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“O YOU SINGER SOLITARY”: WALT WHITMAN ON THE CLOSET

GARY SCHMIDGALL

DELIVERED AT THE WALT WHITMAN BIRTHPLACE
ON THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF STONEWALL,
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In the swamp in secluded recesses,
A shy and hidden bird is warbling a song.

Solitary the thrush,
The hermit withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements,
Sings by himself a song.
—“When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”

1.

BIRDS ARE AN IMPORTANT PART of the Whitman cosmos. Near the end of “Song of Myself” there is the famous “barbaric yawp” that a spotted hawk sounds “over the roofs of the world.” There is the lovelorn mockingbird of “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” whose operatic lamentation over the loss of his mate Whitman employs to explain how he came to discover his vocation as a poet. But probably the most famous winged creature of all is the hermit thrush who figures thrillingly in his great cry of the heart in homage to Lincoln, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.” The thrush ventriloquizes the poet’s grief as he helps us picture the journey of Lincoln’s coffin to Illinois. That’s why I was so pleased when I first saw the design for the postal service’s 2019 commemorative stamp honoring Walt. It has three design elements: an image of him taken from one of my favorite Whitman photographs (made in 1870, when he was about fifty), the branch of a lilac bush, and on that is perched a hermit thrush.

The hermit thrush also figures in the beginning of the his crucial autobiographical poem “Starting from Paumanok,” which he placed

first in his most daring *Leaves of Grass* edition of all, that of 1860. He tells us there that he liked to withdraw “to muse and meditate in some deep recess,” and then he declares that, having “heard at dawn the unrivall’d one, the hermit thrush from the swamp cedars, / Solitary, I strike up for a New World.” In the rest of the poem he lays out his bold new agenda. One leaf of that agenda he was eager to articulate, and that is what we now call gay liberation—which will be my focus today.

But let’s pause and ask: why did the poet so identify with the hermit thrush? First, we have to consult the bird-watchers. The species is called *Catharus guttatus* (“guttatus” means “spotted” in Latin). It is thus a bird with spots on its breast and is widely distributed throughout North America. Here’s what the Cornell Lab of Ornithology tells us: “the hermit thrush lives up to its name. Although celebrated for its ethereal song, it is mostly a quiet and unobtrusive bird.” The lab also tells us, “an unassuming bird with a lovely, melancholy song, the hermit thrush lurks in the understories of far northern forests,” and it “rarely visits backyards and generally does not visit feeders.” The Audubon field guide says its “clear, pensive song is heard in forests of the mountains of the North.” The Life Nature Library also describes the thrush family in general as “perhaps the most gifted of all singers.”

Whitman’s hermit thrush figures in an 1873 essay his friend John Burroughs, one of the nation’s great early nature writers, wrote on “The Birds of the Poets”: “The most melodious of our songsters, the wood-thrush and the hermit-thrush—birds whose strains, more than any others, express harmony and serenity—have not . . . yet had reared to them their merited poetic monument.” But he does cite the hermit thrush’s “exalting and spiritual utterance” in the Lincoln elegy and notes how it inspires the poet when he “flees from the stifling atmosphere and offensive [city] lights and conversation of the house” [*Scribner’s Monthly*, (1873), 6:574].

Three traits seem to explain why Walt was drawn to the hermit thrush: (1) it is a not strikingly attractive bird, (2) it prefers to lurk in the forest or underbrush, and (3) it likes to sing. The bland muted colors of the bird certainly mimicked Whitman’s looks: we know he turned gray by age thirty, and in one early poem he referred to his face

as “swarthy and unrefined.” No eye-catching plumage here. The bird’s very name may also have resonated for a poet who was beginning to feel apart or isolated from the mainstream of mid-nineteenth-century American culture. The hermit thrush “is a shy bird,” Walt told his friend Horace Traubel late in life (*With Walt Whitman in Camden*, hereafter *WWC*, 9:224). And yet: this bird has a gift for song and the urge to sing.

I hardly need to tell you these are contradictory traits—or that Walt’s great gift was for reveling in contradiction: “very well then I contradict myself; / I am large I contain multitudes.” Whitman reveled in the contradiction of the hermit thrush: a bravura singer who is very shy. (And let me tell you, as one who reviewed opera and published books on the art-form for twenty years early in my career, that being a great singer and being shy at the same time is absolutely impossible.)

