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The metonymic self in Whitman's poetics

Homeira Foth
San Jose State University

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THE METONYMIC SELF IN WHITMAN'S POETICS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Homeira Foth

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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Dr. John Engell

Dr. David Mesher

Dr. Donald Kessey

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

THE METONYMIC SELF IN WHITMAN'S POETICS

by Homeira Foth

This thesis, through an analysis of Whitman's poetry, argues that, for Walt Whitman, metonymy functions more than a mere rhetorical device to craft his poetry; metonymy becomes a form of consciousness, a psychological or ontological understanding of the world. Whitman's metonymic consciousness allows his poetry to transcend boundaries, divisions, classes and to achieve a commensurate and democratic view of life. The first part of the thesis focuses on defining metonymy and distinguishing it from metaphor. This section also establishes how Whitman, as poet, deviates from many of the conventions associated with traditional poetry, particularly Romantic poetry. In the following sections, different theories, by Jacques Lacan, Hélène Cixoux and others, are applied to specific poems by Whitman, to demonstrate how he incorporates metonymical consciousness into his poetry.

Table of Contents

Chapter I: From Metaphor to Metonymy	1
Chapter II: Paradise Lost and Regained: In and Through the Mirror Stage	15
Chapter III: Metonymical Consciousness: Transcending Time and Space	32
Chapter IV: Metonymical Consciousness: Transcending Gender	46
Chapter V: Conclusion	59
Works Cited	62

CHAPTER I: From Metaphor to Metonymy

Though many scholars and readers have attempted to search Whitman's poetry for metaphoric significance, to read *Leaves of Grass* as a symbolic work is a mistake. Jackie Kaye argues that the whole structure of *Leaves of Grass* resists an allegorical or symbolic reading (14). The experiences that Whitman shares are intended to be real and immediate, stripped of symbolic layers. Through his poetry Whitman shares with his readers his experiences, yet he refuses to interpret them. He not only deviates from the conventional use of rhyme and meter, but he also prefers the use of metonymy over metaphor. Because readers often associate poetry with metaphor or symbol, poetry that contains a stronger metonymical strain than a metaphoric one confuses those who are eagerly awaiting, their tools for metaphorical dissection in hand, to uncover symbolic meanings. Whitman's poetry, however, does not lend itself easily to metaphoric interpretation. For Whitman, metonymy is not simply a deliberate rhetorical preference; metonymy is, for him, a form of consciousness – a psychological and ontological understanding of the world.

To appreciate what Whitman wants to achieve through metonymy, it is essential to define metonymy and to distinguish it from its rhetorical cousin: metaphor. Roman Jakobson's essay "The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles" provides valuable definitions. The publication of his essay in 1956 was a pivotal moment in the evolution of Structuralist theory and in particular the study of figurative language. Although Jakobson was not the first formalist critic to identify metaphor and metonymy as binaries, he was the first to propose a comprehensive study of the differences between the two rhetorical modes based

on the research he had done on aphasia, a language-speech disorder. Jakobson challenged the commonly held belief that metaphor and metonymy were closely related and served the same purpose in the structure of language. Literary critics, from Aristotle and Quintillion to many in the nineteenth century, placed metonymy and metaphor in the same rhetorical category. They based their conclusions on the understanding that both tropes share a similar function: a substitution, where one term (or linguistic unit) replaces another. However, in his essay, Jakobson splits the two tropes and assigns them different roles in the *parole* of language, arguing that “the development of a discourse may take place along two different semantic lines” (22). He suggests that although metaphor and metonymy appear to have similar characteristics, they are, in fact, opposite and do not share the same basic principle. According to Richard Lanham, Jakobson “singled out metaphor and metonymy as the two main engines of rhetorical language, passing down to modern critical thinking a basic distinction between metaphor as indicating similarity and metonymy as revealing contiguity” (10). In metaphor, one term (or phrase) substitutes for another due to some basis of similarity, whereas in metonymy, one term substitutes for another because they are contiguously and organically related.

Jakobson’s argument, however, goes a step beyond distinguishing between metaphor and metonymy; he extends his definitions of metaphor and metonymy by applying them to other disciplines. For example, he points out that in film, a *montage* could be viewed as a form of metaphor since one scene overlaps and replaces another, while a *close-up* functions as a metonymy (or synecdoche). In contrast to a montage, a close-up represents a smaller unit that is contiguously related to the larger picture — to, for example, an establishing shot. In art, Jakobson argues, Surrealism is metaphoric, since it relies heavily on symbolism, while Cubism could be considered metonymic; the work of art maintains its “wholeness” despite its fragmentation into smaller parts. Jakobson even applies his binary system to Freudian dream analysis. He contends that in psychoanalytical

terminology, displacement and condensation in dreams are based on contiguity, and thus have a metonymical relationship; the significance of the thing dreamed is either compressed or reduced. In other words, something ostensibly trivial in a dream may have great significance if traced back to the origins of its meaning. Identification and symbolism in dreams, on the other hand, are metaphoric, based on similarity where one image or symbol stands for another object, feeling, or crisis.

With literature, Jakobson applies his binary paradigms to prose and poetry, and more specifically to Romanticism in poetry and Realism in the novel. He argues that in most literature, including (and especially) in most literary criticism, metaphor has been privileged over metonymy.

[N]othing comparable to the rich literature on metaphor can be cited for the theory of metonymy. For the same reason, it is generally realized that romanticism is closely linked with metaphor, whereas the equally intimate ties of realism with metonymy usually remain unnoticed. Not only the tool of the observer but also the object of observation is responsible for the preponderance of metaphor over metonymy in scholarship. Since poetry is focused upon sign, and pragmatical prose upon referent, tropes and figures were studied mainly as poetical devices. The principle of similarity underlies poetry; the metrical parallelism of lines or the phonic equivalence of rhyming words prompts the question of semantic similarity and contrast [. . .] Thus for poetry, metaphor, and for prose, metonymy is the line of least resistance and, consequently, the study of poetical tropes is chiefly directed toward metaphor. (27)

According to Jakobson, poetry relies heavily on rhetorical devices, stressing parallelism and patterns of similarity. Because poetry is condensed and controlled, it emphasizes words as signs, endowing them with metaphoric or symbolic value. But prose creates significance

through the extension and contiguity of ideas. "Following the path of contiguous relationships, the realistic author metonymically digresses from plot to atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time" (23).

In prose the contiguous relationship between characters, plot, and narrative setting or atmosphere is integral and inseparable. The author moves back and forth from "synecdochic detail" to the larger picture of the narrative. Yet due to the subtlety of the author's metonymical "digressions," the reader might find it difficult to detect the figurative devices the author employs. In poetry, however, the opposite occurs: "similarity connects a metaphorical term with the term for which it is substituted. Consequently, when constructing a metalanguage to interpret tropes, the researcher possesses more homogeneous means to handle metaphor, whereas metonymy, based on a different principle, easily defies interpretation" (26). According to Jakobson, critics are better equipped for the analysis of metaphors, and lack the tools for the dissection and interpretation of metonymical devices. The same holds true with readers; they, too, seem to possess a better understanding of the definition and the uses of metaphor, and generally remain hazy and unclear about not only the functions of metonymy, but its definition as well.

Jakobson's structuralist theory of metaphor and metonymy can be useful in the study of certain literatures, in particular realistic novels or romantic poetry; however, it falls short with literature that does not fit either category and occupies a place between the "poles." This is especially true with Whitman's poetics which deliberately resists formal categorization. Whitman's poetry creates an interesting paradox. Whitman comes from a tradition of Romanticism and is generally considered an American Romantic. Yet Whitman's poetry is also in many ways deliberately non-Romantic. Whitman consciously chooses to break away from an English literary tradition that had a significant influence on American culture in the nineteenth century.

Romantic poetry, according to Jakobson, relies heavily on metaphor. But Whitman's poetry, especially in early editions of *Leaves of Grass*, challenges conventional Romantic poetic form through constant use of metonymy. Therefore, Jakobson's categories do not apply to Whitman; his poetry is "realistic," but it is not prose. Carroll Hollis points out that "metaphors in their similarity aspect are always *in absentia*, they do not and can not exist in reality; metonymies in their contiguous aspect are always *in praesentia*, they can or may exist in the real world" (170). However unusual and unorthodox it may have been for Whitman to stress metonymy over metaphor in ostensibly romantic poetry, it was a suitable choice for what Whitman wanted to achieve: realism in his poetry.

Romantic philosophy did have a significant influence on Whitman; he was familiar with the works of the English Romantics. But his intimate knowledge of the tradition of Romantic poetry allowed him to deviate from it. Indeed, it was not only the Romantics whom Whitman criticized; he rejected much of the British literary heritage, including Shakespeare and Milton. He wanted Americans to break away from the deeply ingrained valorization of the great English poets. Kenneth Price points out that "despite Whitman's iconoclastic ways -- or perhaps because of them -- the poet learned much from the English tradition. Yet as the poet gained knowledge, he bent it to his purpose" (16). One aspect of Romantic ideology that Whitman "bent" was his slant on the "organic theory" of poetry. Whitman, much like his Romantic predecessor, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, advocated an organic approach to poetry, yet he did not subscribe to Coleridge's overall theory. Gay Wilson Allen argues that "Whitman adopted and developed for his own purposes the 'organic' theory of poetic expression. Poetry should imitate not things but the spirit of things, not God or creation but His creativity" (379). Whitman's organicism, therefore, suggests that poetry should not be formalist in any traditional sense, that poetry itself has an inherent design. Allen notes,

Such a principle would have to be an exemplification of the poet's "organic" theory, his belief that form must spring from within, that poetic experience will find its natural rhythm in the act of expression. Certainly this was Whitman's most fundamental literary theory, as his various analogies — and those of numerous critics — indicate. (410)

Coleridge, in his "Essays and Lectures on Shakespeare," contrasts organic poetry to mechanical poetry. As the name suggests, in mechanical poetry form is superimposed on content, not allowing the natural form of the poem to surface and evolve on its own.

Coleridge states:

The form is mechanic, when on any given material we impress a pre-determined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material; — as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened. The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes, as it develops, itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. Such as the life is, such is the form. (656)

Whitman, like Coleridge, preferred natural expression in poetry, as opposed to the use of excessive external or formal manipulation. But whereas Coleridge wrote in traditional English-language verse forms, Whitman used the organic theory of poetry as a springboard for his own experimental poetic style: his emblematic free-verse. The long, open-ended, non-rhyming lines reflect the inherent rhythms and patterns of nature. The parallelism and cataloguing in his poetics imitate the uncontrolled, endless, and multiplicitous qualities of nature. Formal rhyme patterns and consistent meter, on the other hand, confine the organic nature of poetry. As Whitman insists, "The poetic quality is not marshalled in rhyme or uniformity" (LG 447). Therefore, one of the major themes that runs throughout *Leaves of Grass* is the poet's declaration that neither he nor his poetry can be "contained." For

Whitman, the traditions of poetic form and grammar place strict boundaries on natural expression.

Some English Romantics also believed in using a “common” language — a language that represents the average man. In his “Preface to Lyrical Ballads,” William Wordsworth expresses his views on why poets should strive to employ everyday language. He states that effective poetry shares much with prose, in that good poetry should also attempt to capture the “common” experience of the common man — it should be as clear and direct as prose: “the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose” (146). Wordsworth based this comment partly on his argument that good poetry should “choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as possible, in a selection of language really used by men” (142). But Wordsworth also believed that metaphoric language can be a part of the natural language of men — that men think metaphorically. In contrast, Whitman’s early editions of *Leaves of Grass*, which also attempt to capture “common” experiences, relate these experiences in a non-metaphoric manner. Whitman’s notion of what constitutes a common language thus differs from Wordsworth’s. Whitman wishes to find a language that is uniquely American, uniquely democratic. “The American poets are to enclose old and new for America the race of races. Of them a bard is to be commensurate with a people” (443). For Whitman this idea translates into the use of metonymy, not metaphor, since metonymy is more conducive to his poetic philosophy. Whitman’s “common” language is therefore free from both the formalism and the metaphoric qualities of the poetry of Coleridge and Wordsworth.

