

## **“noble american motherhood”**

**whitman,  
women, and  
the ideal democracy**

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D. H. Lawrence’s description of Whitman’s women as “muscles and wombs: functional creatures—no more” is a typical Lawrentian mix of the outrageously hyperbolic and the provocative. It is true that traditional wives suckling nimble babes while a welter of healthy progeny play at their feet considerably outnumber the female lawyers, doctors, and legislators in Whitman’s canon. But recently a number of articles have credited Whitman with anticipating, even distantly supporting, the issues raised by the women’s rights movement. These persuasive articles take their cue from lines such as those from “Song of the Broad-Axe” where women are seen to “enter the public assembly and take places the same as the men.” Such lines may be less prophetic than inconsistent however; we cannot dismiss the far more numerous passages in which Whitman idealizes traditional roles and makes “grand and powerful motherhood” the only path to female self-fulfillment. A more subtle inconsistency radiates from the open-collared rough, the sexually potent Bohemian carouser, whose strong procreative urge appears to threaten the stable family Whitman’s women uphold. In his poetry, women are allowed to be sexually vigorous; men however always take the lead but for one notable exception, namely Section 11 of *Song of Myself* where he depicts the twenty-eight bathers observed by the desirous lady.<sup>1</sup>

Whitman is prone to shrug off such inconsistencies in other instances, his large and visionary persona having no time for the restrictions of conventional logic. But concerning women and their rights, his views are in fact and unfailingly extensions of his very consistent

views on general human improvement. He encouraged the development of women—but in order that they raise offspring who would reform and steadily improve society by acting in concert with the laws of nature. The way to achieve such perfect and perfecting motherhood was an even greater commitment by women to traditional roles. Those vignettes in *Leaves of Grass* of completely liberated women reflect a later condition once the Religious or Ideal Democracy has unfolded. They are not models of the present, only visionary projections. Whitman's stand on key issues of the nineteenth century woman's rights debate does not so much bespeak an inherent radicalism as it does millennial expectations.

Predictably the poetry that results has an almost messianic fervor. Whitman is dealing with a vision that inspired a major portion of nineteenth century thought, what Alfred Kazin calls America's "insatiable utopian will." As the writings of the Protestant clergy show, whether those on church government by John Wise, or the millennium by Mark Hopkins, or a universal humanism by William Ellery Channing, the ideal of the millennium had also a secular character—the Kingdom of God was fused with American republican destiny. The secular counterparts to Puritan eschatologists and Christian perfectionists envisioned a future ideal society where free individuals, whose only allegiance was to those laws derived from nature, exist in sublime statelessness. The many experimental communities that dotted the nineteenth-century landscape were as much the product of New World expectations as they were idealistic expressions of the reformist wing of Transcendentalism.<sup>2</sup>

Whitman projected his own hopes for the ideally possible in the Ideal or Religious Democracy, a construct derived from a Jeffersonian faith in America's election by divine Providence for a special historical mission and the Jacksonian faith in the value of the irreducible self. Under a perfected future government, individuals will regulate their own lives, correct and monitor those few laws already in operation, and eventually abolish formal government.

To hasten America's upward spiral of improvement Whitman assumed responsibility for the fashioning of superior men and women. He noted in an 1856 notebook "to make a superior American Intellect and Character in any or all the states,"<sup>3</sup> and announced twenty years later in the *Preface 1876* that his "general object" in *Leaves of Grass* had been "to make a type-portrait for a living, active, worldly, healthy personality, objective as well as subjective, joyful and potent, and modern and free, distinctively for use of the United States, male and female, through the long future" (II, 470). The portrait of the ideal human, endowed with the superior developments necessary to usher in the blessed future, was to be his legacy to America.

Far from being original with him, the details comprising Whitman's program for America's women are to be found in an enormous

body of popular writings—speeches, orations, tracts, sermons, and newspaper pieces addressed to this subject. In drawing on these works, Whitman is acting on his own precept that the ideal poet must “absorb, and express in poetry . . . America . . . These great new underlying facts and new ideas rushing and spreading everywhere;—Truly a mighty age” (*Preface 1872*, p. 740). While reshaping these materials to formulate an ideal role women were to fill in order for his utopian democracy to unfold, he appropriates the myths and realities surrounding popular assumptions about woman’s nature to propose a particularly male vision of the role of women in his America. He urged physical fitness for women and attacked tight-lacing in order to enhance American woman’s childbearing potential; supported increased education for women, but one that would aid mothers to raise their offspring more effectively; advocated a rudimentary sex education, but to insure superior offspring. If they filled these “natural” functions in the present, Whitman felt, women could expect to witness the progress of the Republic to its destined pre-eminence and human institutions to a degree of perfection that would include the equal participation of women with men in the governing and administration of the New Zion. Against the wide spectrum of proposals made by his contemporaries involved in the women’s rights debate, Whitman’s was modestly revolutionary; twentieth century hindsight, however is less kind to Whitman’s thinking about and contribution to women’s rights and prerogatives. In his unwavering adherence to his age’s views regarding a woman’s true nature and an equally passionate faith in a democratic idealism that promised the certain progress of the Republic and civilization to a glorious millennial flowering, Whitman could only have formulated the program that he did, one that was conservative if not in intention, then in real practice. His program gave succor to the status quo, leaving unchallenged the reigning male priorities of the age, and located women even more firmly within the narrow confines of domestic activity.

