothing is left for anything else” (*WWWC* 1:10); can Herrero Brasas find some “true” religion left over after he is done with Whitman? The second chapter, “The Mystic Hypothesis,” reopens another long-mulled question about Whitman: was he a true or merely figurative mystic? The third large question raised by Herrero Brasas’s long title—which contains multitudes—is how Whitman’s homosexual identity affected his mystical-religious-ethical project? The answers to the first two of these momentous questions turn out in the end to be anodyne or unsurprising, but sparks certainly fly regarding the third, giving new life to a long-fought Whitman studies culture war.

Well into the chapter on Whitman’s “religion” we learn that the poet “never articulated a systematic definition of religion” and that there “is no systematic creed” in it. All the religious vocabulary is purely metaphorical. The lone high priest “is the poet himself,” or, as Whitman wrote in “Passage to India,” “the true son of God” is “the poet.” The chapter’s last paragraph retreats from literal “religion” entirely: “Whitman seems to be proposing . . . a new behavior, a new ethical code. . . . From the new ethics he proposes—not from the messianic aura—stems his appeal to many a reader even today.” (Herrero Brasas depends heavily on two religious studies: an unpublished 1957 dissertation, “The Religion of Walt Whitman,” by Dale Hesser and David Kuebrich’s 1989 book *Minor Prophecy: Walt Whitman's New American Religion*.)

Herrero Brasas begins his next chapter on a similarly bold note, quoting Whitman’s manuscript remark, “William Blake and Walt Whitman [–] Both are mystics” (*NUPM*, 4:1502). (He does not, however, quote the end of the sentence, in which Whitman asserts “a vast difference” between himself and Blake.) Herrero Brasas then contrasts what he terms the “strong mystic hypothesis” (Whitman was a true mystic) and the “weak” one (no, just figurative). Kuebrich speaks for the “strong” in rather startling terms. Kuebrich, Herrero Brasas concludes, “believes that Whitman advocates self-denial” because he “puts the good of others before self-interest.” Whitman’s gospel is “not a gospel of homosexuality but of mystical love,” Kuebrich is quoted as saying. The “weak” hypothesis is represented by James Miller’s description of “Song of Myself” as the “dramatic representation of a mystical experience.” The mystic “illumination” Whitman presents is at bottom theatrical. After sampling denials of the mystic hypothesis, Herrero Brasas takes the “strong” thesis off the table (“far from being universally recognized”), and we are left with a view that will raise no eyebrows: “In summary . . . there is a lack of

consensus over whether Whitman is a mystic,” but “there is, however, positive consensus that Whitman is ‘mystical.’” Oddly, not a single one of the two dozen instances of *mystic/mystical* in *Leaves* is cited in the chapter—not even “The Mystic Trumpeter.”

Having offered a parting suggestion that Whitman’s “mystical inspiration” was “triggered by aesthetic emotions,” Herrero Brasas moves on in his third chapter, “A Gospel of Beauty,” to “focus on the aestheticist assumptions in Whitman’s worldview and how they inform his ethics.” Here the traditional Christian and Neoplatonic notions of the elevating effects of contemplating “true beauty” are explored. Whitman, Herrero Brasas believes, “does not belong in the Christian tradition,” and he quotes William Sloane Kennedy on Christianity and Whitmanism being “mighty and irreconcilable opposites, as touches the body.” The chapter develops a bit waywardly, with digressions on phrenology, Whitman’s “aesthetic morality,” eugenics (a topic “so important to Whitman”), his racism, and on his similarities with Friedrich Nietzsche and Oscar Wilde, “two aesthetes” with “intensely personal views on religion and ethics.” Herrero Brasas draws them into his discussion because all three shared a common “elevation of aesthetic values to the moral plane.” Herrero Brasas says the mutual admiration of Whitman and Wilde “has not been the object of much attention, perhaps because they have been understood as holding widely disparate worldviews.” (But there is a 54-page “annex” in my *Walt Whitman: A Gay Life* devoted to the profound similarities between the Whitman and Wilde worldviews.) Surprisingly, Herrero Brasas never mentions the very pertinent essay, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” in which Wilde appropriates Christianity’s Jesus for his own new religion, just as Whitman did in the one poem Herrero Brasas quotes in its entirety, “To Him that Was Crucified.”