In his “Preface, 1855,” Whitman contends that the poet must keep his art simple and free of stylistic ornamentation.

The art of art, the glory of expression and the sunshine of the light of letters is simplicity. Nothing is better than simplicity . . . nothing can make up for

the excess or for the lack of definiteness[. . .] The greatest poet has less a marked style and is more the channel of thoughts and things without increase or diminution, and is the free channel of himself. He swears to his art, I will not be meddlesome, I will not have in my writing any elegance or effect or originality to hang in the way between me and the rest like curtains. I will have nothing hang in the way, not the richest curtain. (*LG* 448)

Like Henry David Thoreau, Whitman believes in “simplifying” one’s life; he applies this philosophy to language, as well. Whitman disapproved of the “Romantic” style because he felt that the language of, say, Coleridge and Wordsworth, relies too much on symbols and metaphors, detracting from the natural essence of the “thing” or the experience. He also thought that the Romantic preoccupation with nature and mythology left little room for the average man or, as Price states, “insufficient regard for the common man” (20).

Whitman, in his essay “Poetry Today in America,” remarks on what he considers a major flaw in English poetry: “Never one democratic page; nay, not a line, not a word; never free and naïve poetry, but involv’d, labor’d, quite sophisticated – even when the theme is ever so simple or rustic” (*LG* 532).

Whitman also felt that descriptive language – what he regarded as highly metaphoric or “ornamental” language – concentrated too much on the past: wars, heroes, kings and queens.

For such the expression of the American poet is to be transcendent and new. It is to be indirect and not direct or descriptive or epic. Its quality goes through these to much more. Let the age and wars of the other nations be chanted and their eras and characters be illustrated. [. . .] Not so the great psalm of the republic. Here the theme is creative and has vista. (*LG* 444)

The symbolic Romantic poetry of England reflected on its long history of monarchy. But since Americans had fought to free themselves from despotism and hierarchy they needed,

according to Whitman, to establish their own unique voice through poetry, one that was neither descriptive nor epic. “The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem” (Whitman *LG* 441).

Whitman’s determination to find a language suited for the United States explains his propensity for metonymy. Metonymy as a rhetorical device allowed Whitman to achieve a certain clarity and simplicity in his poetry. Price contends that Whitman’s use of metonymy was a reaction to the Romantic poets’ “polished poetic surfaces and heavy reliance on simile and metaphor” (21). Whitman claimed “No ornamental similes at all” (qtd. in Price 21). In his book on Whitman’s poetics, Hollis delineates the metonymic poet: “The metonymist (the realist) customarily does not interpret life (at least not in any obvious sense) but presents it” (193). And this is because the metonymic poet believes that interpretation through the use of symbolic language undermines the immediacy of experience.

Whitman also believed that the audience or the reader was an integral part of the overall poetic experience. Often Whitman’s poetry contains a prevalent sense of inclusiveness. The entire world is subsumed in his poems. No one person is unwelcome. Not only does Whitman include every creature, every person in every walk of life, he also includes the reader in the poem. In contrast, Romantic poets like John Keats and Percy Shelley often emphasized the solitary experience, as seen in poems like “Ode to a Nightingale,” and “Alastor, or, the Spirit of Solitude.” In these poems the reader feels privy to the poet’s experiences but does not necessarily feel a part of them. Whitman, on the other hand, involves the reader directly. In the original 1855 version of “There was a Child Went Forth,” as in many other poems in this volume, he directly addresses the reader: “And these [the objects the child comes across] become him or her that peruses them now”

(LGV 32). Here, Whitman reminds the reader that he or she has now become a part of the child's consciousness.

One of the characteristics Whitman especially disapproves of in Romantic poetry is its preoccupation with the past – the revival of the antiquities and the classical age. Price, in his book *Whitman and Tradition*, notes, “Romanticism generally had encouraged a revitalization of myth, but Whitman objected to it as inappropriate to modernity” (21).

The poetry of the future, (A phrase open to sharp criticism, and not satisfactory to me, but significant, and I will use it) – the poetry of the future aims at the free expression of emotion, (which means far, far more than appears at first,) and to arouse and initiate, more than to define and finish. Like all modern tendencies, it has direct or indirect reference continually to the reader, to you or me, to the central identity of everything, the mighty Ego. (Price 536)

Whitman believes that the preoccupation with the past hinders any progress that could be made toward the future, in particular any progress toward the modernity of the United States. For Whitman modern poetry represented open-endedness, a continual anticipation of the future – a quality that always includes readers, making it an immediate experience for them.

A common theme found in Romantic poetry was the mutable and transitory quality of life, and the Romantic poets would often turn to the past to illustrate this subject. This was partly due to the glorification of history and tradition. Shelley's “Ozymandias” and Keats's “Ode to a Grecian Urn” are good examples of poems concerned with the mutability of life. In order to depict the significance of the past, these poets relied on the use of symbol and metaphor. Keats's Grecian urn is a symbol of the timelessness of beauty in art, but also a reminder of the ephemeral quality of human existence. Yet highly metaphoric or symbolic poetry loses its sense of immediacy and creates a gap or an

alienation between the reader and the essence of the things described since the emphasis is placed on the art of poetic language as opposed to the beauty of the object described. Whitman's objective is the opposite of this; he wants to achieve a sense of unity and immediacy between the reader and the poem. For this reason Whitman limits his use of metaphor and employs metonymy. Whitman rarely mentions or pines over the past, and in his poetry he attempts to transcend the mutability of life. Metonymy functions better than metaphor as a device to connect the reader, the poet, and life's experiences. Metonymy also allows Whitman to connect the present with the past and the future, creating a sense of timelessness. In section 51 of *Song of Myself*, Whitman declares that "The past and present wilt – I have filled them, emptied them, / and proceed to fill my next fold of the future" (LGV 1- 2). Through his poetry the poet transcends, or "folds," time. Metonymy, with its emphasis on realistic detail, is spontaneous and immediate, as opposed to Romantic metaphor which is deliberate and mediate.

For Whitman metonymy also allows for movement. Unlike most English Romantic lyrical poetry which conveys a momentary and largely stationary experience, Whitman's long lines and poems, containing extensive catalogues of metonymic detail, allow the poet to roam freely in a larger space. Allen states,

His [Whitman's] point of view (except in a few of the shorter and more truly personal lyrics) will not be finite and stationary but ubiquitous and soaring – a migrating soul transcending time and space. It is not in the least unusual for a lyric poet to identify himself with some one object or place, like Shelley in "The Cloud" or "Ode to the West Wind," but Whitman's ego is in constant motion, flitting like a hummingbird from object to object and place to place with miraculous speed. (383)

According to Allen, what makes Whitman an unusual lyric poet is his ubiquitous self. And this ubiquitous self transcends not only time, but also space. English Romantic poetry is

often associated with specific localities as in Wordsworth's "Lake District" poems or Shelley's "Mont Blanc," or in other poems that take place in the poet's garden as does Coleridge's "This Lime Tree Bower, My Prison." Lionel Trilling touches on this subject by making an important distinction between two very different lyric poems: Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" and Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking."

The topography of Keats's Ode is comprised of glades, dells, and valleys, of enclosed, discrete places. Even the darkness encloses. Indeed, the dominant emotion of the Ode can be describes as a response to limitation [. . .] But the spaces of "Out of the Cradle" seem limitless – the unending stretch of Long Island beach, the dunes behind, the sea in front, the sky unobstructed. And we are mindful of the thousand miles the mocking-bird has flown to come to Long Island from Alabama. There are no demarcations of place, no dells and valleys. (910)

Whitman's poetic style is dynamic and restless. The sense of "endlessness" in his poetry reflects the vastness of the United States. For Whitman, focus on one locality, one object, or one person is too limited – too confining. His words, like his consciousness, need room to expand and explore, and the most suitable poetic device to allow for this contiguity in language is metonymy. Allen notes,

In so far as the expanding ego psychology results in an enumerative style, the cataloging of a representative and symbolical succession of images, conveying the sensation of pantheistic unity and endless becoming, it is itself a literary technique. (387)

Thus for Whitman, literary technique becomes more than a tool with which to compose poetry. For Whitman metonymy is a product of his ontology. He perceives the world through a metonymic consciousness. And it is through this metonymic consciousness that he is able to create a new persona, the American voice or the "Self" of *Leaves of Grass*.

Besides its ability to transcend time and space, and its ability to move around freely within the confines of language, this American self also has the ability to change form – to shape-shift and mold into any and all objects that it comes across; it does not discriminate. Daniel Hoffman contends that this quality, in particular, makes Whitman's poetry revolutionary, and adds to its "American" nature.

It is in respect of such inclusions in his poetry that Whitman is revolutionary. His inclusions are the natural extensions of feeling of the Self devised as the persona of his poems. And among all these selves, which is the real Walt Whitman? He is elusive, never stopping for long in any one guise, always shifting from one shape to another, poem by poem, strophe to strophe, line by line. Identity is the great mystery. Its solution, it seems, is never to be trapped in one limited skin, but to be protean, shape-shifting, ever-changing, a universal Self enjoying its own metamorphic powers. Those powers are the keys to the Self's inclusions, to its egalitarianism; for the Self, as we have seen, accepts good and evil as equals, accepts the defeated along with the victors, the outcasts along with the powerful, the sick and the suffering as well as the healthy, the male and the female alike. Each is good, each has its own identity, its own dignity. This is indeed an aesthetic extension of the American political idealism concerning equality.

(5)

Whitman's metonymical consciousness allows him to transform, or metamorphose, in an endless string of multifarious selves. The ability to metamorphose into any shape or form makes it possible for the Self to see everything on the same level. No person, object, or experience is more important or less important than another. Neither gender is superior to the other. The metonymic self can assume the form and point-of-view of any and all beings. Whitman's metonymic self acts as the great equalizer, breaking down hierarchical systems.

In contrast, one could argue that a “metaphoric consciousness” or a “metaphoric self” emphasizes hierarchy and order because metaphor is based on a system of comparison and categorization, showing both similarities and differences. Jackie Kaye notes, “The desire to compare, to be concerned with similarities and differences, gives rise not only to the ‘laws’ of nature but also to metaphor and symbol” (18). However, in Whitman’s metonymical language all things are related to one another yet paradoxically each thing maintains its individuality. According to Kaye, metaphors allow the rules of language to replace natural expression, and lead to a system of hierarchy and order in language, which stands in direct opposition to some of the major themes that underlie *Leaves of Grass*: unity and equality.

Whitman’s poetic structure, which might be termed an anti-structure – his constant use of conjunctions and his lack of subordination– also supports his egalitarian beliefs. Kaye points out that “Nowhere in the universe does [Whitman] recognize caste or subordination” (11), not even in the grammatical structure of his poetry. Kaye argues that “Whitman’s poetry is pragmatic and affective and it exists in a paratactical relationship with the world of objects and actions, neither subordinated to nor subordination of that world” (11). Kaye is implying that syntactic subordination does not fit Whitman’s ontology. Subordination means that one unit of a sentence depends on another and is therefore in a lower position; this would suggest a form of syntactic hierarchy, a concept that contradicts Whitman’s pan-aesthetic belief in equality. Conversely, Whitman’s use of coordinating conjunctions treats the different units in the sentence as equals. Thus the grammatical form of the lines in the poems, like his use of metonymy, of which such coordination is a syntactic example, supports his ideological content.

Whitman may have consciously or deliberately employed metonymy because he found it an appropriate and effective rhetorical and ideological device for achieving a clear, simple American language out of which was created the protean self of *Leaves of Grass*.

Yet it is equally important to understand that Whitman's unconscious propensity for metonymy reveals something about his psychology – his perception and understanding of the world. Hollis asserts that Whitman “uses metonymy because, as understood in Lacanian terms, in his psychological bent he was metonymic” (199). Metonymy functioned as a form of consciousness for Whitman which he applied to many different areas of his life, including his poetics. The question then becomes, what is the connection between language and the human psychical process? Post-structuralists may aid us in answering this question. Both Jacques Lacan and Hélène Cixous base their theories on the close ties between language, the human psychical process, and sexuality. In the following chapters I will attempt to analyze the metonymic “self” in Whitman's poetics by applying the theories of language espoused by Lacan and Cixous.