Including issues such as American national destiny and even mankind’s with the question of women’s rights might appear to be a red herring, but those involved in this debate thought otherwise. They were eloquent and persuasive, Whitman finding much in their argument to commend. As we shall see, Whitman viewed the well-ordered home, along with his contemporaries, as a stabilizing force amidst the legendary restlessness of republicans who were felt to be excessively devoted to individualism and the avid pursuit of wealth. Though the public and economic life of the nation blossomed gloriously, radical changes, namely greater differentiation in social structures and the emergence of more complex and diverse economic structures, left men disquieted and they turned increasingly to the warm hearth as a haven or retreat. Here reigned neither ambition, competition, nor coarse materialism, but submission and spirituality embodied in the dutiful

wife/mother. The ideal required that the woman symbolize no less personify the stability and order theorists wished would characterize the very life of the republic. Or, put another way, here in the home, Barbara Welter states, women were left hostage "to all the values which he [the Jacksonian male] held so dear and treated so lightly." The practice of such virtues as piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity among women was consequently unnaturally elevated. The influence of the family, as Nancy F. Cott observes, was believed to reach outward to give shape to the religious and political institutions of the nation and inward to individual character. Enlightened motherhood assumed patriotic overtones among writers. Lydia Sigourney's contention, for instance, that the degree of a mother's diligence in preparing her children for citizenship was "the true measure of her patriotism," was also expressed by Catharine Beecher in *The Duty of American Women to Their Country* (1845).<sup>4</sup> This too was an age when millennial expectations were so deeply entrenched that social action was very nearly a moral imperative; by being dutiful wives and exemplary mothers, women were being offered an opportunity to contribute significantly to the American mission. Women, it appears in retrospect, were being refashioned to counteract not only the fears but complement the aspirations of the age. As we shall see, Whitman's own depiction of women was controlled by such corporate considerations and embraced similar stereotypical thinking. In his writings, motherhood too offered moral salvation and national and human salvation as well.<sup>5</sup>

Predictably, the configuration of the woman that emerges in these writings is as distorted as it is ungainly. In their injudicious blending of the ideal and the sentimental with the faintest bit of the real, these writers reveal the confusions and contradictions of an age whose energetic pursuit of the ideal was occasionally rudely shocked by the actual and present. Domestic activities were unnaturally elevated and Lydia Sigourney's description of the woman-as-mother as one who reaches "the climax of . . . happiness [and] takes a higher place in the scale of being," was duplicated endlessly in the writings of Sarah Josepha Hale, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Fenimore Cooper, Lyman Cobb, Heman Humphrey, Noah Webster and a host of unknown staff writers for popular periodicals. The household is commonly depicted as a harmonious and self-contained microcosm within which the woman most completely cultivates her whole person—where her special gifts of kindness, self-sacrifice, and spirituality blend naturally with child-bearing and -rearing functions. Clearly, such writers remained faithful to a middle-class ideology that, Nina Baym argues, had been defined by a coalition of clergy and conservative patriots who elevated the domestic woman. Such a woman, her being and activities suffused in images of regality and divinity, was to be a comfort and support to her husband and a devoted tutor to her children. Here

too in the home could be transmitted, Cott suggests, the piety that seemed to be so quickly disappearing in this age of eroding religious influence. The ideal order between the sexes required that the primary sphere of women be the home and that all her efforts, beginning with the training of her body and her mind, anticipate the eventual choice she was to make as a prospective wife and mother. Because women were believed to be endowed with those special gifts of benevolence, conscientiousness, self-sacrifice, spirituality, and moral uprightness, they were increasingly admitted to the ranks of teachers where these gifts could be given their natural expression. Such a gesture signaled less a radical departure from conservative thinking, however, than the extension of premises regarding woman's true nature into another area. Teaching too attracted large numbers of women because it was a relatively new profession and so fast-growing that women did not compete with men for available positions and even accepted lower wages than their male counterparts. In the main, the cult of domesticity, rather than mending the split between home and work, actually exacerbated it; while women maintained a semblance of moral government at home, men were freed to pursue the activities of the marketplace.<sup>6</sup>

So entrenched was the idea that great motherhood figured significantly in the quality of national life that various reformers justified their proposals accordingly. The campaign for dress reform, specifically anti-tightlacing, is a good case in point. Not only did dress reformers indignantly accuse the fashionable woman of attempting to make vain improvements on "God's handiwork," but argued more pointedly that tight-lacing wreaked havoc on the internal organs of women, thereby endangering the environment of unborn babies. Drawing on the conclusions of physiologists, dress reformers argued that a close correlation existed between high mortality rates among women and new-born babies and the follies of diet and fashion.<sup>7</sup> Not only did Lydia Sigourney in *Letters to Mothers* (1846) attribute to tight-lacing "impaired digestion, obstructed circulation, pulmonary disease, and nervous wretchedness," but asserted that it threatened as well the proper development of the physical and even moral powers of an unborn child. The Bloomer movement provided, of course, its own alternative to this folly, while entrepreneurs offered patterns for their own versions of the "Reform Dress" in privately printed pamphlets. Only with bodily emancipation, these reformers argued, could women "regain health and equilibrium of forces adequate to the high influence they must wield in the harmonization of society" and begin their own spiritual emancipation as well. But resistance by large numbers of women to sensible fashions continued, causing one exasperated writer to conclude that women preferred complaining about their headaches, backaches, sideaches, dyspepsias, neuralgias, and con-

sumptions, even blighting their children's health, to modifying their dress.<sup>8</sup>

These same reformers did not merely inveigh against women who compressed their digestive and child-bearing organs in whale bones, but against those who cultivated sylph-like figures. To offset this folly, writers vigorously promoted the cause of women's health by advocating calisthenics, proper diets and, of course, clothing that fit the body rather than compelled the body to fit it. They collectively advocated the physical maturation of the body through exercise, both in preparation for marriage and for conception and pregnancy, arguing, as C. Morrill did, that "the proper development of the physical and moral powers of our whole race depends upon the conduct of the female before marriage, during pregnancy, suckling, and afterwards."<sup>9</sup> A staff writer for the *Physio-Medical Recorder* urged girls "to ride, run, walk, dance in the open air," and to "plant and cultivate a garden," while another columnist for *Peterson's Ladies Magazine* (1852) bluntly summarized the advantages of physical exercise as helping women to become stronger and consequently more efficient wives and mothers. Such sentiments are also common in phrenological tracts such as Lorenzo Niles Fowler's *Marriage: Its History and Ceremonies*, enthusiastically reviewed by Whitman in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* on March 12, 1847; J. G. Spurzheim's *Education*; and Andrew Combe's *Treatise on the Physiological and Moral Management of Infancy*. Orson Squire Fowler urged women to participate in sports: playing ball, calisthenics, croquet, and even rowing, and scorned those "'society' ladies [who] often make love behind what Gen. Jackson fought behind—'cotton breastworks.'"<sup>10</sup>

