CHAPTER - II
SONGS OF THE BODY

Several scholars have explored the issue of Whitman and the body to some extent. This discussion will center on certain elements of his application of the body in his poems as a means of resisting traditional techniques of poetic representation that seek to distinguish the poetic image of the body from the socio-cultural realities of human physicality and sexuality.

To achieve his goal of maintaining the somatic mark of the body on the poetic text, Whitman adopts various dramatic strategies. He also shuns modes of poetic figuration that seek to deny the tangible substance of the body by suppressing its physical and sexual functions. In his 1856 letter to Emerson, Whitman attacks the stifling of the body’s sexuality in contemporary cultural and literary discourse:

To the lack of an avowed, empowered, unabashed development of sex...and to the fact of speakers and writers fraudulently assuming as always dead what everyone knows to be always alive, is attributable the remarkable non-personality and indistinctness of modern productions in books, art, talk ....... By silence or obedience the pens of savans, poets, historians, biographers, and the rest, have long connived at the filthy law, and books enslaved to it, that what makes the manhood of a man, that sex, womanhood. Maternity, desires, lusty animations, organs, acts, are unmentionable and to be ashamed of, to be driven to skulk out of literature with whatever belongs to them. This filthy law has to be replaced – it stands in the way of great reforms ....... This tepid wash, this diluted deferential love, as in songs, fictions, and so forth, is enough to make a man vomit; as to mainly friendship, everywhere observed in the states, there is not the first breath of it to be observe in print. I say that the body of a man or woman, the
main matter, is so far quite unexpressed in poems: but that the body
is to be expressed and sex is”. (LG, P, 739)

If Whitman’s observations are to be accepted, the Mid-Nineteenth century
discourses of poetry and other literatures acted either as vehicles for the censorship
of the physical, or worse, circulated anti-sexual propaganda. It would be safe to
suggest that although certain audacious writers like Thoreau and Melville did exist,
it was Whitman who departs most radically from both literary and socialistic
traditions in his discussion of the body. The mainstream prose and poetry was
indeed very selective in its engagement with the body, If we are to consider that
the influential literary discourse of the period was established by poets such as
Emerson and Thoreau, then Whitman’s observations of the “filthy law” that
“enslaved” the language about the body are accurate. Emerson had suggested to
Whitman to withdraw sexually candid poems in the “Enfans d’ Adam” (LG, p. 90)
cluster and finally withdrew his support for Whitman’s poetry.

There has been a long-standing tradition of uniting directly language and
the body itself, viewing the writer’s voice as an extension of the body. Walt
Whitman, however, brings about a relationship between body and the idiolect, the
author’s particular and individual style. Whitman brings into focus the notion that
the idiolect is found most strongly in places where the body has passed directly
into language, he expresses this clearly in the poem “I Sing the Body Electric”:

O my body! I dare not desert the likes of you in other men and
women, nor the likes and the parts of you,
I believe the likes of you are to stand or fall with the likes of the
soul, (and that they are the soul,)
I believe the likes of you shall stand or fall with my poems, and
that they are my poems,
Mother, father’s, young man’s, young woman’s poems.
(LG, 129-32).

The human body is a symbol of human individuality but it also has some social
functions. However, in high forms of literature such as poetry, it is the author’s

544156

62
idiolectic presence, not his social standing, that clearly indicates an interaction between the body and text. John Donne, for example, brings about an interaction of the body and poetry; he sets up a connection between the physical body and the physical book.

Whitman shares with Donne some of the ways of bringing the body into poetry. Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* is close to Donne’s metaphorical conceits, as well as Whitman’s employment of the contemporary discourses of science and medicine. However this is how far the two poets share any similarity, Whitman clearly distances himself from the metaphorical figuration through which Donne moves from the physical to the aesthetic. Whitman wants to give voice to both the social and the individual body; he talks about class differences, as they exist in the sociolect on the body. The discourses that exist on any particular issue reflect the social standing and outlook about that issue during that particular period of time. The class differences of the late Nineteenth-Century America are reflected in a certain way in the social discourses on the body, Whitman engages these class differences to bring out the attitude towards the body in his poems. Whitman not only brings about a connection between body and language but also uses his poems as a conveyance to transport change in socio-cultural attitudes towards body and sexuality, Whitman also takes another radical step in his poems, establishing contact between the physical presence of the writer and the reader. As far as the body is concerned it is the honored place of individual or idiolectic expression and so according to Whitman this site must be enlarged to provide an all-enfolding understanding of the connection between personal physical and general social realities. Whitman wants to give voice to both the social as well as the individual body. Through the poetry of the body Whitman incorporates all American citizens from the past, present and future. He uses the body as an expert medium to comment on various areas of society and sociolect Whitman uses the body very effectively to comment on political and social issues. Poets like Donne use their poetic energies to focus on the inward revelations of his own body, a body that can then be correlated to various psychic states. Whitman’s poems on the other hand move outwards to seize the complexity of the body in all its physical and social forms. He does not imagine all physical states as possible within his body only.
Instead he relates with all physical states and physical variations as they occur in
the public world. The offering of the poem as a physical body defines Whitman’s
individual style. Whitman is not satisfied by just supporting his sense of self on the
well-defined discursive course of the sociolect and the socially sanctioned
discussions on sexual promiscuity and gratification of the immorality of
masturbation, prostitution or homosexuality. In Whitman’s poems the reader
confronts the closest estimate of the physical presence of the author himself, the
most obvious example of this was the title of the poem “Song of Myself “ which
was simply titled “Walt Whitman” in the editions of *Leaves of Grass* from 1860-
1881. In the poem the reader encounters the poet and finally a body, “For every
atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.” Walt Whitman’s idiolect not only
passes to the text but also to the reader, the poem becomes a living thing with its
own course, like the poet, the poem was also born at the age of thirty seven, since
Whitman conceived the poem at that age hoping to “cease not till death” (LG, p.9)

Whitman’s treatment of the body in his work is radical not only because he
suggests a balance between the body and the soul but also because he establishes a
connection between the two. Whitman departs from the sociolectic view of the
body and sex by his unwillingness to represent physicality as detached or
secondary to ethical or social existence. For Whitman the difference between body
and soul, body and mind, or body and language were associated to traditional
distinctions between socioeconomic classes or cultural orders.