CHAPTER II:

Paradise Lost and Regained: In and Through the Mirror Stage

Jackie Kaye, in her essay “Whitman’s Anti-grammar of the Universe,” proposes a theory to explain Whitman’s minimal use of metaphors; in her opinion, there is a direct correlation between metaphoric language and hierarchy in the structure of language. Metaphoric language aligns itself closely with the rules of language, and through this process it becomes systematic in its tendencies to categorize and compare. Kaye argues that Whitman’s poetic discourse “does not engage in symbolic ordering or give priority to any one consciousness. If Whitman’s poetry is pre- or anti-metaphoric, it is also a language which is ‘desacrilised’, that is, it is no longer at the service of hierarchical thinking” (19). “Ordering” ultimately results in separating which goes directly against Whitman’s underlying philosophy in *Leaves of Grass*: the celebration and the “connectedness” of life. Comparing the various elements of nature results in trying to interpret, analyze, and ultimately categorize them. In Whitman’s poetry, nature possesses a spiritually “uncontainable” quality which does not allow for interpretation. Analyzing nature is tantamount to controlling nature. Kaye also argues that the lack of metaphoric language in Whitman’s poetry, and his denouncement of the hierarchy of grammar, corresponds with his democratic values.

Peter Brooks’s theories on metaphors also provide a possible reason for Whitman’s general rejection of metaphors, especially in earlier editions of *Leaves of Grass*. In his essay, “Freud’s Masterplot,” Brooks claims that metaphors are “totalizing” in nature. He excludes poetry in his discussion, and looks more at prose, and specifically at narratives as extended metaphors (710). However, his ideas lend themselves to poetry, as

well. According to Brooks, with metaphors, as with most narratives, there is a sense of completeness: a beginning, a middle, and an end – a totality. The use of metaphors in poetry can be viewed in the same light: one idea replaces another due to a similarity or resemblance, and the rhetorical substitution is complete and closed. In other words, X is not like Y, as in simile, nor is X a part of Y, as in metonymy or synecdoche, but X *is* Y. Metaphor totalizes because it forces together two different ideas or images and creates an illusion of completeness. Whitman's approach to poetry rejects any totalities; his poetry instead offers endlessness and contiguity, and most importantly a non-hierarchical and non-linear structure.

Jacque Lacan postulates that all language is metaphoric and symbolic, and that the acquisition of language itself creates a system of ordering, classifying and dividing. Some symbols inevitably become more important than others, and some linguistic units are subordinate to others, thus creating a linguistic hierarchy. However, Lacan is not necessarily interested in the process of language acquisition, but in the close relationship between language, sexuality, and the formation of the human psyche. David Forrey, who derives many of his ideas from Lacanian theory, asserts that we should not think of "sexuality and language as distinct realms of human experience; the overlapping between them is very wide, as the structuralists have emphasized" (16). Lacan, in fact, bases his structuralist theories of language –and in particular his theory of the "Mirror Stage" – on the close bonds between sexuality and the psychical process.

According to Lacan, humans experience two "births": "natural birth" (our physical birth), and "historical birth" which constitutes the birth of the "self," also referred to as the ego. These births can further be seen as two types of maturation processes – the chronological process and the formational process (of the ego); the two will always be at odds with each other. In the "natural" stage of infancy, also known as the *Imaginary Mode*, the infant (up to about six months) does not have a sense of autonomy, or

the ability to distinguish itself from anything outside of itself; the infant is one with its surroundings. It does not perceive itself as a distinct ego and external objects as “things” that are not the self; there is no separation.

During the Imaginary stage, also known as the pre-Oedipal phase, the infant experiences an inseparable relationship with its mother; the mother and the infant have a mutually desirous relationship with one another. This exclusive relationship, however, only exists until the presence of the father intrudes and prohibits the bond between the infant and the mother. The father brings with him “symbolic” order and societal laws. The father’s presence, symbolized through language, breaks up and places limits on the immediate relationship between the mother and the child. Robert Forrey explains,

The father is the representative of the law which establishes the societal order; the law of the father is expressed in and through speech. “It is now clearer,” Lemaire writes “how paternal interdiction, reiterating for each subject inaugural, mythical principle of the transition from Nature to Culture, makes the father the representative of the law and a protagonist in the subject’s entry into the order of culture, civilization, and language.”

(17)

According to Forrey, the mother represents nature and the father represents culture and civilization. Through the father, language, and therefore culture, begins to play a major role in the growth of the child. The rules of society expressed through the acquisition of language and symbol eventually replace the infant’s immediate relationship with its mother.

The father’s presence initiates the second “birth,” also known metaphorically as the *Mirror Stage*. During the Mirror Stage the infant begins to comprehend the world through signs, symbols, and language. Thus the second “self” transpires and the ego is born; the infant must repress what was once an exclusive bond with the mother, together with the innate sense of oneness with its surroundings. Lacan states,

This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the *infans* stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursling dependence, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject. (503)

The infant, at this point in the Mirror Stage, becomes aware of its wholeness and arrives at the “jubilant” realization that it is a separate entity, and no longer an extension of its surroundings, and its mother.

Lacan refers to this process of moving from one stage to another as a “drama,” but Jane Gallop, in *Reading Lacan*, contends that the movement from one realm to the other should more appropriately be referred to as a “high tragedy” since there is an irrevocable loss. With the development of the ego the infant will suffer a lifetime of inadequacies and an anticipation of the future – paradoxically, a feeling of being “disjointed” (with its surroundings) while seeing itself as whole. “The mirror stage is thus high tragedy: a brief moment of doomed glory, a paradise lost” (Gallop 85). Gallop goes on to compare the Lacanian tragedy to the fall of Adam and Eve. After biting the fruit from the tree of knowledge, the two fall into shame and horror, and become aware of their nakedness. The infant, after going through the Mirror Stage and developing a self, will also become a victim of its own inadequacy, and the infant can never regain the paradisiacal world of the Imaginary Mode. After the Mirror Stage, the infant suffers another loss; the infant can no longer experience an exclusive and euphoric non-sexual relationship with the mother, and begins to identify with its respective sex.

Both in form and content, Whitman’s poetic language attempts to regain paradise again – to revert to a pre-linguistic or pre-metaphoric mode. His poetic language functions in a pre-metaphoric, or in Lacanian terms a pre-Oedipal, mode where the self – or the

subject of his poetry – has not been separated from the external objects that surround it. The term “pre-metaphoric” implies that the self’s relationship to the external world, including other people, remains “metonymical” and contiguous. The self continually merges with all external objects and is in some way organically connected with its surroundings. In other words, the self cannot perceive the outside world as a series of symbols, or metaphors, signifying things isolated or separate from itself. Instead, the objects outside of the self become a metonymical extension of the “self” and vice-versa.

A few critics have commented on Whitman’s pre-metaphoric style of poetry. Erik Ingvar Thurin, who looks closely at the grammatical structure of Whitman’s poetry, observes that “Whitman’s use of non-classifying modifiers also bears a curious resemblance to the ‘imaginary’ mode of being Lacan attributes to infants at the pre-linguistic, pre-Oedipal [stage.] Distinctions like those between subject and object, body and soul, life and death are unknown” (117). Thurin argues that for Whitman, grammatical elements such as “non-classifying modifiers” act as a fuse – merging “subjects with objects” and eliminating any differences. By bending the grammatical rules of poetics, Whitman challenges the conventions of linguistic order. Similarly, Forrey claims that in the “non-grammar” of Whitman’s poetics “there is a failure to move from the register of the *imaginary* (to employ Lacan’s categories), where there is no distinction between the self and things – to the register of the *symbolic*, where the subject, instead of being merged with the mother, recovers himself as a distinct entity” (23). Both Thurin and Forrey agree that in *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman, through his language, maintains a pre-metaphoric relationship to the external world and resists becoming a part of the “symbolic order” by graduating to the Mirror Stage. Both Thurin and Forrey suggest that in Whitman’s poetry there are no “distinctions” between the subject (the self) and objects, and it is this quality, in particular, that makes Whitman essentially a metonymic poet.

Whitman's language, however, presents a paradox; it can remain at a pre-linguistic state only through the use of the "word" as symbol. This becomes a central tension in much of Whitman's poetry; he can "deconstruct" language and take his self and the self of the reader back to the pre-mirror, pre-metaphoric, imaginary or metonymical state only through the "construction" of poetry. Clearly, Whitman saw it as his mission to translate his experiences into a poetic language; in *Song of Myself* he says, "To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow / All are written to me, and I must get what the writing means" (LGV(1) 25: 404-5). And since it would be impossible for Whitman as poet to express a pre-metaphoric state without language, he must achieve this goal through subverting the conventions of grammar and rhetoric, and creating a non-hierarchical and non-linear language. As Thurin puts it, "Whitman uses language to undo what language has done" (117).

One of Whitman's most overtly pre-metaphoric or metonymic poems, both in content and form, is "There Was a Child Went Forth" (1855). The subject of the poem is, appropriately, a child who, through the course of the poem, becomes a part of every thing, every person, and every experience that comes along his path.

There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he look'd upon and received with wonder or pity
or love or dread, that object he became,
And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of
the day. . . or for many years or stretching cycles of years.
(LGV(1) 149: 1-3)

The phrase, "stretching cycle of years," suggests a sense of endlessness and timelessness. For the child there is no passing of time; all of his experiences are immediate and in the present time. Forrey expounds on Lacan's theories of language by stating that "language in effect establishes mediate relationships as opposed to immediate relationships in which

there is no distance between the self and things, between self and others” (17). The child continuously becomes everything he sees — he becomes “part and parcel” of all his experiences.

In the five stanzas of the poem the poet delivers an extensive catalogue of all the objects and persons the child comes across. In the first stanza and a part of the second, the objects that the child subsumes and is subsumed by are non-human, organic objects; however, midway through the second stanza, the list of objects shifts from non-human to human. At this point, the child becomes other people, including his parents, and they too become an extension of the child.

And the field-sprouts of April and May became part of him....

winter-grain sprouts and those of the light-yellow corn, and the
esculent roots of the garden,

And the apple-trees cover'd with blossoms and the fruit afterward....

and wood-berries.. and the commonest weeds by the road;

And the old drunkard staggering home from the outhouse of the

tavern whence he had lately risen,

And the schoolmistress that pass'd on her way to the school [. . .]

His own parents..he that had propelled the fatherstuff at night, and

fathered him..and she that conceived him in her womb and birthed

him....they gave this child more of themselves than that,

They gave him afterward every day....they and of them became part of

him. (LGV(1) 150: 7-13)

The shift from material objects to human forms does not necessarily suggest that the child sees the two categories as being significantly different or that he prefers one over the other. The shift marked by a semi-colon is deliberately subtle, taking place in the middle of one

stanza and not at the start of the next, suggesting that although the child is cognizant of some kind of difference between the two types of objects, he perceives them as equal and places them on the same level. The semi-colon conjoins, and does not separate, emphasizing the child's leveling and commensurate perception of the objects of the world. Since the child in the poem, much like an infant in the pre-metaphoric or pre-Mirror Stage, does not see itself as a separate entity, it does not place symbolic value on one object over another.

"There Was a Child" ends with the lines "These became part of that child who went forth every day, and who / now goes and will always go forth every day, / And these become of him or her that peruses them now" (*LGV*(1) 150: 31-32). These lines themselves create a sense of non-linearity and endlessness. Whitman uses three verb tenses: the past, the child "went forth"; the present, the child "goes" forth; and the future, the child "will always" go forth. In Lacanian terms, not only does the infant have no sense of autonomy, prior to the Mirror Stage and the formation of the ego, it also has no sense of chronological time. Time is cyclical and contiguous. Interestingly, Whitman, in the first edition of the poem (1855), included the reader in the final lines: "and these become of him of her that peruses them now." This was omitted in the later editions (1857 and 1871). Critics have speculated about this omission. Carroll Hollis suspects that "the late change was part of a gradual shift that had been going on for some years; he was moving toward the metaphoric side of the spectrum" (194). Clearly, with the original final lines, the poem ends with a strong metonymical tone. By directly addressing the reader Whitman creates a unity between the reader and the child in the poem – the reader, too, becomes a part of the child, the child part of the reader, giving the poem a sense of metonymic immediacy and timelessness.