Much of this literature includes descriptions and diagrams of the woman fit for ideal conception. Such a woman is popularly pictured as being plump, full busted, and having a broad pelvis. Seth Pancoast endowed his ideal woman with "wide haunches . . . proving that the reproductive organs are well developed," "her hips wide apart and elevated, her abdomen large, and her thigh voluminous."<sup>11</sup> Besides the fact such descriptions sound fairly like the guidelines for judging blue-ribbon cattle, it should be noted that the prohibitions attendant on discussions of sexual matters the mid-nineteenth century observed notwithstanding, rules of ordinary propriety were suspended where national salvation and mankind's perpetuity were at stake.

Whitman's own rather baldly stated search for women "fully equipt" (*Song of Myself*, p. 52) or as he was to state fifteen years later, "perfect Women, indispensable to endow the birth-stock of a New World" (*Democratic Vistas, Prose Works*, II, 364), was evidently neither revolutionary nor especially shocking. Long before he had appropriated this material for his poetic program, he had remonstrated against the female readership of the *Eagle* for their persistence in tight-lacing. "Compression of the organs," he wrote, injured "the

mental temperament, or nervous system, causing a continual fever of excitement, sleepless nights, and in many cases, confirmed mental derangement." In his poetry he warns about the deleterious effect this practice had on children: "And I say that clean-shaped children can be jetted and conceived only/Where natural forms prevail in public, and the human face and form are never caricatured" ("Says," l. 11, p. 599). As did his contemporaries, Whitman viewed woman's petulant sabotage of her body as an irresponsible violation of nature's laws and an offense against the aspirations of a mobile and expansive democracy. The cameo scenes of healthy women, participants in all forms of physical exercise, so abundant in Whitman's works—of women who "know how to swim, row, ride, wrestle, shoot, run, strike, retreat, advance, resist, defend themselves," are prescriptive. Such women are inhabitants of the "great city" described in *Song of the Broad-Axe*, "best-bodied mothers" who also "walk in public procession in the street the same as the men" (p. 190). Scenes such as these are polemically calculated, celebrating those women who willingly receive the "stuff to start sons and daughters fit for these States" ("A Woman Waits for Me," p. 102).

Slender forms, paleness, and melancholic countenances drew vociferous protestations from Whitman too, for these signs, in his eyes, afforded "no very favorable augury for a future mother, or for a wife." In an editorial for the *Eagle* he scorned women who mingled "in the motley throng of the *beau monde*"; while they appear to have mastered the superficial points of grace and elegance, they have surrendered the freshness of their disposition.<sup>12</sup> The stranglehold fashions exerted on women to the detriment of their maternal preparations drew impatient and often peevish reactions from Whitman. He was particularly disappointed during his trip West in 1879 that the hardy frontier woman, one source of inspiration for his idealized woman, was herself so anxious to ape the affectations of her Eastern sisters. His diatribes against fashions were to continue to the end of his life, as he blamed women's slavish devotion to fashion for the failure of America to evolve more perfect citizenry worthy of America's future.

Though it would seem that in attaching such importance to motherhood Whitman might be unresponsive to needed changes in other areas of a woman's life, this is not so. Indeed, Whitman clearly welcomed signs that the attitudes governing his century's thoughts regarding the activities available to women were changing. He perceived, however, that as poet-prophet to nineteenth century America, he could endorse only those reforms that would keep the process leading to the eventual equality of the sexes orderly. Also, the political and social aspirations of women had to be harmonious with their own special gifts assigned them by nature. Thus, Whitman's leaning towards the home and family as the proper sphere for women is not a contradiction of his much professed celebration of the equality

of the sexes, but rather a reflection of his beliefs that these activities were best suited to women at the present time. Whitman, like a large number of sympathetic liberal thinkers, did not deny women their ultimate intellectual equality with men, but, he believed, for the present their special contribution lay in bringing to the home, charitable organizations, and occasionally in schools, the gifts of their special virtues.<sup>13</sup> After peace and love radiate outward from the home and replace the violence and hate and fraud that had so long reigned on earth, then could women begin their justly earned training towards absolute equality with men.

But when many of the men and women who were involved in the women's rights debate took a thoughtful look at the central figure in this whole reform, the woman upon whose shoulders responsibility for the complete transformation of society was to rest, they saw frail shoulders indeed. Besides a physical frame judged to be weakened by long neglect and health undermined by a reckless pursuit of fashion, they despaired at the havoc wrought on the minds of American women by finishing school curriculums. This growing disenchantment with a purely ornamental education had patriotic overtones too—finishing schools carried aristocratic connotations and education, no less than most facets of nineteenth century American life, was expected to have utility. But blessed by an absence of irony and a boundless faith in reform effort to modify human behavior, the undaunted reformers responded to this new challenge by proposing yet another reform—domestic education. Since the whole burden of directing the fate of humanity, of educating, training, and uplifting men fell upon woman, champions of domestic education argued that she should be properly trained for this task. It was hoped that such an education would instruct women wherein their duties, incident to married life, lay and simultaneously elevate house-wifery and motherhood to the level of science and even philosophy. The founders of Vassar, Wellesley, and Smith, guided by strong religious and social commitments, established their colleges with exactly these thoughts in mind. Smith, for instance, expressed the hope that 'by the higher and more thoroughly Christian education of women . . . their weight of influence in removing the evils of society will be greatly increased.' Domestic educationalists argued that it was to society's benefit to develop woman's faculties lest a race of superficially educated and incompetent females emerge who would prove unfit companions to their husbands and bad influences on their children. The widespread acceptance of the Lockean model of the human mind too gave added weight to the view that a mother's teachings left an indelible impress on the blank slate of their child's mind. By shaping the ideas and morals of the child and establishing thereby the character and intelligence of the future adult, women were also credited with insuring an orderly progress towards a strong and enlightened future republic.