Wilde permits Herrero Brasas to introduce the notion of an “ethics of comradeship,” which he lays out in his fourth chapter, “The Love of Comrades.” Comradeship, Herrero Brasas opens, “is at the heart of Walt Whitman’s religious and moral enterprise.” The obvious missing word here is “sexual,” and that is why this chapter is bound to evoke the loudest yelps of dismay from those—myself included, of course—who in the last thirty years have advocated for recognition of Whitman as a gay poet and as, in Wilde’s view, “the herald of a new era” of gay liberation. For Herrero Brasas’s purpose is to argue that “in *Leaves of Grass* the religious message is inseparable from the new ethics it serves to justify.” He is not interested in inseparable male bodies, nor does he think Whitman was. “Nothing is known about his sexual life, if he had one at all.” The same dubiousity about a sexually active Whitman is repeated ten pages later.

Herrero Brasas grants “there is little doubt that Whitman was homosexual” and gently chides his “benevolent” early biographers for finessing this reality. But, true to his scholarly disciplines, he wishes to present Whitman as a religious (figurative sense) and ethical provider rather than as a sex-partner or sexual liberator. Favoring a “mystical” interpretation of comradeship, he is drawn to Kuebrich’s notion that Whitman’s camaraderie is founded on Platonism, Christianity, and German idealism, “three systems that predicate

an ideal realm of the spirit . . . ‘the dear love of man for his comrade.’” But, as happens several times, Herrero Brasas is obliged to concede that “system” does not translate well into *Leaves*: “The poet does not spell out his new morality in any systematic way.”

Pursuing Whitman’s “disincarnate” or non-genital new morality, Herrero Brasas attempts to isolate the “*marginal* behaviors” between males (like kissing and holding hands, he says). In effect, he carves out a realm of homosocial interaction that he defines as “the marginality of regular male friendship.” Presenting his thesis with italic emphasis, Herrero Brasas concludes that Whitman’s ethical program was to give “*core status to those marginal aspects of male friendship.*” Predictably, he calls Whitman’s Civil War hospitals “perfect laboratories for experiencing the marginality of friendship,” though he acknowledges there was whispering about Whitman’s intimate ministrations among the professional nurses on duty. Herrero Brasas also approves of Whitman’s increased emphasis on the political importance of the *Calamus* cluster in his 1876 *Leaves* and in *Democratic Vistas*—adhesive love as salvation for what Whitman called “our materialistic and vulgar American democracy.” He applauds Betsy Erkkila for viewing Whitman’s poetry as “primarily political,” though she has written eloquently for the gay Whitman as well.

The chapter concludes with a section devoted to J. A. Symonds’s extended apology for Greek love that suits Herrero Brasas’s high-minded, non-sexual reading of Whitman’s poetic agenda. Wryly noting Symonds’s “rhetorical gymnastics” to avoid addressing the obvious about *Calamus*, Herrero Brasas quotes this discreet assertion: “Whitman never suggests that comradeship may occasion the development of physical desire.” Herrero Brasas suggests that Symonds’s gay apologia *A Problem in Greek Ethics* (published posthumously in 1901) was written as “a moral and intellectual justification of Whitman’s ethics of comradeship.”

The last chapter, “Whitman the Moral Reformer,” carries this epigraph by Robert Louis Stevenson from an essay happily titled, for Herrero Brasas’s purposes, “The Gospel According to Walt Whitman”: “[Whitman] was a theoriser about society before he was a poet.” Continuing his construction of a non-sexual Whitman agenda, Herrero Brasas declares “we are bound to conclude that moral reform was indeed the ultimate goal of Whitman’s poetical-religious enterprise.” The search for Whitman’s new morality commences with a look at Arthur Briggs’s *Walt Whitman: Thinker and Poet* (1952), which links Whitman as a moral thinker with “latitudinarian Christian moralists, with Nietzsche, Aristotle, and Confucius, as well as the Epicureans, the Stoics, and the German idealists.”