Whitman makes some curious grammatical choices in "There Was a Child Went Forth"; yet those choices accentuate the child's metonymical consciousness. For example,

his use of conjunctions, in particular, emphasizes the child's commensurate and pre-metaphoric perception of the external world. In the second and third stanzas alone, the conjunctions "and" and "or" are repeated over thirty times.

*And the March-born lambs, and the sow's pink-faint litter, and the
mare's foal, and the cow's calf, and the noisy brood of the barnyard
or by the mire of the pondside. . and the fish suspended themselves
so curiously below there. . and the beautiful curious liquid. .and the
water-plants with their graceful flat heads. . all became part of him.*
(my italics LGV(1) 150: 6)

The repetition of such conjunctions creates a fusing effect and acts as a metonymical tool, adhering all the objects in the child's views and forming a long string of interrelated objects, each connected in a non-hierarchical coordination to the next.

Much has been said and written about Whitman's use of parallelism. Several critics have commented that Whitman substitutes parallelism for rhyme and meter. By inserting parallel words or phrases, especially as anaphora at the beginning of his lines, he inverts the effect of rhyme and gives his poetry some form or structure.

*The mother at home quietly placing the dishes on the suppertable,
The mother with mild words....clean her cap and gowna wholesome
odor falling off her person and clothes as she walks by.*
(my italics, LGV(1)150: 14-15)

Hollis, however, contends that, for Whitman, this anaphoric structure functions as an "oratorical-rhetorical" device. By repeating words or phrases, Whitman, much in the manner of speech, emphasizes certain key ideas. Hollis says,

It is true that he used most the features of a journalistic style, but over and above them he used the repetitive and paralleling devices of the oratorical rhetorics as a means of foregrounding[. . .] It is these rhythmical units,

these word groups, which are found in speech, show up to the perceiving eye in literary prose, and can be highlighted by appropriate line structure, that seem to me the key to Whitman's poetic organization. (246-248)

Kaye also discusses how Whitman's poetic discourse is oral in nature; she argues that the laws of literacy are limiting and that written language is confining and finite. Therefore, the mere act of uttering words allows for a more expressive freedom and space.

And this is the way Whitman himself refers to his poetry; he always talks of saying, singing, chanting. Whitman's poems are uttered not written. They offend the eye as they ramble across the page. They have no meter, no rhyme, no stanzaic form. They remain unpredictable and present real problems of readability as they spurn narrative and indulge in indiscrete and inappropriate use of the written word. These lines mimic speech in that they seek to capture its ephemerality and ability to shift from one plane of experience to another in one breath: "I concentrate towards them that are nigh, I wait on the doorslab." (14)

The long ramblings and the endless quality of his poetic structure allow Whitman to challenge the rules of written language, and to revert to a pre-metaphoric, metonymic state of consciousness. Parallelism, unlike meter and rhyme, does not bound language to rules of restrictive ordering but allows his images to unfold and multiply in an infinite manner. Parallelism allows for openness and continuity, unlike rhyme and meter which create a closed and orderly structure. The oral nature of his poetry thus works to achieve a primitive state of consciousness, unfettered by the metaphoric and hierarchical qualities of language. According to Thurin, "Language classifies things and cuts the world up into bundles and pieces, introducing the child to difference and the exclusionary binaries of the 'symbolic order,' in short 'hollows the world into desire'" (117). Yet the child in "There Was a Child Went Forth" never enters this "symbolic" or metaphoric stage, and remains in the

imaginary mode. Forrey contends that “the distinction between signifier and signified, so crucial to the linguistic order, becomes in Whitman’s poetry, at best, blurred and tentative” (20). Signs and signifiers, although crucial to understanding most language, are not key to understanding “There Was a Child.” The poem must be experienced, and not analyzed, as it transports the reader into a state of metonymic consciousness.

While the child in “There Was a Child Went Forth” remains at a pre-metaphoric state, the child in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” (1860) grows out of the pre-Oedipal stage and crosses over, temporarily, into the metaphoric consciousness, while at last making a triumphant return to the metonymic state. In this poem, a grown man reflects on a memorable experience he had as a child. Critics have often interpreted this poem to be about a child’s confrontation with the inevitability of mortality – about a loss of innocence. However, the poem can also be interpreted as expressing the self’s temporary loss of contiguous unity with nature through a metonymic relationship and the immersion of that self into the world of linguistic symbols and metaphors, only to return full circle back to a state of unity.

“Out of the Cradle” is a “reminiscence” poem, told through the voice of a mature poet, reflecting on his childhood. Yet there is also another voice at work, and that is the voice of the child-poet. According to James Wohlpart, Whitman presents two distinctive voices in the poem, that of the “outsetting bard” and that of the mature poet, each representing different levels of maturity and knowledge (78). What Wohlpart does not expound upon is that in addition to the two voices there exist two distinct centers of consciousness: the child’s pre-metaphoric or metonymic consciousness and the adult’s metaphoric consciousness. Thus, the poem itself acts as an illustration of Lacan’s theory of the Mirror Stage. The child-poet’s awakening of his creative self corresponds with the infant’s acknowledgment of its own distinct existence – the birth of the ego.

References to language plays an important part in the overall theme of “Out of the Cradle.” Variations of “translating,” “hearing,” “chanting,” and “listening” are interpolated throughout the poem. However, the single word that appears most frequently is “word,” which functions as a metonymy for language.

The first stanza begins with the mature poet revisiting the past and the events leading up to the moment of his awakening. When speaking in the voice of the mature poet, Whitman refers to himself in the third person.

Out of the cradle endlessly rocking,
 Out of the mocking-bird’s throat, the musical shuttle,
 Out of the Ninth-month midnight,
 Over the sterile sands and the fields beyond, where the child leaving his bed
 wander’d alone, bareheaded, barefoot [. . .] (*LGV*(2) 343: 1-4)

The poet then recalls the sad song of the mockingbird after the loss of his mate. From that moment, the child’s world evolves from a pre-metaphoric consciousness to the Mirror Stage represented by language.

From those beginnings notes of yearning and love there in the mist,
 From the thousand responses of my heart never to cease,
 From the myriad thence-arous’d words,
 From the word stronger and more delicious than any [. . .]
 (*LGV*(2) 343: 11-14)

By reflecting back on this pivotal moment of his life, the mature poet slips into the consciousness of his childhood and conflates the two forms of consciousness.

I, chanter, of pains and joys, uniter of here and hereafter,
 Taking all hints to use them, but swiftly leaping beyond them,
 A reminiscence sing. (*LGV*(2) 344: 20-22)

The poet both laments the loss of his childlike, pre-linguistic view of the world, and accepts his role as a poet, a “translator” of his experiences. Yet as a mature poet he knows that the one way he can transcend — “leaping beyond” — the “pains and joys” of life is through poetry. By writing about his experiences he fuses the past with the present — “the here and the hereafter” — and forms a metonymical relationship with the external world.

In the following section of the poem, the mature poet’s consciousness shifts to the child’s consciousness as the child goes through the process of entering the Mirror Stage. The child who was once one with nature, as in “There Was a Child Went Forth,” is now gradually alienated from nature. Initially the child remains inquisitive as he observes and learns from nature. “And every day, I, a curious boy, never too close, never disturbing them, / Cautiously peering, absorbing, translating” (*LGV*(2) 345: 30- 31). At this stage, the child still perceives the world as a place united and complete as he watches and translates the bird’s joyous love songs.

Shine! Shine! Shine!
 Pour down your warmth great sun!
 While we bask, we two together.
 Two together!
 Winds blow south, or winds blow north,
 Days come white, or night come black,
 Home, or rivers and mountains from home,
 Singing all time, minding no time,
 While we two keep together. (*LGV*(2) 345: 32-40)

Yet the she-bird’s mysterious absence and the he-bird’s sad longing for his mate awaken the poet in the child. The child no longer views the world as a safe and united place but instead begins to see it as fragmented and incomplete.

Yes, when the stars glisten'd,
 All night long on the prong of a moss-scallop'd stake,
 Down almost amid the slapping waves,
 Sat the lone singer wonderful causing tears.

He call'd on his mate,
 He pour'd forth the meanings which I of all men know. (*LGV*(2) 345: 55-60)

Sadness and acceptance replace what was once bliss and curiosity. The child who had “blended” himself with his natural surroundings is now a poet, an outsider “cautiously” peering in and analyzing every experience. As a newly born poet, he now possesses the ability to translate – to put into words – the bird’s suffering. The Edenic world of innocence is lost; the child has moved from the Imaginary to the Mirror Stage, the symbolic world of language.

O you singer solitary, singing by yourself, projecting me,
 O solitary me listening, never more shall I cease perpetuating you,
 Never more shall I escape, never more the reverberations,
 Never more the cries of unsatisfied love be absent from me,
 Never again leave me to be the peaceful child I was before what there in the
 night,
 By the sea under the yellow and sagging moon,
 The messenger there arous'd, the fire, the sweet hell within,
 The unknown want, the destiny of me. (*LGV*(2) 349: 150-57)

The child-poet realizes that he will never be at peace with himself again and that the bird’s song of mortality has now catapulted him into a lifetime of inner turmoil and anticipation – the insatiable need to make sense of life : “the messenger there arous'd, the fire, the sweet

hell within / The unknown want, the destiny of me” (*LGV*(2) 156: 57). Lacan argues that having entered the Mirror Stage, the self will suffer a lifetime of disappointment and inadequacy due to its inability to be one with its surroundings, and will continue to feel alienated; this appears to be the movement described in “Out of the Cradle.” However, unlike Lacan’s belief that the loss is irrecoverable, Whitman’s poem allows for a return to a metonymic consciousness through poetic language.

The child, now an “outsetting bard” on his journey to the realm of symbolic order, questions the bird, wanting to know the meaning of its song.

Demon or bird! (said the boys’ soul,
Is it indeed toward your mate you sing? or is it really to me?
For I, that was a child, my tongue’s use sleeping, now I have heard you,
Now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake,
And already a thousand singers, a thousand songs, clearer, louder, and
more sorrowful than yours
A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me, never to die.
(*LGV*(2) 349:144-49)

The bird’s song is a reminder of the tenuous nature of life and has become the song of the child-poet; it awakens within the child many more sad songs, more “sorrowful” than the bird’s — the sad songs of mutability and mortality. Created by the child’s movement from a pre-linguistic state to a metaphoric state of language acquisition: “For I, that was a child, my tongue’s use sleeping, now I have heard you, / Now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake” (*LGV*(2) 349: 146-47). Upon translating the bird’s song, the child is absorbed into the world of language and order, and his former metonymical relationship has been temporarily suspended.

After the child-poet realizes he can never return to a pure pre-metaphoric state, and after he has accepted his role as a translator of human experiences, he demands to

understand the meaning of life: “O give me the clew! (it lurks in the night here somewhere,) / O if I am to have so much, let me have more!” (*LGV(2)* 350: 158- 59). Once in the symbolic realm, the child can only comprehend the world through words – signs and signifiers. Thus, what he pleads for is one word that reveals the secret of all human destiny, and a word that can momentarily create order and meaning in the chaos of the world.

A word then, (for I will conquer it,)

The word final, superior to all,

Subtle, sent-up – what is it? – I listen;

Are you whispering it, and have been all the time, you sea waves?

Is that it from your liquid rims and wet sands? (*LGV(2)* 350: 160-64)

As a poet and a creator he believes he must “conquer” language in order to decode the meaning of life. As a self-conscious being he is compelled to reflect and to analyze his experiences, and to share his knowledge with others.

Toward the end of the poem, the poet receives, from the sea, the answer he has been waiting for. The sea “delaying not” and “hurrying not” whispers the one word, “superior to all” – the fate of all living creatures: death.