The sociolectic view of Mid-Century America represented the body to be
less than the soul and separate from it at all levels: social, ethical or cultural.
Whitman departed from this sociolectic view and recognized the importance of the
body, its erotic energy, its physical force and its ability to shape individuals and
societies. Whitman went through various experiences of his life through his flesh.
Whitman experienced the public crisis of the civil war through his body; he used
the occasion of war to suppress bodily instincts, to basically control the body. In an
often-cited notebook entry made by Whitman during the war he wrote, "I
inaugurate for myself a pure perfect, clean blooded, robust body, by ignoring all
drinks but water and pure milk, late suppers - a great body, a purged, cleansed,
spiritualized, invigorated body”. For Whitman the body has a greater role and in a
Walt Whitman is also unique in his comprehension of the notion of the 'bodily hexis', which is the different ways in which men and women carry themselves in the manner of walking, talking, speaking, etc. According to what Whitman feels, the body is the location of life, as it becomes a part of history. Whitman considers the body as the central point of all social and linguistic energies. The concept of the bodily hexis, the awareness of the role of the body and its application to divulge the complexity of public and personal attitudes is conveyed throughout the poem "Song of Myself". The starting line, "I loafe and invite my Soul" and the repeated application of the word "loafe" suggests clearly that Whitman is consciously distancing himself from the refined and demure posture of the Nineteenth Century poet. Whitman makes a poetic statement through *Leaves of Grass*, keeping language and body interconnected; he uses the body to revolt against the dominant popular sociolect. Whitman uses the concept of the bodily hexis throughout his poems to encompass physical attitudes within language; he rebelled against the prevalent discourse not only to resist language style but also to resist class-based distinctions that he did not approve of. Whitman was more than aware of his own social and educational differences from the elite and high-ranking poets of the time such as Emerson. Although he admired Emerson, to accept the polite, refined decorative style of writing adopted by the writers of the time meant distance from reality for Whitman. The reality according to Whitman consisted of a world that contained both social and sexual existences that could not be denied and overlooked. The Mid-Nineteenth century was a period of stringent division in American society in all aspects of social, economic and physical existence. The upper elite and middle class citizens expressed great aversion for the physicality of the poor. The bodily hexis of the poor was to the privileged society a vice that had to be avoided at all costs. Whitman addresses these divisions in his poem, he portrays himself as a poem that embraces the American nation as a body, eliminating the differences that existed between classes. Whitman expressed his concern to Emerson in his letter written to tell him in the year 1856, "the stinging fact that in orthodox society today, if the dresses
were changed, the men might easily pass for women and the women for men.”
(LG, p.739)

In *Leaves of Grass* there are many instances where Whitman brings about a merger between physical distinction and sociocultural distinction. Whitman juxtaposes various strata of society with a wide range of physical types. By doing this, Whitman had broken every rule of poetic decorum; he put the mother and the felon in the same poem and catalogued the body from top to bottom. Whitman never hesitated to celebrate all attributes of the physical.

In Whitman's personal life, he found it difficult to become a complete part of any social class that existed at the time. He did not accept the ethics of the educated elite, nor could he fully become a part of the working class where he was actually relatively more comfortable and where he found his "comrades", his male lovers and friends. At one level Whitman's life represents the cultural center of one group and at another level he personifies the refusal of sociocultural distinction typical of the other group.

Whitman also showed great interest in the profession of medicine and this interest was also typical of his idiolect; this was a radical step since the sociolect of the time usually ignored this field. Poetry so far had not made a direct connection between itself and non-poetic interests like the art of medicine. As a deviation from the usual, Whitman yet again propagates a new angle for the use of poetic energy. Whitman incorporates the profession of medicine that had so far not been included in the art of poetry, because for Whitman Medicine had other functions than just curing bodily ailments. For him it combined, "science and the emotional elements". Thus, the text of *Leaves of Grass* expresses a never-ending conflict between the “closed body” of the elite and the “carnivalesque” body of the lower classes; it articulates the concept of bodily hexis and its impact on both the sociolect and the idiolect. Whitman's poetry makes a connection with the non-poetic and gives it an aesthetic touch; Whitman also makes the process of death equally important to the process of life.

Walt Whitman has on the whole not been credited with having written prose as powerful as his poetry. However, the preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*...
Grass is noteworthy for its intellectually compelling stylistic authority. The preface is an important landmark in American literary criticism and continues to impact modern literature. Therefore, when Whitman talks about the body in the preface he sets a precedent for modern literature and its treatment of the body. The term beauty that was up till now applied only to nature, the inner spiritual self and the external appearance was now applied to the body in its somatic form. Walt Whitman wrote in the preface, "All beauty comes from beautiful blood and a beautiful brain." Whitman also introduced the readers to the treatment he was going to give to the relation between the body and the soul in his poetic project when he wrote, "The spirit receives from the body just as much as it gives to the body".

The poem “Song of Myself” makes it increasingly clear as it moves along, that the idiolect is a personalized reordering of the sociolect, a way of working side by side with the sociolectic elements but in the process creating a new approach to an existing situation or element. Walt Whitman does not create a new "individual language" but he does create a new personal literature:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And What I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

The opening lines of the poem, “Song of Myself” reveal Whitman's specific intentions. According to him, the poet and the reader must celebrate their existence, and believe in a democratic existence that is to be attributed to the physical, the 'atom', the body that is universal to all human existence. Thus, Whitman establishes the very important role of the body in not only society but also poetry. To stress the point even further Whitman brings his own origin into focus:

My tongue, every atom of my blood, Form'd from this soil, this air,
Born here of parents, born here from Parents the same, and their parents the same. (LG, 6-7)
The lines bring into focus the human genealogy and also an effort to reject any form of physical differences, as according to Whitman human beings are basically the same over generations. The poet also introduces the word 'loafe' which again reflects his aversion to the divisive differences that are created by bourgeois society for whom all demeanors had to be decorous:

Creeds and schools in abeyance,
Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are,
But never forgotten, I harbor for good or bad
I permit to speak at every hazard,
Nature without check with original energy. (LG, 10-13)

Whitman here wants to keep the creeds and schools that represent the society at a distance. Although he does not intend to forget the discourses that exist in society he intends to speak of something new with 'original energy.'