The pathos of being a hermit thrush was caught by Whitman when he described in *Specimen Days* a nature ramble in one of his favorite venues, Timber Creek, near a farm about a dozen miles from his Camden house. On a spring day in 1876, as the sun was setting, he records: “As I rise for return, I linger to a long delicious song-epilogue (is it the hermit-thrush?) from some bushy recess off there in the swamp, repeated leisurely and pensively over and over again” (“Sundown Perfume—Quail-Notes—The Hermit-Thrush”).

One wonders whether, as he wrote this, the poet recalled creating this very same scene in his Lincoln poem a decade earlier. For in it the hermit thrush—he calls it a “grey-brown bird” and a “singer so shy”—anticipated the Timber Creek idyll:

From deep secluded recesses,
From the fragrant cedars, and the ghostly pines so still
Came the singing of the bird.

And the charm of the singing rapt me . . .
And the voice of my spirit tallied the song of the bird.

Then the poet’s diva-bird goes on to perform a page-long aria lamenting the murdered Lincoln.

The pathos Whitman invested in that hermit thrush (and here—finally—I arrive at the subject of my talk) is the pathos of a life lived in the Closet.

2.

Now let me pause to say I do not have much right to opine, as I'm going to do here, about life in the Closet. Fifty years ago I was beginning a year of living a more or less happy heterosexual life with my college girlfriend; I had just dropped out of Stanford Law School and was starting on a doctorate in English there. But 1969 was the year many eyes were opened, including mine, by events that occurred at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village. By the time I got my Ph.D. five years later in 1974, I had made a pretty efficient and angst-free entry into a new gay life. Because I was ridiculously late in coming to terms with my true sexual identity, I completely avoided the claustrophobia of the Closet. My main experience of that place was vicarious, through knowing my gay uncle Art, who lived from 1900 to 1989. Walt, you will recall, lost his Interior Department clerkship in 1865 when his boss secretary Harlan discovered the 1860 *Leaves* in his office; well, my uncle lost his post office job in 1951, during the so-called lavender scare roiling the U.S. Government (a former lover had outed him to the military police).

By knowing my uncle Art, I learned much about the closeted life, even before I became a candidate for entry into it myself—both its pleasures and its pains. What startled me, once I began to immerse myself in Whitman, was how much the habits of a closeted life pervade his poems, other writings, and manuscripts. Of course, the concept of the “Closet” did not exist in Walt’s day; in fact, the word “closet” never even appears in *Leaves*. Nor, for that matter, did the word “homosexual” yet exist. But, of course, the idea of the Closet, if not the word, has existed for millennia. The saucy Roman epigrammatist Martial was joking about the closeted in the first century AD. In fact, I was astounded to learn online that the modern sense of “to come out of the closet” as meaning to “to admit something openly” supposedly first appeared only in 1963 (of course, not everything on the web is

true).

The Closet existed in Whitman's day, and I come to tell you it is even mentioned in the Bible—and quite favorably. The Closet can be defined as a kind of hypocrisy that is forced on a person by culture, society, or (until not too long ago) by the law. In this sense, the Closet becomes the only place where one can be true to one's self. God, the Bible tells us, hears prayers from the Closet, and it also often condemns hypocrisy. Here is what the Gospel of Matthew says:

But thou, when thou prayest, shalt not be as the hypocrites are . . . or they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. . . . But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father, which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. (6:5-6, King James version)

The Gospel of Luke is even more eloquent and succinct in praise of the truth of the Closet. In fact, one could say this is the scripture for Stonewall: "Therefore, whatsoever ye have spoken in darkness shall be heard in the light; and that which ye have spoken in the ear in closets shall be proclaimed upon the housetops" (12:3). That, of course, reminds me of Walt's gospel yawp sounding "over the roofs of the world" in "Song of Myself."

It might also remind us of the Bible's prophetic "voice of him that crieth in the wilderness," which appears in Isaiah (40:3) and all four books of the gospel—the voice of the disciple who brings news of a savior. Walt was not above posing as a prophet or disciple. In fact, in *Democratic Vistas* (1871) he calls for future poets in America who are "possessed of the religious fire and abandon of Isaiah" (Folsom ed. 69). (More generally, one is also reminded of the famous Whitman manuscript jotting, around 1857, about his plan for a "*Great Construction of the New Bible*" (NUPM 1:353), which has led many critics to cast *Leaves* as kind of New American Bible. First among them was F. O. Matthiessen, who suggested in 1941 that all the "songs" and "chants" were like so many Psalms. In fact, the 1860 *Leaves*—about which I will make much here today—has been seen by many as the edition that most functions like a Bible. Its last poem—"So Long!"—summarizes a new Gospel: "to conclude—I announce what comes after me."