Whisper’d me through the night, and very plainly before daybreak,

Lisp’d to me the low delicious word death,

And again death, death, death,

Hissing melodious, neither like the bird nor like my arous’d child’s heart,

But edging near as privately for me rustling at my feet,

Creeping thence steadily up to my ears and laving me softly all over,

Death, death, death, death, death. (*LGV(2)* 350: 165-73)

The knowledge of death awakens within the poet songs of his own – a language of his own: “My own songs awaked from that hour, / And with the key, the word up from the

waves” (*LGV(2)* 351: 78- 79). As the poet’s imaginative consciousness wanes, a new form of consciousness takes over: his metaphoric consciousness. As a mature poet, the only way he can recapture this transitional process is through the medium of words.

It is important to note the difference between the language employed in the poem before and after the actual awakening. Prior to the actualizing moment, the poet’s language is simple, non-metaphoric.

Up this seashore in some briers,
Two feather’d guests from Alabama, two together,
And their nest, and four light-green eggs spotted with brown,
And every day the he-bird to and fro near at hand,
And every day the she-bird crouch’d on her nest, silent, with bright eyes.
(*LGV(2)* 344: 25-29)

In contrast, later in the poem, the language becomes more elevated and metaphoric – objects begin to symbolize something larger and more meaningful: “That strong and delicious word, which, creeping to my feet, / (Or like some old crone rocking the cradle, swathed in sweet garments, bending aside,) / The sea whisper’d me” (*LGV(2)* 351: 181-83). The mature poet’s voice and tone shift from a child-like simplicity to a more complex and symbolic form of expression, reflecting his shift in consciousness.

However, at the end of “Out of the Cradle,” paradise is not lost completely; there is a return to the metonymical state – a return to the blissful, pre-metaphoric state that every infant experiences before the “prison-house” of words and symbols “begin[s] to close upon the Growing boy” (Wordsworth 178). In “Out of the Cradle,” Whitman ultimately uses language – his ability to translate his experiences – to recapture metonymical consciousness and to transcend death. In the final stanzas of the poem, the mature poet is reconciled to the inevitability of death. Death is now both beautiful and tragic for the poet because it not only represents the final act in separating the self from the external world, but

also the final re-union with the mother, the embryonic ocean, and a return to a pre-Oedipal, metonymic state. Though the poet may never return to the pure state of the Lacanian imaginary mode, he can, with an understanding of life and through poetry, transcend the separation between subject and object, life and death, and achieve a metonymic union of a sort. The shore — the “grey beach of Paumonok” — where the ocean touches the land, represents a place where life and death overlap, a place much like the pre-metaphoric state, where binary states of being remain undivided, metonymic.

The Lacanian pre-metaphoric state corresponds to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s concept of the cyclical design of nature — where everything in life is metonymically a part of something else — one circle within another, starting with the human eyeball and extending to the soul, and, ultimately God. In his essay “Circles,” Emerson states,

The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end. It is the highest emblem in the cipher of the world. St. Augustine described the nature of God as a circle whose centre was everywhere and its circumference nowhere [. . .] Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end nature, but every end is a beginning. (279)

In “Out of the Cradle” there is also “no end.” Like the cyclical motion of waves, metonymical consciousness is an endless process of regeneration and rebirth — a state of transcendence over beginnings and endings.

CHAPTER III:

Metonymical Consciousness: Transcending Time and Space

One of the major themes underlying *Leaves of Grass* is transcending the boundaries of time and space. During the course of *Song of Myself*, Whitman announces several times that neither distances in time (the past, the present and the future) nor distances in space (all places in the universe) are inaccessible to his imagination or can contain him. In fact, *Song of Myself* becomes a journey through time and space for both reader and poet: “But each man and each woman of you I lead upon the knoll, / My left hand hooking you round the waist, / My right hand pointing to landscapes of continents and the public road” (LGV(1) 75:1207-9). In cluster 46 of *Song of Myself* Whitman announces “I know I have the best of time and space, and was never measured and never will be measured / I tramp a perpetual journey, (come listen all!)” (LGV(1) 74:1201-2). Whitman makes it clear that he can not be “measured” against time or space. In Whitman’s metonymical ontology there is no such thing as finite measurement – all is endless and timeless. By breaking the confines of time and space Whitman is ultimately transcending mortality: “And as to you Death, and you bitter hug of mortality, it is idle to try to alarm me / [...] And as to you Life I reckon you are the leaving of many deaths, (No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before)” (LGV(1) 80:1288-97). According to Whitman, life is a series of deaths and rebirths; after our physical death our souls are regenerated and passed on to the future. Although Whitman sprinkles intimations of this process of transcendence throughout *Leaves of Grass*, he gives us the fullest account of it in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.” In this poem, Whitman proclaims that there are no distinctions between the past, the present and the

future, between places in space: “It avails not, time nor place — distance avails not / I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence” (LGV(1) 218:20-21). Time and space are not absolute boundaries that separate. Time is not linear; space is not particular. Both can be transcended through connections and continuities.

Critics have typically interpreted “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” as an unequivocally metaphoric or symbolic poem. Paul Orlov affirms that the central image of the poem — the ferry crossing the river — acts as the metaphoric crossing of “barriers of time and space, thus filling the given moment with ‘the grandeur and life of the Universe’ — and of eternity” (12). The poem can be read as a human journey through life: the river or “the flood-tides” representing time and the ferry symbolizing the spatial movement of human life through time.

Crowds of men and women attired in usual costumes, how
curious you are to me!
On the ferry-boats the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning
home are more curious to me than you suppose,
And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are more
to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose.

(LGV(1) 216:3-7)

Although the underlying metaphor manifests itself throughout the poem, critics and readers have overlooked the metonymical content and structure of the poem — the close tie between Whitman’s metonymical consciousness and his poetics. Indeed, the metonymical qualities hold the poem together and allow for the final transcendence over time and space. Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his essay “History,” also approaches the topic of history in metonymic terms:

If the whole of history is in one man, it is all to be explained from individual experience. There is a relation between the hours of our life and the centuries of time. As the air I breathe is drawn from the great repositories of nature, as the light on my book is yielded by a star a hundred millions of miles distant, as the poise of my body depends on the equilibrium of the centrifugal and centripetal forces, so the hours should be instructed by the ages and the ages explained by the hours. Of the universal mind each individual man is one incarnation. All its properties consist in him. (124)

Emerson, like Whitman, suggests a synecdochic relationship between man, history, and the universe – man as a microcosm of the universe. An individual human life can be seen as a metonymy of the history of the universe. Each human, therefore, plays a major role in both the spatial and chronological design of the universe. Each individual carries within himself or herself the seed, “all properties,” of history, thus enabling him or her to transcend the confines of space and time.

One of the major challenges Whitman faces in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” is how to bridge the gap between life and death – to achieve immortality through poetry. In order to achieve poetic immortality Whitman relies on making connections with readers both in the present time (his present time) and the future (any generation of readers in the future). Whitman transcends the distances created by time and space by making the poetic experience for his readers immediate and real, and by finding ways to merge with them: “What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man that looks in my face? / Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?” (LGV(1) 223: 96-97). But in order to make connections with his readers, Whitman has to eliminate any possible distances that might exist between the reader and his voice, including any figurative or rhetorical devices that create distances, such as reading the poem as metaphor. A metaphoric interpretation requires the reader to focus on language and poetic devices as

opposed to an immediate experiencing of the journey. For Whitman “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” is not primarily a symbol but an authentic transcendental experience that he hopes his readers will sustain throughout time. Jackie Kaye observes that,

“Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” does not describe the ferry crossing as a metaphor for the continuity of life after death. It describes a real experience which is analogous to or alongside the experience of death. Both the sensuous delight in the river crossing and the apprehension of life as a flux from which the individual briefly takes his identity exist simultaneously in the poem; they do not replace one another [. . .] This is poetic discourse which does not engage in symbolic ordering or give priority to any one consciousness. (19)

Kaye suggests that by describing the journey as not as “metaphoric” but as “analogous” – a complete substitution – Whitman makes the experience authentic for the reader. The journey on the ferry does not replace life’s journey as a symbol, but the journey, in fact, becomes a metonymic moment uniting life with after-life.

In order to create immediacy for his readers Whitman employs simple yet vivid language. He uses few metaphors and similes, relying instead on direct descriptions and metonymical images such as “the glistening yellow” (the sun), “the slow-wheeling circles” (the flight of the seagulls) and “Twelfth-month” (December). These metonyms allow him to communicate directly to both the readers of his time and of the future. Richard Pascal states,

Yet Whitman’s frequent invocations to the reader to imagine a situation of immediate conversational communication cannot but cause us to suspect him of harboring an underlying fear that only through such living, face to face contact is there any real possibility of establishing the transbodily connection between separate beings. All other forms of communication,

including poetry, must cope to lesser or greater degrees with distances of space and time between sender and receiver. Such distances lessen the subtlety and immediacy of the communication; what written message, however personal, is as eloquently intimate as seeing, hearing, and touching the communicator's very person? (59)

According to Pascal, distances are eliminated when the reader experiences a personal bond with the poet, when the language communicated by the poet is conversational and accessible, and when the poet directly addresses the reader, integrating him or her into the poem.

Closer yet I approach you,
 What thought you have of me now, I has as much of you — I laid
 in my stores in advance,
 I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born.

Who was to know what should come to me?
 Who knows but I am enjoying this?
 Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at
 you now, for all you cannot see me? (*LGV*(1) 222: 86-91)

The intimate nature of these lines gives an impression that the poet is unified with the reader's imagination as he or she reads the poem. The poet's presence unfurls itself through the words and the lines of the poem. The reader can feel the poet's metonymical eyes watching over him, the poet's metonymical hand hovering over him, while perusing the poem alongside the reader. The reader's consciousness becomes one with the poet's despite the great barriers of time and place.

Several critics have pointed out that for Whitman "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" was a personal "problem-resolution" poem: the problem being mortality and the resolution being transcending death by extending himself to his future readers. Pascal notes,

Death is the ultimate 'distancing' effect beyond which personal communication is impossible, and Whitman frequently gives signs of recognizing it as the major threat to his wishes and aims by linking it thematically with the issue of communication. To solve the 'problem' of death is to show that the conditions of time and space can be transcended, that no distance is absolute, and therefore communication-communion is always possible. (60)

Pascal points out that Whitman denounces any and all absolutes in his philosophy; and therefore death, as the ultimate absolute, can also be transcended through a communion with others. Emerson also rejects absolutes -- "there are no fixtures in nature" (279) -- and believes in transcending death through spiritual connections, through a union between our individual souls and the larger, collective Over-Soul.

The soul circumscribes all things. As I have said, it contradicts all experience. In like manner it abolishes time and space. The influence of the senses has in most men overpowered the mind to that degree that the walls of time and space have come to look real and unsurmountable; and to speak with levity of these limits is, in the world, the sign of insanity. Yet time and space are but inverse measures of the force of the soul. (264)

Emerson's ideas are metonymic in nature -- parts belonging to a larger whole. There is thus a correlation between transcendentalism and Lacan's concept of a pre-metaphoric consciousness. In both instances the self becomes one with its surroundings. In order for Whitman to confront his own mortality as well as the mortality of all living beings he must attain a pre-metaphoric consciousness where no absolutes exist. According to Lacan, in the pre-Oedipal or the pre-metaphoric phase infants have no understanding of time; they have no time consciousness. To obtain a pure pre-metaphoric state Whitman must emphasize continuity and endlessness through the apparent constraint of language. In *Song of Myself*

Whitman says, “I have heard the talkers were talking, the talk of the beginning and the end / But I do not talk of the beginning or the end” (*LGV*(1) 3:38). He must also create a multifarious persona that continually changes its form, making it possible for him to access other selves including his readers and to immortalize himself and others. For Whitman, like Emerson, the idea of being a unique individual while simultaneously being a part of a larger spiritual entity is key to transcendence, even over death. In his essay, “The Over-Soul,” Emerson expounds on this concept:

We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One. (262)

Just as in Whitman’s consciousness, Emerson’s transcendental philosophy abjures any and all closure including death. According to Emerson, our souls are metonymically connected to others, in an infinite manner, and, therefore, there can be no closures.