In The opening lines of section 2 of the poem, he introduces the readers to “perfumes”, an expensive commodity of the time, an example of Nineteenth Century bourgeois materialism. The perfumes were used to overwhelm the smell of the city, to conceal every hint of the labor-class who were actually used in its production, a symbol of distinction between classes:

Houses and rooms are full of perfumes,
The shelves are crowded with perfumes,
I breathe fragrance myself and like it,
The distillation would intoxicate me also,
But I shall not let it. (LG, 14-16)

Whitman talks about perfumes as they lie in houses as a part of social existence, something that pleases the senses through the olfactory passages. He likes the intoxication produced by the “distillation” but decides to distance himself from the effects of the perfume as it represents social and economic disparity. Whitman moves on to contract the intoxication of the perfume to the “odorless atmosphere” with which he is “mad” to be in contact. The lines that follow are highly idiolectic
and provocative; Whitman brings about a personal language, which is situated in the physical aspects of life and body:

The smoke of my own breath,
Echoes, ripples, buzz’d whispers, love root, silk thread, crotch and vine,
My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air through my lungs. (LG, 21-23)

The language used in the above lines is very personal, the images of life "breathing" and the voice, "buzz’d whispers", and the bringing together of nature and actual somatic existence, "love root" "crotch" is highly idiolectic. Whitman clearly states his "inspiration" here, celebrating the physical existence as it is forwarded, such as heartbeat, blood-flow and passage of air in and out of the lungs. In the following lines when Whitman asks the question, "Have you reckon’d thousand acres much?" Whitman’s intention is very clear, he intends not only to stress on but also to condemn society’s obsession with accumulation and possession of material wealth. He wants to bring into focus the "good of the earth and sun" which cannot be understood through material possession or bookish knowledge. Nature in all its form and complexities can according to Whitman be absorbed through physical contact, "stop this day and night with me". The true meaning of a poem can be perceived if the reader makes contact with the poet. The poet will convey, "the origin of all poems" to the one who shares a physical, personal or may be even a sexual space with Whitman. Yet again Whitman shows his true preference for the physical over the literary:

Have you reckon’d a thousand acres much? Have you reckon’d the earth much?
Have you practis’d so long to learn to read?
Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?
Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of
suns left. (LG, 30-34)

Although Whitman wants the readers to belong to him and vice-versa, as the
opening lines of the poem suggest, in this case he stops himself from total
personalism. He asks the reader to "no longer take things at second or third hand"
but "filter" all that the reader listens "from yourself" so as to reach an objective
conclusion. This contradiction has a deep purpose for Whitman; his readers are the
common people for whom reading and understanding poetry is a difficult task,
unlike the elite and the bourgeois. Whitman, by rejecting the books, classrooms
and other symbols of the elite class such as the way they physically conduct
themselves, gives an assurance to his working-class readers that he not only
accepts their physicality but also prefers it to the physicality of the elite:

Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat,
Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom or lecture, not
even the best,
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice. (LG, 84-86)

Whitman takes the relationship of the writer and reader to another level, a level
that no longer relates on literary terms but on physical terms. The use of the word
"loafe" suggests the assurance of comfort that Whitman wants to provide to his
reader, his favored reader from the working-class for whom elitist conduct and
stiffness is uninviting. Whitman yet again rejects the sociolect but this time his
idiolect becomes highly unique as he rejects language itself, instead preferring just
the sound of the voice, not the framework of words. The preference for the poet is
clearly the wordless conversation, an exchange whose value lies in its physical
sensation. Whitman in fact collapses cultural distinction by bringing in a new form
of human interaction that does not just involve words but also the language of
sound, the "hum". Whitman’s idiolect included an equation for the soul and the
body:

Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my
soul. (LG, 52)
The soul and body relationship had always been a complex one for writers of all
times but for Whitman it was clear, the soul was no better than the body nor the
body better or superior to the soul:

Lack one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen,
Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn. (LG, 53-54)

According to Whitman the fact that the body is concrete and tangible does not
make it superior to the soul, and the soul in it’s turn is not superior just because it
is not physically visible. The equation for Whitman is simple, one cannot exist
without the other and so both are equally important:

I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you,
and you must not be abased to the other. (LG, 82)

The sociolect of the time generally regarded the body as evil. Whitman rejects this
notion. The body and soul are not opposites according to him but a part of a whole,
a whole that cannot exist without the other. The union of the body and soul
according to Whitman is not through rejection of the physical senses but by the
coming together of the physical senses. The so-called 'higher state' cannot be
achieved by rejecting the body and its senses but by incorporating them as
important elements in one's existence:

Dancing and laughing along the beach came the twenty-ninth
bather,
The rest did not see her, but she saw them and loved them.
(LG, 208)

In section Eleven of the poem "Song of Myself", in the episode of the
twenty-ninth bather, Whitman identifies with a woman who wants to make love to
twenty-eight men who are not known to her personally. She only knows them
through observation, and they are not aware of her presence. Whitman authorizes
the behavior of the woman, and lets the reader come along and observe her
indiscriminate lovemaking.
Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore,
Twenty-eight young men and all so friendly;
Twenty-eight years of womanly life and all so lonesome.
She owns the fine house by the rise of the bank,
She hides handsome and richly drest of the blinds of the window.
Which of the young men does she like the best?
Ah the homeliest of them is beautiful to her.

(LG, 119-205)

It is clear from reading these lines that her desire is also his and serves as a camouflage for Whitman's own homoerotic desires. The "unseen hand" of her that moves over their bodies is not only hers but his too. The hand that caresses these strange men may be hers or his, and this goes to show that Whitman is not intent on being projected as either a male or a female, rather his idiolect suggests that gender is imposed by society and culture and art should shun such impositions. Whitman consciously violates the conventional and normal social structure where lovemaking takes place between people who know each other and at a private place like home. The poet's homoerotic desires are expressed through a female participant and his objects of desire are unaware of his presence and intentions. The twenty-eight men "do not know ...... they do not think", (LG, 216) incase they did know the result would have been different.

Whitman turned towards his own body as an object of yearning and desire. He listened to the "rippling echoes" and "buzzed whispers" of his body in order to grasp the meaning of body in his life; he explored the various uses of the bodies love root, silk thread and crotch to celebrate his faith in sex. Whitman desperately searches for those deep and profound feelings that the body gives the mind, "the body gives the mind/ of having missed something", and vice-versa. This give and take between the mind and body leads to something having been "found" in the poem "I Sing the Body Electric". That something he insists is himself, loving himself, body and soul and waiting for "you" the reader to do the same:
The man's body is sacred and the woman's body is sacred ... 
A divine nimbus exhales from it from head to foot ....