"If we confer on them a solid education," reasoned Samuel I. Houshour during an address delivered in the Hall of Representatives at Indianapolis in February 1852, "the ensuing generation will have sensible mothers, and the succeeding one sage and experienced grandmothers."<sup>14</sup>

Because her work covered no one particular trade or profession, but included the whole of a child's early existence and the support of menfolk in all stages of their life, a woman's intellectual education, offered Samuel Fisher in "Female Education" (1849), should include a broad exposure to many subjects that would strengthen various faculties of the female mind, particularly those in which women were proverbially deficient. Mathematics could serve to strengthen a woman's power of abstraction; philosophy instruct her on her duties to God and man; music and art refine and entertain her; foreign languages enlarge her social sphere; and history instruct her on God's providence. Noah Webster quite bluntly declared that domestic education should have as its object that which is useful to a woman in pursuing her various tasks, namely some arithmetic, poetry (because "we expect delicate sentiments from this sex") and reading (but only among those writers dealing with "human life and manners"). Other equally pragmatic writers advised women to familiarize themselves with the principles of physiology, education, heredity, physical training, and health, subjects that could be practiced and taught in the nursery.<sup>15</sup> That their education did not pursue purely intellectual matters was no reflection on women at all reasoned Edmund A. Beaman, principal of the Young Ladies School at Temple Place. "It is no degradation to females that the qualities of their minds are not those of the male mind." After all, he reasoned, "They would be most unlovely, if they were different from what they are in this respect. . . . Justice to both, then, requires that they should be educated for each other; the male, *as a male*; and the female, *as a female*." Such an education was not necessarily incompatible with intellectual or even literary achievements provided, of course, that a woman's accomplishments reflected the spirit of her domestic obligations. One Massachusetts contributor to *Mother's Assistant* even praised such authors as Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Wells who had turned "to the toils and trials of authorship" in order to use "the treasure of their own minds" to instruct children. These writers were to help remove the stigma attached to the intellectual woman, the "blue-stocking," thereby expanding the term "domestic woman" to include new activities. Nevertheless, the range of activities permitted woman, for the most part, was circumscribed by the societal priorities of the mid-century years. While domestic education required the subordination of a woman's intellectual education to her social and domestic roles, it nevertheless promised the increasing strength and virtue of the republic and the greater participation of women in national affairs. This was impor-

tant in a society that placed such a high value in political participation but denied women the vote and an education beyond one that made them barely literate. The problem faced by this society—how to extend a woman's sense of participation beyond the universe bound by her home and the careers of her father/husband but did not infringe on areas that traditionally enjoyed male autonomy—was felt to be solved by domestic education.<sup>16</sup>

This attenuated education was popularly conceived of as a path by which women could participate in all facets of national life, though admittedly through the agents of their husbands and off-spring. With no small degree of pride Hester Pendleton noted that the quality and tone of national life depended upon women who themselves determine “whether they become the mothers of wise and virtuous, or foolish and vicious men.” While the rhetoric of O. S. Fowler can seldom be described as commonplace, his sentiments were very typical: “She wields that mighty Archimedian lever, whose fulcrum is childhood, whose length is time, whose weight is the world, and whose sweep is eternity.”<sup>17</sup> The more radical feminists charged that the issue of women's rights was being obscured by a welter of extraneous considerations, but most parties were satisfied. Conservatives were reassured that the safety of the warm hearth and its attendant values was protected; liberals found consolation in the thought that domestic training represented a step towards more substantial education for women in the future.

In this respect Whitman's own reservations about woman's full participation in matters of the mind seem neither peevish nor contrary. He shared with his contemporaries considerable doubts about the wisdom of diverting the energies of women from their more important and immediate duties as wives and mothers. Given the rather unstable and impressionable character of the female mind and a woman's inclination towards heightened emotions unrestrained by strong rational control, Whitman editorially opposed the training of women, at “one of those caravanseras, denominated boarding schools.” He instead supported the concept of domestic education, recommending highly “*The Fireside Friend, or Female Student, Being advice to young ladies on the important subject of education. — With an appendix, on moral and religious education, by Mrs. Phelps, late vice-principal of Troy female seminary.*” An excerpt from his review is revealing:

The subjects treated on are of the widest and deepest interest — interest that comes home to every young female; they are of the kind of company and associations to be sought or avoided — of health and neatness, temperance, habits with regard to dress, and care of clothing — curvature of the spine and injuries from tight-lacing — of female manners, music, dancing, and other

accomplishments—of personal activity in domestic duties and domestic economy—and of the ample points connected with moral and religious education.