Maire Mullins contends that Whitman’s discourse “avoids closure and prompts the reader to proceed ‘in the dark’ by avoiding the fixity and closure of knowing”; she goes on to say that Whitman’s poetry “deheroizes” the self, the ego (197). By refusing to embody a central self, the text, according to Mullins, becomes “decentered” and open-ended, resisting closure and fixity.

Drawing life and sustenance from the landscape that unfolds around him, the speaker of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” gives this sustenance back to others through recognition of relation that collapses false categories of identity and time. Rather than separating the reader from the speaker, these gaps are bridged through the text and through this plural, open-ended experience. The speaker circulates freely, opening to others as well as inanimate objects – all become part of this experience without loss of difference. (Mullins 198)

In “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” Whitman goes through the process of removing his “centered” ego and disseminating his self into the many selves of his readers. His readers thus become carriers of Whitman’s soul into the future, and he a carrier of theirs.

Whitman addresses two different yet closely integrated groups of readers in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.” One appears in the poem, the “crowds of women and men” Whitman imagines riding the ferry. The other is the “present” readers. However, these two are not mutually exclusive; the pronoun “you,” as Whitman employs it, refers to both readers and crowds on the ferry. Thus the reader becomes one with the crowds by imagining that moment, crossing the river. The act of reading the poem becomes a passageway for the reader to access the consciousness of the people on the ferry. Whitman also assures both groups that he will be with them in the future and that time will not distance them. “What is then between us? / What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us? / Whatever it is, it avails not – distance avails not, and place avails not” (*LGV*(1) 54:220). In order to abolish time and place, and to merge past with future, Whitman finds it necessary to create certain images, physical landmarks, that both he and future generations can experience in a timeless fashion. He refers to these images as “similitudes”; they constitute both physical landmarks and psychological or emotional qualities that he shares with his readers, holding generations together.

The simple, compact, well-joined scheme, myself disintegrated,
 everyone disintegrated yet part of the scheme,
 The similitudes of the past and those of the future,
 The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings,
 on the walk in the street and the passage over the river,
 The current rushing so swiftly and swimming with me far away,
 The others that are to follow me, the ties between me and them,
 The certainty of others, the life, love, sight, hearing of others.

(LGV(1) 218:7-12)

Orlov discusses “the glories strung like beads” as “similitudes”:

Initially, of course, the image suggests the continuum of time, as if within the poet’s “present” of perceptions and experiences; yet the image suggests more essentially that the perceptions and experiences of the poem exist, in effect, at every point in time, as “glories” of the phenomena of life common to people at any point upon the string. The poetic consciousness alters a conventional string or line of time in this manner, for the similitudes (the beads) are common to people of all points in time just as the sky (one of the beads) is to people of all points in space in the world. (14)

Though Orlov’s comments on beads on the string is an unconventional image to associate with time, Whitman’s image seems to fit appropriately with his metonymical view of life. The beads placed adjacent to each other on an endless string suggest a contiguous relation; like Whitman’s lines of poetry, his *Leaves of Grass*, the beads act as metonymically coterminous similitudes, as points of unity between the past and the future.

In sections two and three of the “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” Whitman delivers a detailed list of similitudes. By Whitman giving an accurate and vivid description of the shared images, the poet’s experiences become real for the reader as he or she is transported to the ferry. The reader’s vision, as well as other senses, become an extension of the poet’s and vice versa.

I too many and many a time cross’d the river of old [. . .]
 Look’d on the haze on the hills southward and southwestward,
 Look’d on the vapor as it flew in fleeces tinged with violet,
 Look’d toward the lower bay to notice the vessels arriving,
 Saw their approach, saw aboard those that were near me,
 Saw the white sails of schooners and sloops, saw the ships at anchor,

The sailors at work in the rigging or out astride the spars [. . .]

(LGV(1) 219: 27-39)

These specific shared experiences enable Whitman to transcend place and time while functioning as a beacon allowing the here and there, the past and future, a common reference point. However, this resulting transcendence does not come about without paradox. These similitudes suggest permanence, yet in order to transcend time, permanence must work alongside movement — something that suggests time; things must chronologically “occur” — otherwise there would be nothing to transcend. Yet within the flux of time some things must remain static, or transcendence would be impossible.

A major characteristic of Whitman’s metonymical consciousness in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” is this ability to bring together opposites or contradictions such as movement and stasis. Although the two may appear quite contradictory in nature, Whitman coalesces them as a crucial step for transcending mortality. Orlov notes,

Just slightly different from that impression [being simultaneously at two points in time] is one based on being simultaneously static and in motion, a variant of the sense of being temporally fixed and yet transcending time. These paradoxical ideals, basic to the theme of the poem, are important spatially as well since space and time are connected by the very sense that the literal ferry crossing is also the imaginative crossing through the dimensions. (16)

As Orlov suggests, this paradoxical notion of simultaneous movement and stasis is key to the overall theme and structure of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.” One of the images that Whitman uses to establish a sense of simultaneously being “static and in motion” is his reference to similitudes. Whitman makes numerous references to images that reflect the contradictory yet co-existent concepts of movement and stability: “Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood yet was hurried” (LGV(1) 219:25)

and “Be firm, rail over the river, to support those who lean idly, yet haste with the hasting current” (*LGV*(1) 224:113). Here, Whitman is describing the shared experience of being rushed through the currents while the stability of the ferry seems motionless going across the river. Whitman also uses oxymorons that reflect the paradox: the seagulls are flying yet their flight appears motionless. Toward the end of the poem he says “Expand, being than which none else is perhaps more spiritual, / Keep your places, objects than which none else is more lasting” (*LGV*(1) 224:124 -25). Whitman thus demands the expansion of the soul – suggesting movement – and yet also seeks permanence and immutability in life, something “more lasting.” These images act as similitudes that unite the readers of the past with future generations.

In addition to using similitudes as images, Whitman also employs them in the structure of the poem to support the content. One such structural method is the repetition of specific words and phrases in the poem. For example, there are numerous references to the “flood-tide,” to the “white sails,” to the circular motion of the seagulls flying, and to the “spokes of light.” These “fixed” poetic phrases function in much the same way as the “glories” or “beads” hanging on the string. Whitman also creates longer parallel structures to achieve the same effect. As in many of his other poems, he begins a series of his sentences with the same word or grammatical unit.

Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
 Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,
 Just as you are refreshed by the gladness of the river and the bright
 flow, I was refresh'd

Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift
 current, I stood yet was hurried,

Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the thick-stemm'd
 pipes of steamboats, I look'd [...] (*LGV*(1) 218:20-26)

The anaphoric repetition of “just as you” performs two tasks concurrently. Thematically, it functions as the hinge between the poet and readers, informing them that they are on the same plane, sharing the same experience although years have separated them. The repetition of the phrase also gives a visual focal point. The reader’s attention becomes fixed on one phrase while the reader’s eyes follow the long, unrhymed lines, and the alinear structure of the poem. Against the dynamic context of Whitman poetic style, the repetition of one word or phrase acts as a resting point for ideas – a stationary concept against the “currents” of his poetics. Thus his long, rambling lines become the rush of “flood-tide” while the key ideas become the ostensibly motionless ferry, and the physical landmarks that remain still – “the dumb, beautiful ministers.” By combining the static with the dynamic both in the content and form of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” Whitman finds a portal for expatiating his metonymical consciousness – losing the self by disintegrating into others: “The simple, compact, well-join’d scheme, myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme” (*LGV*(1) 218:7).

According to the characteristics Lacan attributes to metaphor and metonymy, metaphors are more static – one thing simply replaces another; whereas metonymy is dynamic since its contiguous nature allows for infinite movement, never ceasing, yet always unfolding into another form. Luce Irigaray, in her essay on “The ‘Mechanics’ of Fluids” takes Lacan’s and Jakobson’s ideas a step further by stating that in much criticism metaphors (solids) have been privileged over metonymy (fluids):

And if anyone objects that the question, put this way, relies too heavily on metaphors, it is easy to reply that the question in fact impugns the privilege granted to metaphor (a quasi solid) over metonymy (which is more closely allied to fluids). Or – suspending the status of truth accorded to these essentially metalinguistic “categories” and “dichotomous oppositions” – to reply that in any event all language is (also) metaphorical, and that, by

denying this, language fails to recognize the “subject” of the unconscious and precludes inquiry into the subjection, still in force, of that subject to a symbolization that grants *precedence to solids*. (110)

In “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” Whitman’s images include both solids and fluids: the fluidity of the river and the solidity of the similitudes in the landscape. The fluidity suggests the continuity of time and the solids represent permanence and stability, yet they are not mutually exclusive – they are, in fact, inseparable. Confounding Irigaray’s charge, Whitman’s poetics do not “privilege” one element over the other. His metonymical consciousness embraces the two elements and allows them to complement each other. Richard Pascal expounds on this aspect of the poem.

So the world outside the human observer, the world of nature and matter, is both a flux of liquid-like formlessness and a spectacle of eternally recurring forms and patterns. It is, paradoxically, both liquid and solid, as suggested by the phrase ‘float forever held in solution’ (5); in physics, a ‘solution’ is composed of both fluids and solids. Even human beings like himself, the speaker tells us, are particles in the solution, parts of the natural whole. (62)

Pascal makes the point that in the sciences, especially physics, solids and fluids work together to create a “solution”; this is essentially what Whitman accomplishes through his contrasting images. He yokes opposites to create a new form of consciousness, one that transcends polarities. Emerson, in his essay “Circles,” also discusses the importance of opposing forces working together:

Yet this incessant movement and progression which all things partake could never become sensible to us but by contrast to some principle of fixture or stability in the soul. Whilst the eternal generation of circles proceeds, the eternal generator abides. (287)

According to Emerson, physical life remains in a constant state of “movement and progression”; however, the stability of soul or the spiritual life stabilizes what could otherwise be chaotic. These two ostensibly contrasting forces must work together to create meaning in our lives.

Earlier I mentioned that for Whitman “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” invokes the “process” of transcending time and space – and ultimately death. But does he succeed in the process? Textually, the answer is “yes.” Through the course of the poem – its nine sections (and it is no coincidence, considering the theme of birth and rebirth, that Whitman divided the poem into nine parts) – Whitman uses a sequential process of trying to find ways to connect his readers with other places and times. He and his readers view the same views, feel the same feelings, and think the same thoughts. They are alike, made up of both good and bad qualities, and have experienced both good and hard times: “It is not upon you alone the dark patches fall, / The dark threw its patches down upon me also” (*LGV*(1) 221: 65-66). Through these points of connection, these similitudes, Whitman and his readers become metonyms and “pour” themselves into one another’s souls.

You have waited, you always wait, you dumb, beautiful ministers,
 We receive you with free sense at last, and are insatiable hence-forward,
 Not you any more shall be able to foil us, withhold your selves
 from us,
 We use you, and do not cast you aside – we plant you permanently
 within us,
 We fathom you not – we love you – there is perfection in you also,
 You furnish your parts toward eternity,
 Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul.
 (*LGV*(1) 225:126-32)

The transbodily disintegration has taken place. Whitman no longer uses the pronoun “I” in the final section. Whereas he begins the poem by repeating “I see you face to face,” he has now become one with his readers -- the “we” of the final lines and the “you” in the poem act as metonyms, connecting here and there, past and future. Through the shedding of his ego -- the “I” of the earlier lines -- Whitman has become a part of his readers. Paradoxically, he uses words to transcend to a pure state of metonymical consciousness where, like the infant in Lacan’s pre-Mirror stage, he can not distinguish himself from his surroundings. But more importantly, Whitman’s soul and his readers’ souls have become metonyms, “part and parcel” of a larger design: the eternal soul -- the Emersonian Over-Soul.