Moving from rural Long Island and rural Brooklyn, Whitman found the ideal Closet in New York's "endless and noisy chorus," the seed-bed for *Leaves of Grass*. What better place to disappear, become invisible in plain sight, than "million-footed Manhattan"? Also, what better place to begin searching for others of one's own kind? One poem about the city—which he later titled "City of Orgies"—has these final lines, which clearly reveal that the metropolis became for him a cruising-ground:

. . .as I pass, O Manhattan! your frequent and swift flash of eyes
offering me love,
Offering me the response of my own—those repay me,
Lovers, continual lovers, only repay me.

This was a poem in the *Calamus* cluster of 1860, to which I will return. Walt referred to his gay fraternity as those "belonging to our circus" (the cognate phrase in the 1970s was "the boys in the band"). He spent all of the 1840s and early 1850s anonymously going with the flow and churning out mundane journalism, forgettable poems, and sentimental fictions, but slowly he began to prepare for the debut of his own charismatic personality, which he would eventually proclaim upon the housetops in his 1855 *Leaves of Grass*.

Late in his life, as the post-Stonewall gay rights movement flourished, my uncle Art expressed something like nostalgia for his former life, namely, the excitement and pleasures to be found in the concealed signs and codes of being the member of a gay fraternity, of managing by clever camouflage to hoodwink the hetero-normative mainstream. I will cite my favorite example in *Leaves* of this hiding-in-plain-sight concealment, a short *Calamus* poem called "A Glimpse":

A glimpse through an interstice caught,
Of a crowd of workmen and drivers in a bar-room around the stove
late of a winter night, and I unremark'd seated in a corner,
Of a youth who loves me and whom I love, silently approaching and
seating himself near, that he may hold me by the hand,
A long while amid the noises of coming and going, of drinking
and oath and smutty jest,
There we two content, happy in being together, speaking little,
perhaps not a word.

Of course, in his real life Whitman eventually found the bohemian establishments in the Bowery—like Pfaff’s dive bar and eatery on Broadway—where he did not have to be so unobtrusive. (I’m told the Pfaff’s rooms still exist.)

But even in the 1855 *Leaves* Walt was beginning to show his resentment at having to present a fake self in public and conceal his real self. Near the beginning of his very first and greatest poem, “Song of Myself,” he offers this memorable distinction:

My dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments, dues . . .
 . . .they are not the Me myself.

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am . . .
 Looking with side-curved head curious what will come next,
 Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it. (sec. 4)

That is what makes reading the poems of the three early *Leaves* editions so bracing and exciting: in them he was both “in and out of the game” of the Closet, watching and wondering at its pleasures and pains. “Both in and out of the game” is, of course, a vintage Whitman contradiction, Walt having his cake and eating it too.

The Closet requires thespian skill. Managing both a public Me and a “Me myself” requires playing with a mask. Whitman’s nineteenth-century soul brother, Oscar Wilde, put it well when he said, “Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth” [“The Critic as Artist,” *Complete Works* (HarperCollins, 1966), 1045]. As early as the first *Leaves* of 1855, we can observe Whitman beginning to use his mask, or persona, to reveal the truth about his Closeted life: donning or suddenly dropping it for strategic purposes. The twenty-eight bathers section of “Song of Myself” is perhaps the most famous example of this actorly mask-play. (I will return again to Oscar Wilde later.)

This must be one reason why Walt was so comfortable with New York’s actors: “I feel rather close to them—very close—almost like one of their kind,” Walt told Horace in one of their first recorded conversations; “actors have always been more friendly to me than almost any other professional class” (*WWC* 1:5-6). On another occasion, after

an actor visited Mickle Street with an offer from a group of actors to stage a benefit for the poet, Walt boasted, “I have a weakness for actors—they seem to have a weakness for me” (*WWC* 2:145). The openness of this bohemian profession to sexual difference (then and now) surely helps to explain why the poet felt he was “one of their kind.”

By the second *Leaves* edition in 1856, Walt had found a word for same-sex affiliation: *adhesiveness*. He drew it from the pseudo-science of phrenology (the reading of personality by the shape of the head); phrenologists used the word to describe persons who were susceptible to same-sex attachments. Walt was now brave enough to hint at his habit of cruising passers-by for likely objects of desire:

Here is adhesiveness—it is not previously fashioned, it is apropos;
Do you know what it is as you pass to be loved by strangers?
Do you know the talk of those turning eye-balls? (“Poem of The Road”)

The third and boldest of all *Leaves* editions, however, appeared in 1860. You could say that in this edition Walt does to the Closet door what he commands in “Song of Myself”: “Unscrew the locks from the doors / Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs” (section 24). Surely the most self-revealing demolition project in this *Leaves* was the 45 poems of its *Calamus* cluster. (The poet chose his title with a sly sexual innuendo: the *Calamus aromaticus* plant has a flower or spadix that resembles the shape of an erect phallus.)