(LG, 74-5)

Throughout *Leaves of Grass* the word "body" occurs as often as the word "soul", In his new approach Whitman's idiolect gives as much respect to the body as it gives to the soul. Not only that, he brings the body up to the level of the soul and makes it "Sacred". The sociolect created by the English romantics and the American transcendentalists stated that spiritualization had its source in the soul and the soul alone. The body was to be ignored along with all its physical concomitants. Whitman however in his radical idiolect gave unmatched importance to the body, "I believe in the flesh and the appetites" (LG, 522), he always remembers and asserts that his body is the point of origin for his mystical states. The body is the outward manifestation of the soul. The idiolect becomes highly radical when Whitman suggests that in order to comprehend the spirit and its manifestation of mysticism the body cannot be ignored because in order to reach any stage of spirituality the emotions of the flesh have to be understood and carried along:

Sex contains all, bodies, souls,  
Meaning, proofs, purities, delicacies, results,  
promulgations.

The sexual act seems to be the very essence of life for Whitman, the desires of the flesh which inhabit all human beings seem to be the uniting factor for Whitman and his fellow-men. He writes in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”:

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.  

(LG, 96-7).

The boldness with which Whitman becomes aware of the origin of his mysticism and how he expresses it in his poems becomes more and more clear. This realization brought him great happiness and understanding of reality, Sometimes
Whitman seemed unsure of the physical world and sometimes of the spiritual, but the sensation that came along with the sexual act and the company of someone he loved always put everything in order:

When he whom I love travels with me or sits a long while holding me by the hand, when the subtle air, the impalpable, the Sense that words and reason hold not, Surround us and pervade us, then I am charged with untold and untellable wisdom, I am silent, I require nothing further.

All sensations of the physical world are not only important to him but also a reason to celebrate. The sensations of smell, touch, and taste are all irresistible to him,

“Ecstasy everywhere touching and thrilling me ……”

In the poem, “The Sleepers”, Whitman presents his most radically volatile register; this register combines people from different social backgrounds along with people of different physical attributes:

The wretched features of ennuyees, the white features of corpses,
The livid faces of drunkards, the sick-gray Faces of onanists
The gash'd bodies on battle-fields, the insane in their strong-door'd rooms,
The scared idiots, the new-born emerging from gates, and the dying emerging from gates, the night pervades them and enfolds them.

(LG 1855, 8-11)

The social types are compiled as the “ennuyee” the “soldier”, the "money maker", “the prisoner”, the “murderer”, the "actor", the "politician", the "emigrant", the "criminal", the "exile", the "voter" and are juxtaposed with physical types such as, the “insane”, the “sick”, the “blind”, the “deaf”, the “dumb”, the “stammerer”, the “well-form’d”, the “feeble”, the “homely”, etc. The physical and socio-cultural distinctions are brought together in a mix never attempted by any poet before. Even if any writer had attempted it, the extent to which Whitman goes and the variety of discursive register he achieves is unmatched in poetic approach. The
Whitman's goal is to record not only his own voice but "forbidden voices" as well, "voices of sexes and lusts Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigured". The connection between body and social orientation, Whitman's own distinction from various forms of elitist society is brought forward very clearly in the poem "In Paths Untrodden":

In Paths Untrodden,
In the growth by margins of pond-waters,
Escaped from the life that exhibits itself,
From all the standards hitherto publis'd, from the pleasures, profits, conformities,
Which too long I was offering to Feed my soul, (LG, 1-5)

The image presented by Whitman here conveys an underlying meaning, a meaning that has elements of what is socially negligible and apparently physical: an untrodden path through luxuriant growth at the margins of a pond. The path taken by Whitman is an unexplored one, it leads to a place of escape, escape from the standards set by society. This path of exploration leads to physical sympathy towards sexuality and the idiolectic possibilities of poetic language to seize a personal or socially suppressed aspect of experience closely joined:

That the soul of the man I speak for rejoices in comrades,
Here by myself away from the clank of the world, (LG, 7-8)
Whitman here finds himself in a new kind of space, a space where he is away from the "clank" of the world and together with his male "comrades" experiencing a new bodily hexis. The situation for Whitman here is rather exclusive since he cannot seem to fit into any social class. He refuses to become a part of the dominant educated class and cannot fully become a part of the working class. Whitman's sexual preferences make him a part of a group that is marginalized and his preference to stay away from the dominant social group further marginalizes his position. These two factors continually interarticulate themselves in the poem:

Resolv'd to sing no songs to-day but those of manly attachment,
Projecting them along that substantial life, (LG, 12-13)

The above stated lines are self explanatory, Whitman wants to sing songs of manly attachment, the content of the songs have to be about "the substantial life", a life in its radical form: a life of the substance, the physical. The use of the calamus plant as the main theme, the main symbol within a personal symbolic code, represents the use of the idiolectic register to bring out the physical and sexual body:

Tallying and talk'd to here by tongues aromatic,
No longer abash'd, (for in this secluded Spot I can respond as I would not dare elsewhere)
Strong upon me the life that does not exhibit itself, yet contains all the rest. (LG, 9-11)

The physicality and sexuality is further brought forward by the use of the word "tongue" and the word "aromatic". The tongue is a part of the body that functions in more than one way as a sexual organ. Here it also serves a linguistic purpose. The tongue is "aromatic", Whitman described the plant as, "fresh, aquatic, pungent bouquet". Next Whitman talks "about the life that exhibits itself", the life of the poet, the writer whose work is published for all to read, the life that contains the career-oriented aspects. Then Whitman talks about "the secrets of my night and days" which is the private life of his sexuality. He pitches these two lives against each other, the "adhesive" and the "secret" love between men; Whitman tries to
explain it as effort to balance the various harmful elements that have crept into the American democracy. Although Whitman tries to politicize the love between comrades, it is apparent that sexuality or repressed sexuality cannot be disassociated. In the second poem of the 'Calamus' sequence, the "Scented Herbage of My Breast", (LG, p. 113) Whitman repeatedly insists on the primary importance of 'Calamus' for the Understanding of his work:

O I do not know whether many passing by will discover you delicate tall leaves of the sweet-flag or inhale your faint odor, but I believe a few will;
O slender leaves! O blossoms of my blood! I permit you to tell in your own way of the heart that is under you. (LG, 6-7)

In the middle of these mystical lines rise here and there bunches of Calamus or sweet flag with tall leaves. Here mysticism meets sensuality with troubling phallic symbols. The homosexual elements of Whitman's personality show up now and then with the help of his radical idiolect but suddenly he regains his self-control and withdraws from fully revealing his great secret just at the brink of time. In the 1860 Leaves of Grass he writes:

But these leaves conning you con at peril,
For these leaves and me you will not understand.
They will elude you at first and still more afterward,
I will certainly elude you...
Already you see I have escaped from you...
for all is useless without that which I hinted at;
Therefore release me and depart on your way. (LG, p. 116, 27-31)

Whitman's eroticization of the homo-social friendship tradition as it had been written in the sociolect so far is brought about most clearly in the 'Calamus' poems. The word Calamus, a Greek-derived word, was used by Whitman to symbolize both botanically and phallically. Whitman wrote, "Calamus" is a "common word here", meaning in the United states, especially "all over the
Northern and Middle states. Whitman identified this homegrown yet exquisite “sweet-flag” with his spiritualized body’s “rich blood” to his brains “occult convolution” and the seminal “milky stream” with his “adhesive” hearts desire. He was not only concerned about the apparent failure of the political parties for whom he established the “adhesive” to keep an enduring social and political union, but also the intensely charged male-male desire, hoping these daring representations of love between men will create a “divine volume”, a “New Bible”. In the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* Whitman declared effectively in the poem titled “States!”:

Were you looking to be held
Together by the lawyers?
By an agreement on a paper? Or by arms?
 away!
I arrive, bringing these beyond all the
forces of courts and arms,
These! To hold you together as firmly
as the earth itself is held together .
The old breadth of life, ever new,
Here! I pan it by contact to you, America.
O mother! Have you done much for me?
Behold, there shall from me be much done for you.

(LG, P.608, 2-10)

Here Whitman issues a powerful challenge to contemporary sociolect, about the understanding of the proper and even possible relationship between ‘individualism’ which isolates, and “adhesiveness” that ties; He tried to convert the American attitude of social distrust between men into national aesthetic of loyalty and love. Whitman distrusted the “individualism, which isolates”, unless it could be made to speak to adhesiveness or love, “that fuses, ties and aggregates, making the races comrades, and fraternizing all”. Whitman’s progress toward speaking the love that dare not speak itself and his leading us toward the promised land of male-male love and his telling the story of a continuously unrepressed sexual life, is thwarted
by the fact that he lives in the world as we still know it in this regard, a world whose successes are partly constituted by acceptable social sadism. The society Whitman knew and the character he inhabited were somehow resistant to the radical shift he claimed to be seeking: Nevertheless, In *Leaves of Grass* Whitman's radical idiolect was designed to merge social and erotic experience. Whitman wants this merger to be fortified for the future; he wants it to be ongoing and always possible. Even Death cannot come in its path, since idiolect is the language where hope is conceived as more powerful:

> When you read these, I that was visible, am become invisible;  
> Now it is you, compact, visible, realizing my poems, seeking me,  
> Fancying how happy we were, if I could be with you, and become your lover; (LG 1860, p. 378)

Whitman's homosocial, homoerotic and homosexual "democracy" was a psychological and social construct. It counterbalanced the socially adopted characteristic suspicion of male-male intimacy and affirmed the value of non-coercive, sympathetic affection between men. Whitman's idiolect redefined constantly the boundaries between homoerotic, homological and homosexual relations. He violated the sociolect, the accepted discursive register joyfully and at his peril. Whitman's "faith in sex" emphatically extended to include male-homoerotic love:

> O my comrade! O you and me at last  
> and us two only;  
> O power, liberty, eternity at last!  
> O to be relieved of distinctions! To Make as much of vices as of virtues!  
> O to level occupations and the sexes!  
> O to bring all to common ground!  
> O adhesiveness!

79
O the pensive aching to be together-
You know not why, and I know not why.

Once again Whitman reverts to his key issue of ‘distinctions’ that, according to him, can be avoided only through physical contact. Whitman moves from an extremely personal, almost confessional level of admitting “0 you and me at last and us two only” to the openly grand and general proclamation “0 power, liberty, eternity at last!” This line has the essence of both the sociolect and the idiolect. Whitman then moves to the more personal or ethical level of radical democracy -- “to make as much of vices as of virtues”-- to the sociopolitical equalizing of the occupations and the sexes “to bring all to common ground” and finally to the socio-sexual means of achieving such common ground- “adhesiveness”. Sex itself is made democratic and, if Whitman's intentions are read closely, male bonding must be reviewed as even more democratic, since homoerotic bonding occurs outside of the social norms of marriage and thus outside the "conformities" of the "life that exhibits itself". The passage ends with a return to the personal-- "0 the pensive aching to be together"-- and to the mysterious level of magnetic attraction: "you know not why, and I know not why". Sexual attraction thus resists any controlling influence of social intolerance.

In the concluding section of “I Sing the Body Electric", Whitman's attempt to avoid using the body in the conventional poetic figuration is most apparent. Whitman's attempt to figure the body poetically can be seen in his catalogues of the body's parts and their functions:

- Head, neck, hair, ears, drop and tympan of the ears,
- Eyes, eye-fringers, 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,
- Nose, nostrils of the nose, and the partition Cheeks, temples, forehead, chin, throat, back of the neck, neck slue,
- Strong shoulders, manly beard, scapula, hind-shoulders, and the ample side- round of the chest,
Upper-arm, armjut, elbow-socket, lower arm, arm-sinews, arm-bones,
Wrist and wrist joints, hands, palm knuckles, thumb, forefinger,
  finger-Joints, finger nails,
Broad breast-front, curling hair of the breast,
Breast-bone, breast side, ribs, belly, backbone, joints of the
  backbone,
Hips, hip-sockets, hip strength, inward and outward, round, man
  balls, man root. (LG, 133-44)

In the passage Whitman very aggressively brings out the physical existence of the
body, totally ignoring any intangible or metaphorical figuration of the body. Not
only this, the passage is unadorned, a diverse mixture of discursive levels and can
be read as a collection of all of society's various constructions of the body through
language. In the passage, Whitman brings together, as well as pitches against each
other, various discursive registers and his use of various self-invented words to
 augment and add to the existing sociolect results in a poetry typically his own. The
body is catalogued from top to bottom externally and internally (internal organs)
before the poem ends with a final group of lines that achieve their intense lyrical
effect through an amplified mixing of discursive modes. The stylistic means by
which Whitman achieves his unique and unforgettable conclusion to the poem "I
Sing the Body Electric" is not simply a collection and enumeration of body parts
but an elated celebration of the body itself.