Herrero Brasas broaches the question of how Whitman’s sexual identity impacted his new morality by choosing as his *bête noir* Robert Martin, whose *Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* (1979) does not fare well: “forced interpretation,” “limited evidence,” “arbitrariness,” “finds sexual innuendos everywhere.” Martin’s “clear defense of the anonymity of sexual encounters” disconcerts Herrero Brasas, and he resists this Martin suggestion that sexual liberation helped shape Whitman’s politics: “Recognizing his position as an outsider, as marginal or criminal, [Whitman] asserts his rights and those of

others who have been made victims of arbitrary ethical codes.” Martin’s theory, Herrero Brasas sums up, “lacks balance and objectivity. It is the theory of a social and political activist.” Besides, Martin should know that there is “no record that Whitman ever addressed the issue of homosexuality in writing or in a speech.” Herrero Brasas adds that “Martin is not alone in his appropriation of Whitman for today’s gay cause. Recent examples of it are Alan Helms (1992), Charley Shively (1987), Byrne Fone (2000) and, more prominently, Gary Schmidgall (1997). In their works, Whitman is made to appear as a disguised late-twentieth-century gay activist carrying out a carefully calculated revolutionary mission in nineteenth-century America.”

Herrero Brasas is far more comfortable when he returns to David Kuebrich’s *Minor Prophecy*, which emphasizes Whitman’s optimistic belief in the possibility of moral reform and his inspiration by what he terms progressive “post-Christian millennialism.” Herrero Brasas respectfully reports Kuebrich’s view that “Whitman’s drive for the moral reform of individual men and women and of society as whole stems from his absorption of Arminian millennialist theology.”

Finally, Herrero Brasas turns in his last chapter, “Whitman, the Moral Reformer,” to more specifically sociological and cultural sources of Whitman’s reformist cause. This he does by featuring David Reynolds’s *Beneath the American Renaissance* (1988). Herrero Brasas says that Reynolds finds the roots Whitman’s “moralizing vocation” in his experience of antebellum black preachers and orators, in Emerson’s “Divinity School Address,” in the influence of the maverick Quaker Elias Hicks, in the “fanatical reformers” whose lectures he loved to hear at the Broadway Tabernacle.

Herrero Brasas offers one final piece in the puzzle of Whitman’s reformist drive: Darwinian evolutionary theory. Whitman was “quite an enthusiastic believer, who found evolution at work in all aspects of society.” Herrero Brasas notes, too, that Ed Folsom has seen the influence of Darwin even on Whitman’s view of race, then quotes a Whitman manuscript observation, “The blacks must either filter through in time or gradually eliminate & disappear.”

At chapter’s end, Herrero Brasas reiterates that an ethical “love of comrades” is Whitman’s main innovation: “It is the love of comrades that constitutes Whitman’s truly unique contribution to an ideology of moral reform.” In the ten-page conclusion that follows, Herrero Brasas returns to the love of comrades that linchpins his book. With perfect consistency, he repeats that Whitman’s “messianic project” delivered “a new type of spirituality.” Herrero Brasas calls this a “genial project” and grants it is “on the conservative side.” Whitman’s *Leaves* is all about encouraging “free expression to those intense impulses of comradeship (not *homosexual* impulses, as R. K. Martin suggests, the difference in conceptualization being crucial).” Herrero Brasas, in fact, boldly posits that Whitman compromised his sexual identity for *strategic* reasons: “Whitman’s attempt to implement his new morality, a morality of homosexual connotations, involved at least in principle an important compromise: the renunciation of the genital aspects of homosexuality in exchange for a wider pool of potential partners.” But *not* sex-partners. Whitman, Herrero Brasas continues, “rationalized his homosexual impulses and experienced

them on an elevated emotional level rather than on the level of pure sexual desire.” (Unsurprisingly, Herrero Brasas approves David Reynolds’s emphasis in his Whitman biography on nineteenth-century male camaraderie involving non-sexual “passionate intimacy” and bed-sharing.)

Herrero Brasas follows this with two more adventurous assertions, one that Whitman “absolutely rejected the possibility of a distinct homosexual minority,” the other that he “did not believe in homosexuality as a separate sexual and social phenomenon.” Mind you, earlier on the same page, Herrero Brasas remarks on “the lack of clear sexual categories (homosexual, heterosexual)” in Whitman’s day. This might prepare one for the climactic assertion in his penultimate paragraph, but it still comes as a shock to anyone who may have complacently thought the gay culture war in Whitman studies (like the military culture war over “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell”) was just about over: “Whitman was not a precursor to the modern gay liberation movement, and he would not have wanted to be seen in that light.”