Some *Calamus* poems show how carefully one has to exit the Closet in pursuit of a potential lover:

Lover and perfect equal!
I meant that you should discover me so, by my faint indirections,
And I, when I meet you, mean to discover you by the same signs.
 (“Calamus 41”)

In another poem, Walt’s reader is startled to be told this:

As I walk by your side or sit near, or remain in the same room with you,
Little you know the subtle electric fire that for your sake
is playing within me. (“Calamus 43”)

The entire *Calamus* cluster is likened to heartsblood in another poem that suggests the difficulty and anxiety of self-revelation:

O drops of me! Trickle, slow drops,
 Candid from me falling, drip, bleeding drops,
 From wounds made to free you whence you were prison'd. ("Calamus 44")

That prison, of course, is the Closet.

The very first *Calamus* poem shows the poet escaping from the suffocating urban Closet into nature: "in paths untrodden, / in the growth by margins of pond-waters, / escaped from the life that exhibits itself." Here the poet can declare that he is "no longer abashed—for in this secluded spot I can respond as I would not dare otherwise." (Doesn't that sound like the habitat of a hermit thrush?) We have a prior manuscript version of this poem in which Whitman writes: "And now, escaping, I celebrate that concealed by substantial life, / I celebrate the need for the love of comrades." Walt must have sensed the invisible walls of the Closet as he wrote those words, because he toned down the published version by dropping the words "concealed" and "love." In the published version he quite literally concealed his love.

Many times, sensing the presence of Closet walls, Whitman concealed a forbidden love in his poems. Perhaps the most moving example of this self-censorship is a later poem, "A Noiseless Patient Spider," in which he analogizes his life-long search for a lover to a spider weaving its web. Again, there is a prior manuscript of this poem in which the word "love"—the real subject of the poem—occurs twice. Here is the full manuscript version:

The Soul, reaching out for love,
 As a spider, from some little promontory, throwing out filament
 after filament, tirelessly out of itself, that one at least may catch
 and form a link, a bridge, a connection
 O I saw one passing along, saying hardly a word—yet full of love
 I detected him by certain signs
 O eyes wishfully turning! O silent eyes!

In the more elaborate published version (which you can access online), “love” vanishes and, even more tellingly, Whitman also deleted the whole last two lines, which erupt with three passionate O’s and reveal the poem was inspired while he was cruising among pedestrians for love. The Closet often requires such concealment of substantial truth.

Another *Calamus* poem introduces a very similar pedestrian moment. It begins: “Passing stranger! you do not know how lovingly I look upon you, / you must be he as I was seeking . . .” This poem ends with the poet poignantly yearning: “I do not doubt I am to meet you again, / I am to see to it that I do not lose you” (“*Calamus 22*,” later “*To A Stranger*”). Already in his very first *Leaves*, Whitman was beginning to reveal such cruising habits: “If you meet some stranger in the street and love him or her, do I not often meet strangers in the street and love them” (“Come closer to me . . .”—later titled “*A Song of Occupations*”).

And how does one get close enough to a stranger to reveal one’s “Me myself”? There is a *Calamus* poem for that! It begins: “Come, I will take you down underneath this passive exterior.” Then Walt tells the reader to picture him as “the tenderest lover,” who contains a “measureless ocean of love within him” and knows “too well the sick, sick dread lest one he lov’d might secretly be indifferent to him” (“*Calamus 10*,” later “*Recorders Ages Hence*”).

That stranger who could become a lover reappears in one of Walt’s most fascinating *Calamus* poems (“*Calamus 16*”). If any one of you here today is a writer, but especially a poet, you will identify with its opening line: “Who is now reading this?” Who, really, is going to read this poem I’m writing? Of course, I myself wonder: Who, really, is listening to this talk I am delivering? Well, the rest of the poem is just a list of four possible kinds of reader/audience member. One possibility, I hope, is not present here today: “May-be one who meets all my grand assumptions and egotisms with derision.” One can so easily fall into the occupational hazard of lecturers—and become a pompous, preening bore. Another guess sounds like someone who might have known Walt personally and was all too aware of his flaws: “May-be one is now reading this who knows some wrong-doing in my past life.” Another guess may tell us about the kind of reader Walt was

really hoping to attract: “May-be a stranger is reading this who has secretly loved me” (The spider at work!). The final guess may refer to all the respectable heterosexual readers who are clueless in the face of Whitman’s many contradictions, coy hints, and gay innuendos: “Or maybe one who is puzzled at me.” By the way, this poem must have struck Walt as too daring an authorial revelation, because he banished it from all later editions of *Leaves*.