The most outstanding stylistic feature of the passage is the number of
hyphenated words identifying parts of body. These words give verbal energy and
the directness of physical impact. Most of the words used here were in common
use in Whitman's day but words invented by him such as "neck-slue," to convey a
precise movement of the neck rely on a subtle displacement of everyday usage.
Whitman created many new words such as "man-balls" and "man-root" denoting
the penis. He also used already existing words in new combinations to create new
words with different meanings, the word socket used for denoting eye-socket was
used for elbow, "elbow-socket", the word sponge was paired with lungs, "lung-
sponges" (LG, 148) "Many words used medically were also included such as, "heart-values", "palate-valves", and "stomach-sac". Whitman also used Latin words such as "scapula" and "tympan" and used them together with Anglo-Saxon words such as "arm-sinews" and "hind-shoulders". The body cannot be made to serve language of any kind, it is completely irreducible. Whitman makes this clear by avoiding any kind of ambiguous and mild vocabulary traditionally used by poets to describe physical functions and characteristics. In his assertive mixing of technical and medical diction with a level of more personal observation like, "the ample side- round of the chest", "the bowels sweet and clean", Whitman rhetorically elides the difference between social and personal forms of discourse, making possible a further combination, in the form of the poem itself, of poetic language that is linguistically creative and has the exactness of scientific and anatomical discourse. The unusual mixing of discourses, along with the use of the hyphenated words, hinders the body itself from becoming marked by any kind of social or cultural distinctions: treated as an activity of their raw materials, all bodies are represented as truly equal.

The final lines of the poem shift registers once again, this time from the summing up of all body parts to an ecstatic appreciation of the physical body in all its aspects, ending in the leap from body to soul:

The continual changes of the flex of the mouth, and around the eyes,
The skin, the sunburst shade, freckles, hair, the curious sympathy one feels when feeling with the hand the naked meat of the body,
The circling rivers of the breath, and breathing it in and out,
The beauty of the waist, and thence of the hips, and thence downward toward the knees,
The thin red jellies within you or within me, the bones and the marrow of the bones, the exquisite realization of health;
O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul,
Whitman ends his poems with some of the most powerful and effective lines ever written about the human anatomy. The description of blood as "thin red Jellies" and the detailed and sensual observation of "the flex of the mouth" express images that are highly physical and extremely personal thus creating a new idiolectic register. The ending of the poem "I Sing the Body Electric," more than any other place in Leaves of Grass brings out the huge idiolectic potential of the body in Whitman's poetry. Whitman breaks away from the previous poetic practice by representing the tangible forms of the body rather than its metaphorical or figurative possibilities to produce what is essentially a new poetic language of the body.

In another context on the issue of personal relationships in the "Enfans d' Adam" sequence, which emerged out of a historical context, the title itself diminishes Eve's importance and the woman functions at an inferior power position. Whitman had first introduced Adam and Eve in the last poem of the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass, "Great are the Myths", (LG1855, p. 144), which he dropped from the final edition. He introduced Adam and Eve as the original models of male dominated marriage:

Great are the myths... I too delight in them,
Great are Adam and Eve .... I too look back and accept them;

(LG1855, 1-2)

Later in the same poem Whitman introduces a few pleasures connected with society such as "books, free trade, railroads" and "marriage" interconnecting them by bringing them together in the same line, "Great are marriage, commerce, newspapers, books, free trade, railroads, streamers..."(LG1855, 49). This connection, which is socially improbable, brings out the meaninglessness of marriage in Whitman's eyes. In the concluding lines of the poem Whitman writes:

Great is life. ...and real and mystical ...
where ever and whoever,
Great is death. Sure as life holds all parts together, death holds all parts together;
Sure as the stars return again after they merge in the light, death is great as life. (LG, 65-67)

After having reduced marriage into a mere legality. In this poem, Whitman brings out various approaches to interpersonal relationships. At one level he approves of society and its norms for human interaction, at another he approves or all the myths that have given way to human history. Yet, Whitman stays clear of conventional styles and approaches to express himself. He uses no love lyric, political or social satire or any religious or philosophical manifestation. Instead Whitman uses his unique idiolect to bring together, “marriage, commerce, newspapers, books, free trade, railroads, steamers, international mails and telegraphs and exchanges”. Thus, Whitman in his unique style shows his contempt and cynicism for structures that govern intimate human relations. According to Whitman the institution of marriage, a mark of interpersonal relationships in society, is not a necessity and is not the only sanction for human personal interaction. To stress his point further Whitman writes in the poem “Once I Passed Through a Populous City”, (LG, p. 109)

I take for my love some prostitute – I pick out
Some low person for my dearest friend,
He shall be lawless, rude, illiterate-he shall be one condemned by others for deeds done;
I will play a part no longer – why should I exile myself from my companions?

The prostitute, the low person, and the dearest friend are the same. Perhaps the speaker’s encounter with the prostitute prepares him for other sexual encounters. Whatever may be the case, the prostitute or dearest friend, a male lover, is outside the law and so he forges personal relationships outside of socially sanctioned “marriage” and so he redefines his relation to the literary tradition, to his audience, and to a conflicted self.
Whitman in his identity as a private lyric poet and in his attempt to create a new discursive register takes us down “underneath this impassive exterior.” and he composes an epitaph for himself:

I will tell you what to say of me: publish my name and hang up my picture as that of the tenderest lover, the friend, the lover’s portrait, of whom his friends, his lover, was fondest, who was not proud of his songs, but of the measureless oceans of love within him and freely poured it fourth, who often walked lonesome walks, thinking of his dear friends, his lovers, who pensive, away from one he loved, often lay sleepless and dissatisfied at night, who knew too well the sick dread lest the one he loved might secretly be indifferent to him, whose happiest days were far away, through friends, in woods, on hills, he and another, wandering hand in hand, they twain, apart from other men, who oft as he reentered the streets, curved with his arm the shoulder of his friend- while the arm of his friend rested upon him also.

Although here Whitman presents himself as an innocent victim, the problem of social trust persists. The prohibited male-male desire in the society and the emotional volatility attached to it cannot be wholly ascribed to a homophobic culture alone. However, the desire to be with another man is clear and it lies outside the socially sanctioned laws of human relationship.

Yet at another level, Whitman was also on a larger humanist mission that did not include homoerotic attachments. The poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” both affirms and denies the value of individual sexual experience. Whitman projects himself ecstatically into an unlimited future; he brings out his attachment to other people regardless of the clan to which they belong. The future readers of Whitman should know that he has his faith in them whether they are masculine or feminine:

Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, how curious you are to me!
On the ferry-boats the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning home, are 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.