In his editorials he clearly discouraged aimless reading, convinced that it stimulated a wanton or morbid curiosity, but advocated rather that women be taught the rudiments of medical science and physiology. Consequently, he recommended women read Mary S. Gove's *Lectures to Women, on Anatomy and Physiology; With an Appendix on Water Cures* and Dr. Edward H. Dixon's *Woman, and her Diseases, from the Cradle to the Grave* believing, as Brasher has argued, that such reading was an excellent way for women to prepare for marriage and superior motherhood. Whitman admired intellectual achievement in women—providing they first had filled their roles as wives and mothers. His comments to Traubel about Anne Gilchrist, his "science-friend," summarize his position precisely: "She was the mother of a number of children," he said. "She had lived a real life with her husband: that was the substratum—a noble substratum, base: then on top of these she built the great scientific, intellectual, aesthetic superstructure as the sort of crown to all. She was harmonic, orbic: she was a woman—then more than a woman."<sup>18</sup>

Although Whitman believed that female temperaments and constitutions were best suited to domestic activities, he prophesies poetically an ideal democratic state in which women will have earned equal roles with men. But before women can be justly honored for their contribution to this ideal democratic state as superior wives and mothers and as well-prepared and trained thinkers, Whitman recognized the importance, as few of his contemporaries did, of changing his age's thinking about sex and procreation; to replace the falsely modest and prudish, as Whitman declared, with a new "sensible, philosophic, democratic method" (*A Memorandum at a Venture*, II, 494). Why he felt so and what he understood by a "democratic method" becomes clear if we scan nineteenth century literature dealing with human sexuality. Whitman's readiness to challenge all the sentimental and religious debris that had accumulated around the act of sexual union, especially the many foolish prohibitions that burdened couples with shame, guilt and anxiety is very remarkable indeed. Dr. Youman's thoughts in his *Illustrated Marriage Guide and Confidential Medical Adviser* (1876) reflect the prevailing tone of the works and sentiments which Whitman was struggling to modify. According to Youman, intercourse is intended, by the law of nature, for reproduction only because "A man who truly loves a woman must respect and reverence her, and cannot make her the victim of his inordinate and unbridled, selfish and sensual nature." In the main, the pious placed formidable prohibitions on what they feared might otherwise become rampant and un-Christian wantonness, holding the

view that ideal union took place only when wisdom and the moral sentiments predominated over the sensuous instincts. They consequently placed blame for poorly endowed children on parents who, perhaps under an improper frame of mind or a diseased state of the body, imparted oddities to their children who, in turn, visited these disorders on the world in the form of more deficient off-spring and, eventually, social discord.<sup>19</sup>

The only organized challenge to such views came from the phrenologists. Their ideas of human sexuality and racial improvement were shockingly contradictory: instead of a solemn joylessness and chilling modesty, they valued passionate and exuberant sexual encounters, reasoning that new life benefitted from the overflow of this creative energy. Madeleine B. Stern has convincingly shown that Whitman's treatment of sexuality and eugenics, both in tone and theme, reflects the spirit of Orson Squire Fowler's own crusade which preached the importance of "right sexuality." During the 1840s and 1850s when Whitman's association with the phrenological cabinet was closest, Orson was lecturing on marriage and racial improvement despite threats that the gaslights would be turned off and of possible imprisonment. His brother Lorenzo Niles lamented too the prudishness of his age's treatment of matters related to sex:

Is it not absurd for any one to advance the opinion that it is too *delicate* a subject, to improve the human race. . . . If it be *really too delicate* to discuss the principles necessary to be known and observed before one is qualified to enter the duties incumbent upon this change of condition—then it will most certainly be entirely *too delicate* to get married, and absolutely *shocking* to become parents.

Though Orson's definitive statement of "right sexuality" is to be found in a formidable tome of 1,052 pages entitled *Creative and Sexual Science*, copyrighted in 1870, his views were imbedded in his earlier works: *The Principles of Phrenology and Physiology Applied to Man's Social Relationship* (1842), *Amativeness; or Evils and Remedies of Excessive and Perverted Sexuality* (1844), *Love and Parentage* (1844), *Fowler on Matrimony* (1841), *Physiology Applied to the Selection of Companions for Life* (1841), and *Memory and Intellectual Improvement* (1853). In all of these books he provided his readers with a daring sexual education for his age.

Fowler encourages exuberant physicality during sexual intercourse by arguing that "life must begin in power, or remain weakly, inert. . . . [The father] must start off its [the child's] bodily organs and functions, along with all its animal propensities, with all possible vim and vigor." Fowler designates the powerful mutual attraction couples feel as the creative agent that animates all productive nature. He en-

joins both male and female readers to prepare for love by “ton[ing] up all [their] physical powers to their highest pitch,” and even measured the success of a “lovefeast” by “enjoyment . . . Nature’s absolute test of her laws.”

Assuming that parents equally transmit their moral and intellectual beings to their children, the phrenologists also argued that the key to millennial glory lay in reform and education, for “to reform and perfect *parents* as *parents*, is to reform and perfect mankind.”<sup>20</sup> Each generation would advance morally and intellectually as well as physically over the one preceding it, until the constitutional perfection of the human race unfolded.

Perhaps inspired by the example set by the phrenologists, Whitman candidly confessed to crusading in his poetry on behalf of healthy sexuality. His presentation of sex in *Leaves of Grass* includes the major concerns of the more daring sex reformers, namely greater sexual enjoyment and improved offspring. The ideal woman, according to Whitman, is a willing agent of republican America’s racial destiny. Whitman’s revaluation of history in which the democratic personality is the flowering of all the political and cultural times past requires the willing submission of women to motherhood so the moral identity of America can be passed on and evolve to higher expression. Only “when breeds of the most perfect mothers denote America” (“So Long,” p. 503), he writes, can the “great Idea” be realized. The persona of *Song of Myself*—rugged, brawny, and sexually potent—is also the willing participant in this drama of democratically inspired procreation. He jets the “stuff of far more arrogant republics” in women who are “fit for conception” (p. 74). The persona is similarly depicted one year later in 1856:

I am stern, acrid, large, undissuadable, but I love you,  
I do not hurt you any more than is necessary for you,  
I pour the stuff to start sons and daughters fit for these States, I  
    press with slow rude muscle,  
I brace myself effectually, I listen to no entreaties,  
I dare not withdraw till I deposit what has so long accumulated  
    within me,