This poem touches on a crucial fact about Whitman’s style: he was writing simultaneously for both a respectable, mainstream audience (what he called “civilians”) and a niche audience (what he called “loving comrades”). This required him to become exceptionally clever, one might even say devious: in other words, he became adept at that magical poet’s trick: hiding in plain sight. This is a trick that was also honed by another great nineteenth-century writer, Oscar Wilde, who idolized Walt and made a point of visiting him when he came to America. While there he wrote Whitman in a letter, “there is no one in thus wide great world of America whom I love and honour so much” [March 1, 1882, *Complete Letters* (2000), 145]. The two were both dextrous at being both in and out of society’s sexual charade, which is what the Closet is. One of the challenges of reading Walt’s poetry is keeping a sharp eye out for his sly tricks. Late in life he explained his deceptive tactics to the Englishman Edward Carpenter, a leading early twentieth century advocate for gay rights, when Carpenter visited him in Camden in 1884. Of course, Walt chose another shy bird to make his point:

You see a hen wandering up and down a hedgerow, looking apparently quite unconcerned, but presently she finds a concealed spot, and furtively lays an egg, and comes away as though nothing has happened! That is how I felt in writing *Leaves of Grass*.

Spotting the hen’s eggs in *Leaves of Grass* is almost as much fun as Easter.

Walt never entirely lost the privacy-guarding instincts he learned from his closeted years. He could suddenly turn gruff and granite-faced when visitors interrogated him. He told Horace one day, “I am not fond of questions—any questions, in short, that require answers” (*WWC*

1:185). And Horace never succeeded in getting Whitman to fess up to him about his sexual identity, even when he was recording Walt's conversation in the upstairs bedroom at Mickle Street. (Of course, Horace may have left some juicy talk discreetly unrecorded. . . . We'll never know.)

Whitman never weaned himself from the instinct to retreat to the Closet for safety and self-preservation. Much in his poetry says, in the spirit of the Gospel of Matthew and Luke, that the Closet is a hallowed place, where one can nurture hope and one's personal truth. Every person needs *some* closet space—a truth in real estate and in real life. You could almost say that, looking back to his early years as a poet, Whitman came to honor the Closet for revealing to him the self he would begin to celebrate in the first line of the very first *Leaves*. This was the retrospective Walt, honoring the place that helped him inhabit his true “Me myself.”

3.

But we are dealing with Whitman, after all, and so there is a contradictory view of the Closet to discuss: the Closet that is a claustrophobic and suffocating place. The more aware one becomes of the walls of the Closet, the more it becomes a prison. It is no place to *live*. The solitary singer of “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” inspires the budding poet to confront what he calls “the sweet hell within”—a splendid and telling oxymoron. The prophetic bird tells him his depression has come from “the cries of unsatisfied love.” In “Song of the Open Road” of 1856, where Walt introduced us to adhesiveness, he urges the reader to get a move on:

Allons! out of the dark confinement!
It is useless to protest—I know all, and expose it. . . .

Behold a secret silent loathing and despair!

No husband, no wife, no friend, no lover, so trusted as to hear the confession,
Another self, a duplicate of every one, skulking and hiding it goes,
open and above-board it goes . . . (1856 version, “Poem of The Road”)

This passage indicts the Closet, urging the reader to give up skulking in a fixed, dark place and begin an open and above-board discovery of the world.

In several *Calamus* poems of 1860, there are unsparing evocations of the Closet's dark confinement. In "Calamus 6" (later, "Not Heaving From My Ribb'd Breast Only"), the poet whose life pulses with adhesiveness is filled with "sighs at night, in rage, dissatisfied with myself." He often utters "long-drawn, ill-suppressed sighs." He sends out "many a hungry wish, told to the skies only." He hears "cries, laughter, defiances, thrown from me when alone, far in the wilds." He experiences "husky pantings through clenched teeth." *This* Closet is a chamber of horrors.

"Calamus 9" offers another harrowing account of the loneliness of the Closet, especially when aggravated by the loss of a lover. Its first line is "Hours continuing long, sore and heavy-hearted." At its midpoint the speaker pauses: "Sullen and suffering hours! (I am ashamed—but it is useless—I am what I am); / Hours of my torment—I wonder if other men ever have the like, out of the same feelings?" Whitman must have felt this peek into his own Closet was too scary, because he removed this poem from all later *Leaves* editions (you can draw it up online by typing "Hours Continuing Long").