(LG, 3-5)

The people Whitman comes across on the ferry may be “the sailors at work in the rigging” or “the pilots in their pilot houses” but he ties them to himself and to the future regardless of their social standing. He is able to imagine himself fusing men, genders, nations and races together. He asks the question, “what is then between us?” and then goes on to answer that, the body is the unifying element. It is the body that is common to all and though it gives identity to each individual, it also becomes the joiner of humanity:

I too had received identity by my body, that I was I knew of my body, and what I should be I knew I should be of my body.

(LG, 63-64)

Appearances, now or henceforth, indicate what you are, you are necessary film, continue to envelop the soul,
About my body for me, and your body for you, be hung your divinest aromas. (LG, 120-122)

Whitman always tends to emphasize the relationship between bodily love and social cohesion rather than individual romantic love. Whitman’s notebook entries indicate an atypical interest in the specifics of bodily structure and medical practice. Not long after he settled in Camden, he told some friends: “If I had to choose, were I looking for a profession, I should choose that of a doctor. Yes; widely opposite as science and the emotional elements are, they might be joined in the medical profession, and there would be great opportunity for developing them. Nowhere is there such a call for them… Oh, a doctor should be a superb fellow. He does not approach at present what he should be.” In his unfinished project “The Primer of words”, Whitman calls attention to the discursive affluence supplied by medicine and its sister sciences: “Medicine has hundreds of useful and
characteristic words - new means of cure - new schools of doctors the wonderful anatomy of the body - the names of a thousand disease - Surgeon's terms - hydropathy - all that relates to the great organs of the body. The medical art is always grand-nothing affords a nobler scope for superior men and women. It, of course will never cease to be near to man, and add new terms".2

It is clear that Whitman's interest in the science of medicine is unique, especially as a Nineteenth-Century American poet. The poetry of the time did not include the science of medicine and literary writers were not interested in exploring it. Certain literary figures who did show some interest, kept it separate from their poetic writing. Like for example Bryant -- who served as president of the board of directors for the Homeopathic college in New York in 1869 -- maintained a resolute distinction between his poetic writing and non-poetic interests. What is even more striking as far as Whitman is concerned is that he was awed not so much by the advances in medical technology but by the linguistic expression brought by those advances. For Whitman the new terms that were being added to the sociolect, bringing a new richness to language were of maximum interest. About the time Whitman was preparing the 1856 edition, Whitman jotted down a notebook reminder to “Read the latest and best medical works/talk with physicians/study the anatomical plates/also cast and figures in the collection of designs”. On the same page he also wrote: “A poem in which is minutely described the whole particulars and ensemble of a first rate healthy human body-it looks into and through, as if it were transparent and fine glass and now reported in a poem.” In the poem “I Sing the Body Electric”, section seven, and the concept of illustrated anatomy plates appears:

Examine these limbs, red, black, or white, they are winning in
tendon and nerve, they shall be stript away that you may see them.
Exquisite senses, life-lit eyes, pluck, volition,
Flakes of breast-muscle, plant backbone and neck, flesh not flabby,
good sized arms and legs, and wonders within there yet.

(LG, 104-5)
The Mid-Nineteenth Century sociolect was starting to include many words and terms from medical sciences due to the sudden expansion and development in this field. The medical science of the time not only included the traditional approach but also unorthodox approaches such as allopathy, homeopathy, hydropathy, phrenology and spiritual healing. These schools of healing regarded most illnesses as a derangement of the total organism; they supposed nature and the sufferer’s own vital powers to be the essential sources of cure. Therefore these practitioners believed intuition and compassion were more important to successful healing… Whitman’s healer-persona also shows the same faith in nature’s curative and healing forces and in the power of personal sympathy.

Whitman believed that nature’s forces such as fresh air, water, sleep, health food and exercise, were the best cure for all ailments. This belief is brought out through the heroic personages of *Leaves of Grass*, who like so many models of health in Romantic literature drink only water. In various poems the poet-persona bathes in the swimming bath, on the shores of Manhattan. He bathes to ready himself for sleep with his beloved companion and to celebrate “the fitness and equanimity of things”. Symbolically, the act of bathing represents personal and national well-being, healing, spiritual purification and death. Whitman even campaigned in his newspaper columns, to promote sanitation and proper sewage disposal; he advocated bathing as a wholesome sport and expressed outrage when people were stopped from bathing at public places and beaches.

The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* includes many themes and aspects from the health sciences. In the poem “Faces” he observes an epileptic seizure:

This face is an epilepsy advertising and doing business…. Its wordless tongue gives out the unearthly cry.
Its veins down the neck distend…. Its eyes roll till their eyes show nothing but their whites,
Its’ teeth grit… the palms off the hands are cut by the turn’d – in nails,
The man falls struggling and foaming to the ground, while he speculates well. (LG1855, 26-29)
Whitman's unique idiolectic expression is also seen when he observes "the face of the most smeared and slobbering idiot they had at the asylum", whom he calls "My brother":

I saw the face of the most smeared and slobbering idiot they had at the asylum,
And I knew for my consolidation that they knew not;
I knew of the agents that emptied and broke my brothers

(LG1855, 41-3)

In the poem "The sleepers", the poets persona views the rheumatic, the epileptic, "the consumptive, the erispalite, the idiot", and "the insane in their strong-door'd rooms". In the poem "A song of Occupations" he alludes to medicinal instruments:

The etui of surgical instruments, and the etui of the owlists or aurit’s instruments, or dentists instruments...

In "Song of Myself", Whitman brings out pictures of suffering and his own Christ like Persona:

I am he bringing help for the sick as they pant on their backs,
And for the strong upright men I bring yet more needed help.

Whitman's unique idiolect also covers amputations, which he witnessed himself during his visits to the hospitals during the civil war he was also familiar with the horrors of Nineteenth-Century surgery:

The malform’d limbs are tied to the surgeron’s table,
What is removed drops horribly in a pail... (LG1855, 270-1)

Whitman’s first-hand observation can also be seen in his description of a surgical operation being performed without sedatives, section 36, "Song of Myself":

The hiss of the Surgeon’s knife, the gnawing teeth of his saw,
Wheeze, cluck, swash of falling blood, short wild scream, and long, dull tapering groan,
These “irretrievable” instances of human pain brought out the poet’s compassion and gave sustenance to his imagination. Whatever may have been his attraction to medical sciences, he felt poetry includes and transcends science. He said “The facts are useful and real – they are not my dwelling – I enter by them to an area of the dwelling”. As John Burroughs observes that Whitman’s extensive knowledge of science had been, “transmuted into strong poetic nutriment”. Whitman also shows his fellowship to physicians in a passage in section 23 of “Song of Myself”:

Hurrah for positive science! Long live exact demonstration.