    . . .  
On you I graft the grafts of the best-loved of me and America,  
The drops I distill upon you shall grow fierce and athletic girls,  
    new artists, musicians, and singers  
The babes I beget upon you are to beget babes in their turn.  
    (“A Woman Waits for Me,” pp. 102-03)

Whitman’s zeal on behalf of eugenic planning was no doubt heightened by the pride an ardent republican took in America’s impressive demographic gains. At a time when the European population remained unchanged, Americans were replenishing the earth ad-

mirably, the national population doubling every 20-25 years. This "American Multiplication table," so-called by one proud senator from Indiana, was popularly interpreted to mean that Providence looked favorably on the American republican experiment and that the American race, confident of its future, intended to perpetuate itself.<sup>21</sup> By satisfying God's mandate to Jacob, Americans felt that out of them too a nation and a company of nations would spring.

Over the course of his lifetime, Whitman's preoccupation with eugenics increased until ultimately his hopes for meaningful social change rested largely on this "noblest science" of "fatherhood and motherhood" as he called it in *Democratic Vistas* (p. 397). In *A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads* he writes: "Difficult as it will be, it has become, in my opinion, imperative to achieve a shifted attitude from superior men and women towards the thought and fact of sexuality, as an element in character, personality, the emotions and a theme in literature" (II. 728). The ecstatic and confident yea-saying persona who revels in the full activity of all his senses is replaced by a more muted persona, tutored by a fratricidal war and deteriorating health. In later editions of *Leaves of Grass* sex is not joyously celebrated for its own sake, but as part of a cosmic eugenic plan leading to man's greater improvement. Skeptical about the preparedness of his countrymen to apprehend divine messages in the actual, Whitman was willing to make certain adjustments in his thought to accommodate new insights or circumstances, but he was never prepared to compromise any bit of his faith in his ideal democracy of the future.

Progress towards the advent of this more perfect society lagged shamefully, Whitman concedes in *Democratic Vistas*, and he lays no small blame for America's failure to make more progress in this direction on women. Here he records his disquiet over the physical, spiritual, and even moral unpreparedness of American women to conceive "bigger and nimbler babes." The remedy he proposes for the social and spiritual desolation he witnesses in American society is a familiar one: America needs the promulgation of "new races of . . . perfect Women, indispensable to endow the birth-stock of a New World" (*Democratic Vistas*, II, 363). Whitman returned to this disappointment again in 1888 when he described *Leaves of Grass* to Traubel as a book that "speaks . . . of the woman first of all, of the facts of creation first of all—of the feminine: speaks out loud: encourages, persuades, points the way." "But," he added sadly, "the women do not know it." This sad afterthought, as we have seen, was not new to him, but had been drawn earlier as the full debacle of the Gilded Age became apparent. Women, it seemed to him, had ignored the prescriptions, so carefully planted in his work, that were to guide them on the physical, intellectual, and spiritual preparations necessary for the unfolding of a more perfected democratic society. No

longer does he see God "in the faces of men and women" (*Song of Myself*, p. 87), instead he sees "a pervading flippancy and vulgarity, low cunning, infidelity . . . —everywhere abnormal libidinousness, unhealthy forms, male, female, painted, padded, dyed, chignon'd, muddy complexions, bad blood, the capacity for good motherhood deceasing or deceas'd, shallow notions of beauty" (*Democratic Vistas*, II, 372).

The full extent of Whitman's later despair is evident in a poem written for the Centennial edition, entitled "With All Thy Gifts America." Intended to serve as a message, a warning, and an explanation, this poem also conveys Whitman's increasing anguish over the failure of America's women to realize their greater responsibilities.

With all thy gifts America,  
Standing secure, rapidly tending, overlooking the world,  
Power, wealth, extent, vouchsafed to thee — with these and like  
of these vouchsafed to thee,  
What if one gift thou lackest? (the ultimate human problem  
never solving,)  
The gift of perfect women fit for thee — what if that gift of gifts  
thou lackest?  
The towering feminine of thee? the beauty, health, comple-  
tion, fit for thee?  
The mothers fit for thee?

(p. 401)

Clearly this poem is a capsule statement of Whitman's program for women, formulated by him as early as *Leaves of Grass 1855* and unwaveringly maintained to the end of his life. It also reiterates what we have come to recognize as the several myths by which mid-century thinkers defined the role and nature of women. The "perfect women fit for" America are women whose "health" reveals the necessary robustness to bear healthy offspring and whose "beauty" reflects a harmonious blending of highly developed mental and spiritual faculties necessary for them to be fit companions to their husbands and uplifting influences on their children. Such women reflect "completion."

But much to his dismay, there were few hopeful signs that a new race of hardy and "best-bodied" women was developing. The very deficiencies he and other champions of domestic education had sought to eradicate were even more pronounced. Time did little to lift his gloom. Shortly before his death, he lamented to Traubel: "Our women don't seem to be any longer built for childbearing. We have gone on for so long hurting the body that the job of rehabilitating it seems prodigious if not impossible."<sup>22</sup>

To the very end, it seems, Whitman had difficulty separating, as Nina Baym charges, "his ideas and treatment of the female from the ideal of motherhood." We can also justly wonder if Whitman is not

being Janus-faced in promising radical if not millennial changes while attempting to place women even more securely within the traditional confines of the domestic circle. Or was Whitman proposing merely an emphatically male vision of the role of women in his America? Whitman did not support the woman's rights movement—we have but to note his increasingly critical tone in the *Brooklyn Times* from bemused detachment to scorn as he reported on the proceedings of the woman's convention held at Rutland in 1858. We may safely agree with Thomas Brasher that Whitman was neither prepared to welcome women into all occupations as Margaret Fuller was, abolish marriage as Frances Wright was, nor even extend to women the ballot. But to dismiss Whitman as a reactionary chauvenist, that these charges appear to point to, would be a lapse in historical perspective. Even more seriously, such a label would require that we question not only the sincerity of Whitman but an overwhelming majority of men and women who, in encouraging the canon of domesticity and its attendant obligations, believed they were incalculably and significantly widening a woman's sphere.