I will mention just two other *Calamus* poems that capture the dank isolation of the Closet. The first is "Calamus 20," later titled "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-oak Growing." The poet famously identifies with the forlorn tree: "All alone stood it . . . Without any companion it grew there, uttering joyous leaves, without its friend, its lover near." As a native Californian I am very familiar with live oaks; they always stand apart, because their root structures have to stretch out for yards in search of water. The concealed root-structures of Whitman's poems stretch a long way too; as I've made clear, he sent them out in search of love, as vital as water. The end of the poem always carries an emotional jolt:

. . . though the live-oak glistens there in Louisiana, solitary,
in a wide flat space,
Uttering joyous leaves all its life, without a friend, a lover, near,
I know very well I could not.

This solitary oak is just like that solitary singer, the hermit thrush.

“Calamus 27” (later, “O Living Always, Always Dying”) is a very short but exultant cry of liberation from the Closet: seven O’s and seven exclamation points in its seven lines. The poet looks back on his closeted former self and cries out, “O me, what I was for years, now dead (I lament not—I am content).” The poem’s closing lines capture the sense of exhilaration that Gay Pride Day will celebrate the day after tomorrow:

O to disengage myself from those corpses of me, which I turn
and look at, where I cast them!
To pass on (O living! always living!) and leave the corpses behind!

Now, before leaving the Closet’s dark corners, I should mention the companionship provided by Walt’s notebooks. They must often have served as his Dear Diary. All his poems must have begun as jottings in his notebook; many of the *Calamus* poems show signs of having begun as a “note to self.” As early as about 1855, we find for example this entry, which he labeled “Depressions”: “My pride is impotent, my love gets no response. The complacency of nature is hateful—I am filled with restlessness.—I am incomplete” (*NUPM* 1:167). Surprisingly, about ten years later Walt produced a short poem that seems to capture the same misery. He tucked it in among his Civil War poems:

Not my enemies ever invade me—no harm to my pride from them I fear.
But the lovers I recklessly love—lo! how they master me!
Lo! me, ever open and helpless, bereft of my strength!
Utterly abject, grovelling on the ground before them! (*Sequel to Drum-Taps*)

After he became the Good Gray Poet, however, such a raw confession spoiled the image he desired to project, so Whitman banished it from *Leaves* after 1867. Don’t look for it in a typical *Leaves* edition.

But the deletion did not mean he could avoid repeating the humiliation of opening himself to love. Just a few years later Walt was still in Washington and continuing his intense relationship with the former confederate soldier Peter Doyle (whom he met in the winter of 1865). Here is perhaps the most moving and harrowing of all the notes-to-

self in his notebooks, which he dated July 15, 1870:

GIVE UP ABSOLUTELY & FOR GOOD, *from the present hour, this FEVERISH, FLUCTUATING, useless UNDIGNIFIED PURSUIT* of 16.4 [16th and 4th letter of the alphabet = P.D.= Peter Doyle]—*too long, (much too long) persevered in,—so humiliating—It must come at last & had better come now . . . avoid seeing her, or meeting her* [original “him” erased in both cases], *or any talk or explanations—or ANY MEETING WHATEVER, FROM THIS HOUR FORTH, FOR LIFE* (NUPM 2:888-89)

The reason this cry from the Closet never became a poem is easy to imagine.

4.

To sum up, I have focused mainly on the poems in the *Calamus* cluster that reveal the pleasures and fulfilling joys that were possible within the Closet. Yet we have also seen that many *Calamus* poems reveal the manifold pains of the Closet. These poems deal with the world, the culture of Whitman’s own day, when the Closet was a present, unavoidable part of daily life.

Now, in closing, I’d like to say something about the Closet-less future that Whitman clearly hoped for and foresaw—perhaps even predicted. The process of writing *Walt Whitman: A Gay Life* convinced me that the poet was extraordinarily forward-thinking. The future was on his mind, as we all know from his iconic “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” (1856), which delivers this confident promise: “I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence.” One of the most exciting features of the *Calamus* cluster is that it shows Walt beginning to articulate his ideas about the adhesive life as a political agenda. This, of course, reminds me of the group of activists (including some veteran Act-Up AIDS fighters) who descended on the Whitman Birthplace visitor center on 31 May 1997 to protest loudly at the erasure of Walt’s gay identity in the center’s permanent exhibit. Need I add that the group called itself The Calamus Preservation Society?