CHAPTER IV: Metonymical Consciousness: Transcending Gender

Since one of the major concerns of Whitman, as a metonymic poet, is to transcend all barriers and categories, we might wonder if he is able to cross over one of the widest and deepest cultural gaps between two groups: men and women. Throughout *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman insists that he is a poet for both genders — “the poet of the woman same as the man” (*LGV*(1) 26:40). However, feminist critics like Robyn Wiegman question the validity behind Whitman’s bold pronouncement, arguing that *Leaves of Grass* is “grounded in the rhetoric of the male body” (16); it misrepresents women and reduces them to types. Critics who defend Whitman, on the other hand, contend that his treatment of women in *Leaves of Grass* is democratic, and gives equal attention to female as well as male sexuality. Unlike either group of interpreters, I argue that Whitman goes beyond an equal or democratic treatment of men and women; Whitman not only tries to “represent” both sexes, but as a metonymic poet he *becomes* both sexes.

Whitman’s pre-metaphoric consciousness allows him to achieve what Hélène Cixous calls “bisexual writing” by rendering both the feminine and the masculine qualities of the self. Cixous coined the term “bisexual writing” and defined it as “the location within oneself of the presence of both sexes, evident and insistent in different ways according to the individual, the non-exclusion of difference or of sex, starting with this ‘permission’ one gives oneself, the multiplication of the effects of desire’s inscription on every part of the body and the other body” (“Sorties” 41). In Lacan’s Imaginary mode, prior to the Mirror Stage, the infant has no sexual identity and is in essence a bisexual

being; Whitman's ability to revert to this state allows him to break down the barriers between masculine and feminine qualities, and allows what Cixous calls the "repressed other" – his feminine self – to surface. Whitman achieves bisexual writing in his poetry in two different, but inter-related ways that fortify one another. First he uses feminine language, *l'écriture féminine*; this usage, in turn, gives him access to the multiplicitous or metonymic self and allows him to shift continuously from male sexuality to female sexuality, at times fusing the two.

L'écriture féminine, a term created by and associated with Cixous and other French feminist critics, is defined by Maire Mullins as "Writing linked intimately to the body and the senses, writing that is non-linear, anti-teleological, and unsettling and that defies notions of closure" (216). Feminine writing is sensual: a discourse of bodily desires and experiences. It is not restricted by rules and regulations and is concerned more with process than product. Feminine language is multi-layered, open-ended, and allows for numerous interpretations. Masculine writing, on the other hand, is hierarchical, logical, and orderly. Masculine writing seeks a definitive answer, or closure.

Cixous bases many of her ideas on Lacan's structural theories of figurative language, in particular the structure of metaphor and metonymy. Lacan posits an equation, or a computational procedure, to chart metaphor and metonymy. According to Lacan, if the equation were graphed, metaphor would be a vertical construct, while metonymy would remain horizontal. Lacan incorporates Freudian theory into his structuralist analysis of figurative language. He attributes feminine characteristics to the horizontal construct of metonymy: latent, hidden, passive, "the dark continent" (Gallop 127). Conversely, he attributes masculine characteristics to the verticality of metaphor: patent, aggressive, dynamic. These attributes are closely tied to the physical anatomy of the female and male bodies. In males the sexual organs are exposed and evident, while in the female body they remain hidden and latent.

According to Lacan, metaphor (the masculine) is more creative and free, while metonymy (the feminine) is subordinate, always a part of something else, and always bound to something else. Lacan, however, does admit that without metonymy there would be no metaphor; metaphor rests and builds on metonymy. They are inter-dependent, much like the infant's mutual "desirous" relationship with its mother in the pre-metaphoric stage. If Lacan claims that metaphor subsists on metonymy, then there must exist a point where they are not separated or polarized, where they are one, much like Cixous's concept of bisexual consciousness. Cixous agrees with Lacan on the metonymical qualities of feminine language – its contiguous and hidden qualities; however, she disagrees with Lacan and argues that it is exactly those qualities – non-linear and by inference metonymic – that give feminine language freedom and creativity. It is also through a feminine consciousness that one can achieve a pure state of bisexual consciousness.

Cixous admits to the difficulty of finding literature written by women that inscribes all the elements of feminine writing as she defines them: "[The] exceptions are so rare, in fact, that after plowing through literature across languages, culture, and ages, one can only be startled at this vain scouting mission" ("Medusa" 878). Yet, she argues that women inherently possess bisexual qualities that acknowledge the other, the masculine self, whereas men suppress the existence of the feminine other: "Rare are the men able to venture onto the brink where writing freed from law, unencumbered by moderation, exceeds phallic authority, and where the subjectivity inscribing its effects becomes feminine" ("Sorties" 43). According to Cixous, masculine discourse is monosexual; it has boundaries and contours. She asserts that men are dictated by the "regionalization" of their libido, making it more difficult for them to acknowledge the other. However, a woman's "libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide. Her language can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours" ("Medusa" 889). It is important to note that Cixous states it is *rare* for men to write in a feminine language, but not impossible. I suggest that

in a number of Whitman's poems he attains, largely because of his metonymical consciousness, bisexual writing through the contiguous and equal incorporation of his feminine other.

Cixous's notion of *l'écriture féminine*, and more specifically bisexual writing, shares some the same characteristics found in metonymic or pre-metaphoric consciousness. Both instances emphasize non-closure and continuity. For Cixous, non-closure does not imply passivity, but instead affirmation: "But there is a non-closure that is not submission but confidence and comprehension; that is not an opportunity for destruction but for wonderful expansion. Through the same opening that is her danger, she comes out of herself to go to the other, a traveler in unexplored places [...]" ("Sorties" 42). Whitman's metonymic poetry insists on non-closure both in form – his long, flowing lines – and in content; and yet the fluidity, and the feminine form of his poetic structure does not qualify it as passive, but instead dynamic and affirmative. In section five of *I Sing the Body Electric*, Whitman says "Be not ashamed woman, your privilege encloses the rest, and is the exit of the rest, / You are the gates of the of the body, and you are the gates of the soul" (LGV(1) 126: 66-67). The "gates" Whitman mentions echo Cixous's concept of feminine non-closure, referring both to female anatomy and feminine discourse. Females, through the act of procreation, through their "gates," continue and celebrate the metonymic chain of human beings and more importantly human souls.

Another term Cixous uses for open-endedness and non-closure in feminine writing is the "endless body," which she explains is "without 'end,' without principal 'parts'; if she is whole, it is a whole made up of parts that are wholes, not simple, partial objects but varied entirety, moving and boundless change" (HCR 44). Cixous's concept of the "endless body" is metonymic in nature – "a whole that is made up of parts." A number of Whitman's poems exemplify Cixous's concept of the endless body. For example, section

nine of *I Sing the Body Electric* can be read as Whitman merely cataloging, or objectifying body parts:

Head, neck, hair, ears, drop and tympan of the ears,
 Eyes, eye-fringes, iris of the eye, eyebrows, and the waking or
 sleeping of the lids,
 Mouth, tongue, lips, teeth, roof of the mouth, jaws, and the jaw-
 hinges ...
 Hips, hip-sockets, hip-strength, inward and outward round, man-
 balls, man-root,
 Strong set of thighs, well carrying the trunk above,
 Ankles instep, foot-ball, toes, toe-joints, the heel. (LGV(1) 131:133-146)

However, upon close reading, it becomes clear that the section is not a listing of individual body parts, but instead a survey of a whole; parts work independently as single units, but also work together as a larger unit. Each unit becomes a metonymical sub-unit of the other. The continuous movement of the verse exemplifies what Cixous defines as the “endless body.” Whitman compares the poem to the body, and the parts that make up a poem to parts of the body. Like the body, the poem is made up of metonymic units (words, phrases, and sentences) which can stand alone, but can also work together as a larger whole. He even extends this metonymic concept to parts of the soul: “O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul/ O I say now these are the soul!” (LGV(1) 132:162-63). Whitman's list moves freely from one part to another, without discriminating or giving preference. Cixous contends that feminine writing is contiguous and goes “on and on, without ever inscribing or distinguishing contours” (HCR 44). There are no contours in Whitman's description of body; one part of the body is connected organically to the next. The body is also universal, belonging to everyone, “All attitudes, all the shapeliness, all the belongings of my or your body or of any one's body, male or female”

(LGV(1) 131:147). For Whitman, the human body is a microcosm, a metonym, of the universe, “endless,” and made up of infinite parts that function together.

Another similarity between metonymic consciousness and Cixous’s bisexual writing is the rejection of hierarchical structures. In Lacan’s pre-Mirror stage, the infant can not distinguish itself as separate from its surrounding, and thus it cannot place itself above or below anything or any one around it. Cixous also claims that the first step toward bisexual writing is the disintegration of the self – the ego. Due to the absence of a “centered” ego, the structure of text becomes “decentered” – every element of the text is metonymically connected to the next. Whitman’s metonymical consciousness also “decenters” his poetry. He not only deconstructs masculine elements of hierarchy and order through the open-ended structure of his verse but also defies hierarchy in the subject matter of the poetry. The title itself, *Leaves of Grass*, suggests democracy and equality. In section six of *Song of Myself*, a child asks Whitman “what is the grass?” and he replies “I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out hopeful green stuff woven ... / Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic/ and it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones/ Growing among black folks as among white” (LGV(1) 6:101-107). The word “uniform” implies egalitarianism; grass grows under every person’s feet regardless of race, gender, or status. Each blade of grass, like each line of poetry, is separate, different, but equal. The lines of his poetry are therefore metonymical units that work together to create a larger unit: *Leaves of Grass*.

Whitman also eliminates hierarchical relations between men and women. Cixous argues that masculine consciousness generally values hierarchy.

We see that “victory” always comes down to the same thing: things get hierarchical. Organization by hierarchy makes all conceptual organizations subject to man. Male privilege, shown in the opposition between activity and passivity, which he uses to sustain himself [sic]. Traditionally, the question of

sexual difference is treated by coupling it with the opposition: activity/
passivity. (HCR 38)

In *Leaves of Grass*, men and women are not placed in polar opposition to one another: superior/ inferior, above/ below, exterior/ interior, but instead side to side. At times their positions are reversible and interchangeable. This echoes Lacan's theories of masculine language being vertical, and ultimately hierarchical, whereas feminine structure is horizontal and equal. In "To the Garden of the World," Whitman states "Content with the present, content with the past/ By my side or back of me Eve following/ Or in front, and I following her just the same" (LGV(2) 352:9-11). Later, in "A Woman Waits for Me," he says of women, "They are not a jot less than I am," (LGV(1) 238: 15) once again placing women in equal proximity to men, and tearing down the hegemonic relation between the sexes.

Whitman's metonymical or non-hierarchical consciousness allows him to fuse the two selves, the female and male, into a multiplicitous and inclusive self. This multiplicitous, inclusive self materializes continually into different forms and shapes. It appears as the pronoun "I" in many of the poems. This ubiquitous "I" inhabits various bodies and undergoes their immediate experiences. Cixous believes that in order to be multiplicitous the self must "deheroize" its self -- forget its self, eschew the ego and be open the experiences of others. Whitman exemplifies this process by dissolving his self into and becoming a part of his poetic characters. Mullins's term for the multiplicitous self is "shape-shifting." Whitman, during his journey through *Leaves of Grass*, shape-shifts into numerous bodies:

I pass death with the dying and birth with the new-wash'd babe,
and am not contain'd between my hat and boots,
And peruse manifold objects, no two alike and every one good,
The earth good and the stars good, and their adjuncts all good. (LGV(1)
8:133-35)

The speaker in the passage experiences all selves, from the old and dying, to the “new-wash'd babe.” His amorphous presence can not be contained in one identity, “between my hat and boots.” He invites the reader to join him on this multiplicitous and inclusive journey. The reader, along with the speaker, experiences what it feels like to be another self, to inhabit other peoples’ bodies, regardless of their gender.

The poem “Twenty-eight young men,” in section eleven of *Song of Myself*, illustrates the successful process of achieving Cixous’s bisexual writing through maintaining metonymical consciousness. In this section, Whitman blends his masculine identity with his “other” self, here a lonely Victorian woman. The speaker refrains from continually referring to himself in the first person. The “I” has been dehereoized, decentered. Cixous claims bisexual writing is a “fantasy of a complete being... not made up of two genders but two halves. Hence, a fantasy of unity. Two within one, and not even two wholes” (HCR 41). In “Twenty-eight young men,” the poet becomes one with his female character, and both, through the power of their collective imagination, vicariously experience a sexual awakening or liberation.