Given the views expressed above, it may not surprise that Herrero Brasas’s publisher asked him to place them in the context of Queer Theory; hence his four-page annex, “A Queer (Theory) Postscript.” Among his reflections are the following (I will leave the reader, whoever you are, to judge them): “Over time Whitman became aware that the kind of romantic and sexual impulses he experienced clearly overflowed the chosen category” of comradeship. “His project was one of moral reform, with religion and mystical revelation at its center, as the source of authority—a far cry from the queer perspective.” “Nor was Whitman a queer activist or prophet in any meaningful sense of the word.” “[Whitman] and his disciples would be disappointed at the sexual economy that appears to dominate the gay world of today, so devoid of Greek virtue (as defined by Symonds), martial spirit, and poetry, so devoid of spirituality, in a word, so capitalistic in its conception of love.” “I have no doubt that, if pressed, Whitman would have preferred to be remembered as a hetero rather than a homo.”

A new visitor to Whitman studies can be forgiven a few minor slips. Herrero Brasas refers to Harry Stafford as Whitman’s “nurse,” but he never held that position. He also leaves the impression that Whitman disguised initials by numbering them multiple times, but I know of only the P.D. = 16-4 instance. David Reynolds is described as a Rutgers professor, but he has taught at the City University of New York for two decades. This is obviously not the place to contest the many views in *Walt Whitman’s Mystical Ethics* that give new life to the long tussle among critics over the genital or non-genital Whitman. Herrero Brasas certainly demonstrates how starkly the battle lines can be drawn, just as he reminds us yet again of Whitman’s multitudinous contradictions (and the mutually exclusive interpretations they can sometimes generate). I will confine myself to just three points.

In his “Love of Comrades” chapter, Herrero Brasas introduces a discussion of Eduard Bertz’s homophobic frontal attack on Whitman, *Der Yankee-Heiland* (1906), and quotes with approval this harsh observation by Bertz on how Whitman’s disciples subverted his “exalted expression of comradeship”: “There is a moral peril in the way fanatics turn a pathological way of feeling

into a gospel, even a religion, and poison the normal male youth.” Herrero Brasas more than once suggests that he shares Bertz’s view that the early Whitman disciples egregiously took the ball of comradeship and ran ahead of him. “[T]he extreme devotion, verging on fanaticism, of his closest followers,” Herrero Brasas writes, “did decisively shape Whitman’s religious enterprise.” But this is unfair. In *Worshipping Walt: The Whitman Disciples* (2008), Michael Robertson argued eloquently and persuasively that those disciples were far from fanatical. My *WWQR* review of the book summed up the nine disciples Robertson discusses thus: “little was perfunctory, hyped, or rose-colored in the discipleship Robertson lays before us. Intelligence plus genuine and heartfelt personal conviction always seem to shine through.” Clearly, Herrero Brasas is not inclined to view Whitman’s more recent disciples—or “activist” scholars—so cordially.

Second, there is not a single reference to the concept—or the reality—of the Closet in Herrero Brasas’s study. Eve Sedgwick is referenced, but her *Epistemology of the Closet* is absent from the discussion. It is very hard to imagine addressing the “religious enterprise” of the homosexual Whitman without introducing this subject.

Finally, I draw attention to Herrero Brasas’s third endnote of the “Love of Comrades” chapter, evoked by a reference to “this calamus-root” in “These I Sing in the Spring”: “It is unclear why Whitman refers to the calamus grass as a ‘root.’” This is the root of my problem with *Walt Whitman’s Mystical Ethics of Comradeship*: Herrero Brasas doesn’t get to the root of *Leaves of Grass*. He needs to do a little botanical research and learn about the calamus root (or rhizome) and its many herbal, medicinal, and aromatic uses. He might also reconsider how his assertion of Whitman’s “renunciation of the genital” squares with his energetic paean to Horace in 1889: “Sex: sex: sex: whether you sing or make a machine, or go to the North Pole, or love your mother, or build a house, or black shoes, or anything— anything at all—it’s sex, sex, sex: sex is the root of all” (*WWWC* 3:452). And he might look more carefully for the genital root of *Leaves of Grass*. In “Song of Myself,” for example: “The smoke of my own breath, / Echoes, ripples, buzz’d whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine.” Or in “I Sing the Body Electric”: “Hips, hip-sockets, hip-strength, inward and outward round, man-balls, man-root.”

*Hunter College—The City University of New York*

GARY SCHMIDGALL