The first *Calamus* poem seems to invite rustication—“In the growth by margins of pondwaters, / Escaped from the life that exhibits

itself”—but Whitman swiftly brings the cluster back into the center of civil life. The poem sounds like the declaration of a political leader when it ends:

I proceed, for all who are, or have been, young men,
I tell the secret of my nights and days,
To celebrate the need of comrades.

By 1860 Whitman had become much more boldly political. You could say he began to “act up” and also act “out.” That’s probably why the *New York Times* reviewer hated the 1860 *Leaves* edition, calling Walt “repulsive” and accusing him of “throwing filth” (May 19, 1860). (On the very same date in 1997, the same paper’s reviewer professed similar disgust at my *Walt Whitman: A Gay Life*, objecting to my “blinding libido” and “self-hugging” impulse.)

Several *Calamus* poems are phrased as if they could be placed on a Gay Pride banner today. “Calamus 19,” for example: “Mind you the timid models of the rest, the majority? / Long I minded them, but hence I will not—for I have adopted models for myself” (later, “Behold the Swarthy Face”). Likewise, the Stonewall rioters in 1969 got courageously fed up and adopted a model of their own. Some lines from *Calamus* have the nice alliteration of a political slogan: “The dependence of Liberty shall be lovers” or “The continuance of Equality shall be comrades” (“Calamus 5,” later “Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice”).

Another *Calamus* poem begins, “We two boys together clinging, / One the other never leaving,” but it ends with the two boys becoming like Act-Up activists: “Cities wrenching, ease scorning, statutes mocking, feebleness chasing, / Fulfilling our foray.” The two boys are described as “armed and fearless,” but I hasten to point out he did not mean “armed” in the NRA sense (Walt’s brother said he hated guns), but rather arm-in-arm. In fact, “Calamus 37” (later, “A Leaf for Hand in Hand”) conjures up something like a Gay Pride parade; it includes “natural persons, young and old marching together . . . all processions moving along the streets!” The poem ends with a gesture of political solidarity: “I wish to infuse myself among you till I see it common for you to walk hand in hand.”

In “Calamus 33” (later, “No Labor-Saving Machine”), Whitman declares that the whole *Calamus* cluster will serve as a political legacy: “Only these carols, vibrating through the air, I leave, / For comrades and lovers.” In the very last *Calamus* poem (“Calamus 45,” later “Full of Life Now”), he seems to promise he might just show up for the parade—at least in spirit: “To one a century hence, or any number of centuries hence, / To you, yet unborn, these, seeking you.” Its last line is an almost tantalizing warning, reminiscent of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”: “Be not too certain but I am with you now.”

Speaking, as I am, of Whitman’s radical political agenda, I should now mention that, ten years after publishing the *Calamus* cluster, he produced his great jeremiad about America, *Democratic Vistas*. In this long prose essay he made it clear that the great nation promised by the Founders in the Declaration of Independence had not yet arrived: “The fruition of Democracy on aught like a grand scale,” he wrote, “resides altogether in the future,” adding, the real “gist” of Democracy “still sleeps, quite unawakened.” (I believe he would say that America in 2019 is also far from woke.) Whitman was appalled by the “solely materialistic bearings” of These States, and he hoped *Democratic Vistas* would offer a “tremendous force-infusion” to waken the nation from its torpor.

One way to awaken America, Whitman says in *Democratic Vistas*, is to believe in the power of adhesiveness: “Adhesiveness or Love, that fuses, ties and aggregates, making the races comrades, and fraternizing all” (24). Ignoring the “grim estimates inherited from the Puritans,” Whitman extols the “intense and loving comradeship, the personal and passionate attachment of man to man.” He adds, “I confidently expect a time when there will be seen, running like a half-hid warp through all the myriad audible and visible worldly interests of America, threads of manly friendship . . . emotional, muscular, heroic . . . I say Democracy infers such loving comradeship” (61).

Well, you get my point: though he memorably told us he was expert at leaning and loafing, when it came to the Closet, he was a political activist and a futurist. In fact, there is a little Whitman manuscript in the Duke University library that is perhaps my favorite of the countless leftover odds-and-ends among his papers. We think

he jotted down this idea for a poem sometime before he wrote the *Calamus* poems. It reads: “A poem which . . . addresses those who will, in future ages understand me (Because I write with reference to being far better understood than I can possibly be now)” (*NUPM* 1:338). How true that is when it comes to gay liberation. Whitman was so far ahead of his time that he condemned the Closet even before it existed! Oscar Wilde was another great nineteenth-century writer who felt imprisoned in the Closet, and I suspect he was thinking of those eyes on the future when, in his one published essay on Walt, he wrote: “He has begun a prelude to larger themes. He is the herald of a new era. As a man he is the precursor of a fresh type. He is a factor in the heroic and spiritual evolution of the human being” (*Pall Mall Gazette*, January 25, 1889).