Where are you off to, lady? for I see you,
You splash in the water there, yet stay stock in your room.

Dancing and laughing along the beach came the twenty-ninth bather,
The rest did not see her, but she saw them and loved them. (LGV(1) 12:206-209)

The decentered, multiplicitous, inclusive self of this passage works on three levels: the poet watches the female figure watching the young men. When the speaker says “Where are you off to, lady? for I see you,” the “you” and “I” become one. The “I” acts as the woman’s id. The poet, or her id, urges her to break out of her cloister and pursue her

desires. The invisible twenty-ninth bather is not only the lady, but also the poet. Mullins writes “The speaker becomes both young woman and young men, the one who loves and the ones who are loved” (201). The “I” is also a metonym for a larger collective consciousness. Whitman, as the speaker, disseminates his self into the selves of the female figure and the young men.

At first, it may seem unclear whether the erotic description of the young men can be attributed to the speaker or the woman: “The beards of the young men glisten'd with wet, it ran from their long hair/ Little streams pass'd all over their bodies” (*LGV*(1) 13:210). However, no distinctions lie between the two perspectives; they have momentarily become one – a bisexual self – a metonymic extension of one another sharing one larger consciousness. The section reaches its bisexual apotheosis when the poet’s metonymic hand reaches out to the woman and their hands become one as they simultaneously imagine caressing the young men: “An unseen hand also pass'd over their bodies/ It descended tremblingly from their temples and ribs” (*LGV*(1) 13:211-13). The “unseen” hand that passes over the young men’s bodies functions as a bisexual metonym, incorporating both the poet’s masculine consciousness and the woman’s feminine consciousness. Pamela Postma describes this section as a “self-marriage”:

The self-marriage that occurs within the woman to produce, full-grown as it were, twenty-eight lover-sons is like the process of the poetic imagination in which the poet fuses male and female principles (physicality and spirituality) into an amalgam of poetic composition. (42)

According to Postma, Whitman gives poetic life or birth to the female character in the section, and she in turn gives birth to the twenty-eight young men, who are both her sons and lovers, hence creating a self-marriage. The term “self-marriage” can be viewed as a variation on Cixous’s bisexual writing – the fusion of the male and female selves accessed through Whitman’s metonymic consciousness.

The Sleepers is another poem in which Whitman fuses male and female consciousness. But more importantly, he successfully synthesizes many of the characteristics of metonymic consciousness. In *The Sleepers* the speaker transcends time and space as well as gender. The poem is a journey into the unconscious, a return to the pre-metaphoric or pre-Mirror stage. Here night time is a gateway to metonymic consciousness. “The night pervades them and infolds them” (LGV(1) 109:10). During the day humans typically live a life of separation and hierarchy – a metaphoric life; but at night, they are united: “The diverse shall be no less diverse, but they shall flow and unite – they unite now” (LGV(1) 119:159). The sleepers are unique individuals, but together they share a larger consciousness.

The Sleepers is a dream sequence in which the poet, himself a sleeper, merges with other sleepers (a married couple, a soldier, a murderer, a widow, etc.). As in many of his other poems, Whitman employs the image of the poet’s hand reaching out and touching the figures he plans to inhabit: “I pass my hands soothingly to and fro a few inches from them / The restless sink in their beds, they fitfully sleep” (LGV(1) 110:24-25). Thus, the hand acts as a metonymy of the self, since the speaker does not simply touch others, but through the use of the hand accesses them and enters their dreams: “I dream in my dream all the dreams of the other dreamers, / And I become the other dreamers” (LGV(1) 110:30-31). The speaker’s ability to dream the sleepers’ dreams is, in a sense, the ultimate act of union with other people. The speaker not only experiences their conscious thoughts, but their unconscious as well. He states “Now I pierce the darkness” (LGV(1) 110:26) suggesting he penetrates the veil that separates the two realms of the psyche and enters the unconsciousness – the bisexual pre-metaphoric.

The one quality common to all the sleepers is their “collective unconscious”; it brings them together in the non-hierarchical unconscious state of dreaming. “I swear they are averaged now – one is no better than the other, / the night and sleep have liken’d them

and restored them” (LGV(1) 118:142-43). The sleepers unconscious state reflects Lacan’s imaginary mode where there are no contours and boundaries, where all is commensurate. The sleepers are metonymically connected together stretching across the world: “They flow hand in hand over the whole earth from east to west as they lie unclothed” (LGV(1) 119:162). In this state there are no distinctions between the sexes, and the self can easily access both male and female consciousness.

In the first section of *The Sleepers*, the poet, after a series of metamorphoses, or acts shape-shifting, transforms, once again, into a female figure who has prepared herself for a visit from her lover: “I am she who adorn’d herself and folded her hair expectantly, / My truant lover has come, and it is dark” (LGV(1) 111:46-47). In this section the poet’s bisexual or metonymic consciousness reaches its apex. The poet, although temporarily female, at this point possesses both masculine and feminine qualities. Lines such as “Receive me and my lover too, he will not let me go without him” (LGV(1) 111:48-49) and “I resign myself to the dusk” suggest passivity and even sexual subjugation. Yet, these lines are counter-balanced with masculine phrases such as “I roll myself upon you as upon a bed,” (LGV(1) 111:50) which imply aggressiveness. The speaker’s sex becomes ambiguous. This ambiguity escalates with the introduction of a third entity, neither male or female, yet possessing an erotic quality: the darkness. The sleeper (now a female) invokes the darkness: “Double yourself and receive me darkness” (LGV(1) 111:48) and “Darkness you are gentler than my lover” (LGV(1) 112:53). The sleeper not only merges with the female, but with the darkness as well. However, the darkness is also the poet himself; the poet again shape-shifted into an amorphous and bisexual entity, the darkness. The sleeper has the ability to enter the unconsciousness of his fellow sleepers in the form of darkness. This suggests that the female figure makes love to herself. If read in this context, the poet’s metonymical hand not only touches and caresses the darkness, but reaches to herself as well: “My hands are spread forth, I pass them all directions” (LGV(1) 112:55).

The sleeper and the darkness are fused into one self, and eventually dissolve into one another, becoming a part of a larger whole: "I thought my lover had gone, else darkness and he are one / I hear the heart-beat, I follow, I fade away" (LGV(1) 112:58-59). By yielding one's ego to the "darkness" and becoming a part of the larger collective unconscious, one is returning to the metonymic or the pre-metaphoric state.

The Sleepers ends with the speaker's cycle into and out of the state of unconscious sleep to the state of consciousness. The progression of the poet's journey through the state of dreaming is much like the return to the pre-Oedipal, or the pre-symbolic stage. Michael Rainer explains that "there is a tension between the desire to be conscious, and therefore separate, and the desire to return to the preconscious [another term Freud used for the unconscious], the realm of the whole" (8). The "whole" is another variation of what Cixous refers to as bisexual consciousness. According to Rainer, the speaker has made an uroboric return to the unconscious (10); the sleeper's journey back to the unconscious can therefore be interpreted as Whitman's return to the metonymical state of consciousness. *The Sleepers* exemplifies an ideal state, a return to the pre-Oedipal, where sexual polarities do not exist. The identification with one sex, or the privileging of one form of consciousness (masculine or feminine) over the other, comes with the awareness of signs and symbols. In Whitman's poetry we experience a resistance to hierarchy, to order, and, above all, to the hegemonic tendencies of metaphoric consciousness. Whitman, through the use of the metonymical self, allows the poet and speaker to "converge with the objects of the universe" and to transcend all boundaries of gender, race, and social status.

CHAPTER V:

Conclusion

Whitman's metonymic consciousness finds its roots in transcendentalism, and in particular, ideas espoused by Emerson. Much of Emerson's own writings possess a strong metonymical strain. In his essay "Circles," Emerson claims: "Every ultimate fact is only the first of a new series. Every general law only a particular fact of some more general law presently to disclose itself. There is no outside, no inclosing wall, no circumference to us"(281). Emerson's basic theory is that no one "thing," event, phenomena stands alone; everything is connected infinitely to a larger phenomena – a larger design. Like Emerson, Whitman applies his metonymical consciousness to every and all aspects of his life. Whitman's philosophical ideas are transcendentalist in nature; his psychological understanding of the world is metonymical. For Whitman, metonymy functions both as a rhetorical method for his discourse and a form of consciousness, and he crafts his poetry to act as a medium to express his ideas.

Transcendentalism, like metonymical consciousness, emphasizes connections and unity – a transcendence over boundaries and closures. Yet the contiguous nature of transcendentalism and metonymical consciousness does not necessarily suggest a lack of individuality. In Whitman's writing the individual parts make up a greater whole. An example of this would be Whitman's democratic vision of the United States. For Whitman, the United States has two different meanings, closely related. The first is the United States as political entity – the "united" states that make up the nation as a whole – the United States as a place where each state stands alone, unique, yet metonymically functions as part

of a larger political whole. However, on another level, for Whitman, the United States represents transcendence over polarities – over different “states” of being: life and death, circular and linear time, spirituality and physicality, feminine consciousness and masculine consciousness. By attaining a metonymical state of consciousness, Whitman transcends these opposing states and fuses them into one larger “state” – a collective and united state, much like Emerson’s Over-soul. Whitman’s metonymical consciousness also rejects placing any restrictions or boundaries on what he considered the inevitable growth of the United States. In his “Preface, 1855,” Whitman states: “Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nations of nations. Here is action untied from strings necessarily blind to particulars and details magnificently moving in vast masses” (441). The United States, according to Whitman, is a nation based on growth, expansion, and continuous “action” – a dynamic and spontaneous force that gives no heed to consequences: “blind to particulars and details.” The concern with consequences could result in inhibition and confinement, and these characteristics go against metonymic or pre-metaphoric consciousness.

Whitman’s metonymical consciousness works its way into every aspect of his poetry. Metonymy, in fact, not only plays a significant part in both the theme and the overall structure of *Leaves of Grass*, but in the title as well. The word “leaves” has multiple meanings. On one level it literally means leaves of grass – as in blades of grass. On another level, “leaves” refers to the actual pages and lines of Whitman’s text. However, the “leaves” also function as metonyms. The individual pages and lines of Whitman’s poetry can be viewed as individual blades of grass. The lines, pages, leaves are, therefore, sub-units of the poem and help form *Leaves of Grass*. In turn, the individual lines, pages and poems act as metonyms of the larger text – the entire volume of *Leaves of Grass*. Over the span of twenty years, Whitman continued to modify and revise the text through a number of editions, all named *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman’s perpetual emendations to *Leaves of Grass* suggest that his text remained open and fluid,

characteristics associated with metonymy. The openness of the text allowed for additions and the fluidity of the text allowed for revisions. There was no finality or closure to *Leaves of Grass*. Thus Whitman's own volume of poetry reflected his metonymic consciousness, open-ended, inclusive, various and always in search of room to expand.

For Whitman, grass was the appropriate image to illustrate his democratic beliefs. Each blade of grass, like each individual in America, is both a unique and a necessary part of the collective whole. Whitman deliberately chose leaves of grass over, say, leaves of a tree. An image of a tree has metaphoric implications; the verticality of the trunk and the patulous branches of the tree emphasize hierarchy and division. On the other hand, leaves of grass are metonymical – the image emphasizes equality and contiguity. For Whitman, every detail of his poetry, from the structure and theme of his individual poems to the overall structure his collection reflected his tendency to perceive the world in metonymical terms.

According to Roman Jakobson, metonymy has been and perhaps will continue to be privileged over metaphor. Students and teachers of language spend a substantial amount of time studying metaphors and symbols and are better equipped in understanding the nature of metaphoric language. Writers and poets use metaphor more frequently than metonymy, and critics generally focus more on metaphoric interpretation. However, in our daily conversational language, we speak both metaphorically and metonymically. The two rhetorical terms reflect two ways of thinking, and Whitman, who was essentially a metonymic poet, integrates these two ways of thinking. Though, Whitman was not the only writer who thought metonymically, perhaps an awareness of Whitman's metonymic consciousness will lead to a more in depth look at the psychology behind metonymical consciousness in other writers.

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