Whitman's program for women is not more reactionary than Lydia Maria Childs' was or Sarah Josepha Hale's, for that matter. In his study of Childs, Kirk Jeffrey shows how Childs' belief in the inherent goodness and nobility of women and their obligations to fill intelligently their roles as wife, mother, and the nation's moral guardian was greeted as an intelligent and valuable contribution to contemporary thinking about the place of American women in national life. Childs' thought won the admiration and approval of large numbers of men and women who remained skeptical if not hostile to the more radical feminists such as the Grimke sisters or Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Far from conceiving the cult of the true woman as a form of spiritual and mental oppression that left its votaries dead in life as one feminist charged, Whitman saw that a woman, from within this sphere, could wield considerable power in national and even cosmic matters. The ideology of domesticity, by giving women a sense of "vocation," did enhance women's position, as Nancy Cott argues; it credited them with making a unique contribution to national affairs that they could not claim in the past. Whitman's support of "domestic education" was no less inspired by a similarly high vision. Whatever chagrin the more radical feminists must have felt about this concept, its advocates believed that domestic education represented a significant step towards halting the degrading slide of women into an intellectual and personal vacuousness. In short, Whitman believed, with those many writers both male and female, that the measures he urged represented significant advances in restoring woman to a position from which she could help men realize and shape the special destiny awaiting the American Republic.<sup>23</sup>

An uneasiness nevertheless persists regarding Whitman's program

for women and we wonder whether Whitman deserves the eponym accorded him by Mabel MacCoy Irwin, "poet-liberator of women." Certainly, Whitman can be faulted for not making bold enough proposals for changes more nearly consistent with his egalitarian sympathies and that would have required his age to confront the gap that existed between the visions of the future by which it hypnotized itself and the actualities of women's position, between the ideals it upheld regarding woman's character and role with the accompanying deprivations such views engendered and the realities of human nature. Whitman's failure to be more innovative can be explained by the precept that he assigns the "greatest poet" in the *Preface 1855*, namely that he "form . . . the consistence of what is to be from what has been and is" (p. 716). Whitman absorbed the materials of what "has been and is" only too well. In so doing he incorporated into his program the many contradictions and disparities between myth and reality regarding women's natures and proper roles held by his contemporaries; these contributed to the forming of an unruly matrix of truths, half-truths, and romantic ideals that ultimately refused to coalesce into an orderly blueprint leading to the unfolding of a millennial society characterized by full equality of the sexes. Our final judgment regarding Whitman's contribution to women's rights, at best, has to be tempered by a historical perspective that allows but for muted praise, how he, with those many other "venturesome conservatives" contributed, but inadvertently, towards the transfiguration of the True Woman into the New Woman. In the reassurance women gained from the ideology of the True Woman that the well-being of society rested in the influence they exerted over husbands and children, and in the education given them to strengthen domestic ties, these True Women grew in confidence and were exposed to outside influences that inspired succeeding generations to pursue more authentic rights.<sup>24</sup>

## notes

1. D[avid] H. Lawrence, "Whitman," *Nation & Athenaeum*, 29(July 23, 1921), 617; Judy Womack, "The American Woman in 'Song of Myself,'" *Walt Whitman Review*, 19(June 1973), 67-72; Kay Reinartz, "Walt Whitman and Feminism," 19(December 1973), 127-137; Walt Whitman, "Song of the Broad-Axe," in *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition*, eds. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York, 1965), p. 190. Subsequent references to works in this edition are noted in the text by title and page. Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas in Prose Works 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York, 1964), II, 396. Subsequent references to works in this edition are noted in the text by title, volume, and page. Nina Baym similarly observes disparities between Whitman's depiction of male and female anatomy which, she feels, "implies a disparity of attitude." "Portrayal of Women in American Literature, 1790-1870," *What Manner of Woman: Essays on English and American Life and Literature*, ed. Marlene Springer (New York, 1977), p. 221.

2. "The Bridge," review in *The New York Review of Books*, (15 July 1965), p. 7. As quoted in Harold Kaplan, *Democratic Humanism and American Literature* (Chicago, 1972), p. 2. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven, 1977); and Cecelia Tichi, *New World, New Earth: Environmental Reform in American Literature from the Puritans through Whitman* (New Haven, 1979).

3. *The Complete Writings of Walt Whitman*, eds. Richard M. Burcke, Thomas B. Harned, and Horace L. Traubel (New York, 1902), IX, 9.

4. Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, 1977), p. 67; Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly*, XVIII(Summer 1966), 151; Cott, p. 8; Lydia Huntley Sigourney, *Letters to Mothers*, 6th ed. (New York, 1846), p. 15 and p. 179; Catharine Beecher, *The Duty of American Women* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1845); and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Beauty, the Beast and the Militant Woman: A Case Study in Sex Roles and Social Stress in Jacksonian America," *American Quarterly*, XXIII (October 1971), 583.
5. Smith-Rosenberg, p. 565; Harriet Beecher Stowe, *House and Home Papers*, quoted in *Democratic Vistas: 1860-1880*, ed. Alan Tractenberg (New York, 1970), p. 136; Emma Willard, "An Address to . . . the Legislature of New York Proposing a Plan for Improving Female Education," in *Quest for America: 1810-1824*, ed. Charles L. Sanford (New York, 1964), pp. 294-95; and Tractenberg, p. 136. That women were to serve in largely decorative or moral capacities according to ideal evaluations of their potential is discussed by William Bridges, "Family Patterns and Social Values in America: 1825-1875," *American Quarterly*, XVII (Spring 1965), 3-11.
6. Sigourney, p. 9; Baym, p. 213; Cott, p. 65; Baym, p. 220; Cott, p. 69.
7. M.M. Jones, *Woman's Dress: Its Moral and Physical Relations* (New York, 1864), p. 11; Mary S. Gove, *Lectures to Ladies on Anatomy and Physiology* (Boston, 1842).
8. Sigourney, p. 80; Mary E. Tillotson, *Progress vs. Fashion* (n.p., 1873), p. 19; Jones, pp. 9-10. See also: Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg, "The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Woman and Her Role in Nineteenth Century America," *Journal of American History*, 60(September 1973), 343.
9. Jones, p. 11; C. Morrill, *The Physiology of Woman* (Boston, 1868), p. 11. See also: Sigourney, pp. 69-73 and D[aniel] H. Jacques, *Hints Toward Physical Perfection* (New York, 1859).
10. Eleanor Wolfe Thompson, *Education for Ladies: 1830-1860* (New York, 1947), p. 52 and p. 50; Orson] S[quire] Fowler, *Creative and Sexual Science or Manhood, Womanhood and Their Mutual Interrelations* (n.p., n.d.), p. 396 and p. 146.
11. S[eth] Pancoast, *The Ladies' Medical Guide and Marriage Friend* (Philadelphia, 1859), p. 356.
12. "Tight-Lacing," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 13 April 1846; "False Standards of Female Beauty," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 12 March 1847, p. 1; "Evil Influence of Fashion," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 29 May 1847, p. 1.
13. Whitman's editorial attacks on the exploitation of working women, it appears, reflect more the instincts of a humanitarian concerned with the physical and spiritual environment of his times than those of a dedicated proponent of immediate sexual equality. He brushes over the \$7.41 male teachers were paid more than female teachers in average monthly salaries or the \$15.00 more that the highest salaried male teachers were paid than female to plead for an across the board increase in salaries. A demand that this inequity be repaired is notably absent. "State of the Common Schools," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 29 January 1847. Reprinted in Florence Bernstein Freedman, *Walt Whitman Looks at the Schools* (New York, 1950), p. 166.
14. Cott, pp. 117-18; Adele Simmons, "Education and Ideology in Nineteenth Century America: The Response of Educational Institutions to the Changing Role of Women," *Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays*, ed. Berenice A. Carroll (Urbana, 1976), p. 118 and p. 116; Susan Phinney Conrad, *Perish the Thought: Intellectual Women in Romantic America, 1830-1860* (New York, 1976), p. 32; and S[amuel] K. Houshour, "An Address on Education," (Indianapolis, 1852), pp. 8-9.
15. Samuel Fisher, "Female Education. An Address Delivered at . . . Ohio Female College," (Cincinnati, 1849), pp. 33-34; Noah Webster, "On the Education of Youth in America," in *The Rising Glory of America: 1760-1820*, ed. Gordon S. Wood (New York, 1971), p. 166; Harmon Knox Root, *The Lover's Marriage Lighthouse* (New York, 1858), pp. 21-23; Pancoast, p. 201.
16. E[dmund] A. Beaman, "The True Principle of Education," (Boston, 1854), p. 22; Kuhn, p. 37; Conrad, p. 32; and Rosenberg, p. 563.
17. Pendleton, *Parent's Guide*, p. 117; [Orson Squire Fowler], "Woman—Her Character, Influence, Sphere, and . . . Education," *American Phrenological Journal*, VII (January 1845), 8; Charles A. Goodrich, *The Influence of Mothers on . . . Communities* (New York, 1835), p. 34.
18. Walt Whitman, "The Fireside Friend, or Female Student," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 4 March 1847. Reprinted by Freedman, p. 169; Thomas L. Brasher, *Whitman as Editor of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Detroit, 1970), p. 186; and *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, ed. Sculley Bradley (New York, 1953), IV, 93.
19. Youman, p. 92. See also: Root, pp. 205-06; Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Reformer*, vol. IV of *The Great Harmonia: Concerning Physiological Vices and Virtues, and the Seven Phases of Marriage* (Boston, 1859), pp. 395-96.
20. Madeleine B. Stern, *Heads and Headlines: The Phrenological Fowlers* (Norman, 1971), p. 42. Stern quotes Lorenzo N. Fowler on p. 42. Fowler, *Sexual Science*, pp. 129, p. 88,

p. 615, and p. 610; and Orson Squire Fowler, *Education and Self-Improvement Founded on Physiology and Phrenology* 2nd. ed. (New York, 1844), p. 220.

21. Henry Steele Commager, *Jefferson, Nationalism and the Enlightenment* (New York, 1975), p. 28.

22. Traubel, II, 331 and 251.

23. Baym, p. 221. The apt term "Janus-faced" is used by Cott, p. 8. Emory Holloway, *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman* (New York, 1932), II, 8n; Brasher, p. 172; Kirk Jeffrey, "Marriage, Career, and Feminine Ideology in Nineteenth Century America: Reconstructing the Marital Experience of Lydia Maria Child, 1828-1874," *Feminist Studies*, II(1975), 123-24; Conrad, p. 39 and p. 151; and Cott, p. 205.

24. Mabel M. Irwin, *Whitman, The Poet Liberator of Women* (Privately Printed, 1905). My final judgment of Whitman's contribution in this area is similar to the one drawn by other critics writing about "venturesome conservatives": Welter, p. 174; Cott, p. 205; and Anne D. Gordon and Mari Jo Buhle, "Sex and Class in Colonial and Nineteenth-Century America," *Liberating Women's History*, p. 287. See also: Glenda Riley, "The Subtle Subversion: Change in the Traditionalist Image of the American Woman," *The Historian*, XXXII (February 1970), 210-27.