5.

I will close the door of my Closet talk with an anecdote. When Wilde was ostracized and living in poverty in Paris in his last years, he became furious when a closeted gay friend insisted on secrecy when he came to visit him. Oscar chided him in a letter: “Don’t have with *me* the silly mania for secrecy that makes you miss the value of things,” and he added, “On the whole . . . you are a great baby” [to George Ives, 1 February 1900, *Complete Letters* (Henry Holt, 2000), 1172]. In the years after Stonewall such a person would be snidely dismissed as a “Closet case.” Which reminds me of the biggest Closet case in American literature. Of course, I refer to Henry James. When *Drum-Taps*, a collection of Whitman’s Civil War poems, appeared in 1865, James reviewed it very harshly. In it he offered a view of literary art that is exactly the opposite of Walt’s great declaration, “I celebrate myself . . .” Here is what James opined: “Art requires, above all things, a suppression of one’s self, a subordination of one’s self to an idea. This will never do. . . . We find art, measure, grace, sense sneered at on every page” (*The Nation*, 16 November 1865). One can only defend James by noting he was a callow, snot-nosed 22-year-old when he wrote those words. James’s declaration that selfsuppression is the highest art, of course, is a perfect definition of what a Closeted life demands, and

that is where, not surprisingly, James resided until the day he died.

Give me Walt Whitman any day, with his vocabulary of pride and individual personality. In the 1860 *Leaves*, there is a short poem addressed to a historian that can stand as a superb response to the prissy, fatuous Henry James. Walt opens by saying most historians “celebrate bygones.” Instead, Walt will do what he so often does—look to the future. Here are its closing lines:

Pressing the pulse of the life that has seldom exhibited itself,
 (the great pride of man in himself),
 Chanter of Personality, outlining what is yet to be,
 I project the history of the future. (“To a Historian”)

I like to think that, if Walt were to look out on the democratic vista of Gay Pride this weekend, he would boast, quite justly: “*I predicted this.*” That is why one of my favorite couplets in “Song of Myself” expresses almost exactly the same view: “I chant the chant of dilation or pride, / We have had ducking and deprecating about enough” (sec. 21).

Now, for symmetry’s sake, let me circle back at the end to Walt’s birds. I will read you just one more short Whitman poem. He composed it after he had closed the door on his “deathbed” *Leaves* (1891-92) but before he lay on his real deathbed. He gave the jotting to Horace Traubel, who arranged its lines into a poem and published it five years after he died. That is why you may never have heard of it. It is in virtually no editions of Whitman. I’m sorry to say it is not even in my St Martin’s Press *Selected Poems* (though it now goes on a short list of the poems I *wish* I had included).

In this short poem Walt says he has left the shy, melodious birds of his early career and now identifies with birds who revel in the wide-open sky. You could say that its last line perfectly captures the essence of the fiftieth Stonewall anniversary and Gay Pride Day:

I have not so much emulated the birds that musically sing,
 I have abandon’d myself to flights, broad circles.
 The hawk, the seagull, have far more possess’d me than the canary
 or mocking-bird,
 I have not felt to warble and trill, however, sweetly,
 I have felt to soar in freedom and the fullness of power, joy, volition.
 — from *Old Age Echoes* cluster (10th *Leaves* edition, 1897)

I'm only sorry that Walt did not include the hermit thrush in his list of bravura birds he had left behind. In this poem, of course, he is saying one last time that he has exited the bird-cage of the Closet (la cage aux folles?) and is looking to the future and expanding his habitat, aligning himself with the hawk and gull who explore the world in "broad circles." I just wish he had added the broad-circling eagle here, whose aerial sexual intercourse he wrote a superb late poem about.

But the hawk he does mention reminds us of the bird who makes a comprimario appearance toward the end of the poem that announced his debut on the stage of American poetry. That spotted hawk, uttering its startling, disruptive "barbaric yawp," tells us Walt's process of coming out of the Closet was already beginning in 1855. In the Closet Whitman gained much wisdom, but he became the definitive American poet only after emerging from it to tell his reader, as he did in 1860, "from behind the screen where I hid, I advance personally" ("*So Long!*").

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