(LG, 485)

Whitman tells anyone who listens to him: “All comes by the body, only health puts you in support with the universe”. He declares that all physicians have attributes that are beautiful and spiritual. Furthermore, he establishes a bond between body and soul and communication and exchange between physical health and spirituality:

The exquisite realization of health;

O I say now these are not the parts and poems of the body only,

poems of the body only,

O I say now these are the soul!

In the poem, “I Sing the Body Electric”, Whitman asserts the dignity of all physical characteristics and commends the body as the repository of generations to come and as the home and complement of the soul:

If any thing is sacred the human body is sacred.
And the glory and sweet of a man is the token of manhood untainted,
And in man or woman a clean, strong, firm-fibred body is more beautiful than the most beautiful face. (LG, 124-26)
It is clear through the reading of Whitman's poetry that he does not ignore his physical existence; he loves himself inside and out. Whitman has immense respect for the corporeal and throughout his poems he mentions the body and the soul on equal terms. He is never ashamed of his body. Instead, he celebrates his body and all its bodily functions. He becomes the voice of every physical activity that is considered indecent by society:

Through me forbidden voices,
Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil’d and I remove the veil,
Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur’d

(LG, P.53, 516-18)

Whitman uses the body as a means of connecting with everything that exists around him; he experiences everything through the flesh. He sharpens his senses of sight, hearing and touch in order to absorb fully everything and everyone he is surrounded with. For him to be able to live and breathe is a miracle, he feels he himself is a miracle because he was born with a beautiful body:

Each part and tag of me is a miracle (LG, p.53, 524)

Whitman was not only fully and impressively in touch with his physical self but he also revered his body. This type of body-worship was unheard of in the literary circles of his time. Whitman desires to be the prong that directs the plow (the corporeal) into the turf of lyric poetry. He wants to cultivate the fertile soil of literary writing with symbols of physical existence. The poet Walt Whitman gives birth to the mystical union of body and soul that he expresses with erotic imagery through which he experiences immediate intuitive revelations:

If I worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread of my own body, or any part of it,
Translucent mould of me it shall be you!
Shaded ledges and rests its shall be you!
Firm masculine colter it shall be you!
Whatever goes to the tilth of me it shall be you!

91
You my rich blood! Your milky stream pale strippings of my life!
Breast that Presses against other breasts it shall be you!
My brain it shall be your occult convolutions!
Root of wash’d sweet flag! Timorous pond – snipe! Nest of guarded duplicate eggs! It shall be you!
Mixed tussled hay of head, beard, brown, it shall be you!
Trickling sop of maple, fiber of manly wheat, it shall be you!
Sun so generous it shall be you! (LG, p.53, 527-38)

Alone among American poets Whitman combines the various symbols writing in the wake of Romanticism, of physical existence such as sex, eating, drinking and sleeping with the traditional poetic trope of death. The Romantic lyric poetry achieved its distinction from the everyday world through oxymoronic contrasts that attempt to deny, or at least evade, the existence of any real social context; any living and breathing physical world; or the physical reality of death. Among American poets it is Whitman who comes closest to embracing life as well as death and rejecting the Romantic literary mode. Whitman often presents life and death together. In the poem, “A Song of the Rolling Earth” (LG, p. 219), for example, he writes “Persuasions of lovers, curses, gasps of the dying, laughter of young people, accents of bargainers” (LG, 39). Taken as a whole Leaves of Grass is not only a celebration of “the wholeness of a triumphant life” but also of the inevitable process of death. Whitman successfully makes death a process that is equal in importance to life in Leaves of Grass.

In sections 6 and 7 of the poem “Song of Myself” a significant amount of meditation on death and its relation to life can be seen. Whitman attempts to reconcile the dual pulls of life and death:

The are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death.
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,
And ceas’d the moment life appear’d. (LG, 125-8)
Whitman’s radical approach to death is unique indeed. Not only does he bring life and death on the same platform, he also states that dying is as fortunate as living:

Has anyone supposed it lucky to be born?
I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and I know it.

(LG, 131-2)

This unique way of presenting death was for removed from anything written in Romantic poetry. The celebration of life with its joyful activities of laughter, food and especially sex is incomplete without the discussion of the process of death. Whitman takes it upon himself to present the forbidden voice of death. In section 24 of the poem “Song of Myself” he writes “Copulation is no more rank to me than death is”. (LG, 521). It is clear that Whitman gave great importance to the body and its functions. He believes in the flesh and considers his body divine. For Whitman bodily functions such as hearing, seeing, feeling are miracles. Inspite of Whitman’s body worship he does not take death as an irremediable end. Fundamental to Whitman’s vision of death are its corporeality and its sensuality. In section 49 of the poem “Song of Myself” Whitman calls death a “bitter hug of mortality” (LG, 1289) but refuses to be alarmed by it. Next, he presents death in a sensual light, a first time attempt by any poet so far:

And as to you corpse I think you are good manure, but that does not offend me,
I smell the white roses sweet-scented and growing,
I reach to the leafy lips, I reach to the polish’d breasts of melons.

(LG, 1294-6)

The “Corpse”, a symbol of death is presented as manure, a catalyst of life. Whitman offers death as a new beginning; it is not an end but a start of something beautiful represented by sweet smelling White roses. Finally, Whitman shifts discursive registers again: from the traditional poetic image of white roses to sexualized “leafy lips” and “polish’d breasts of melon.” The lips and breasts would traditionally be coded as signs of female sexuality, though within Whitman’s sexual economy they remain more uncertain. Whitman not only brings life and
death together but also gives death a new function – regeneration. The regeneration brought about by death is presented in an idiolect totally unique to Whitman; he attaches death with sexuality. For Whitman life does not stop ever, it moves “onward” and “outward”, unlike the general and prevalent concept of death as an unwelcome event. Whitman projects it as “different from what any one supposed, and luckier.” (LG, 130). According to Whitman, death is not to be ignored as ignoring it would take away from the proper understanding of how to live life. Whitman is totally comfortable with both life and death. As he clearly states in “Song of Myself”, “I pass death with the dying and birth with the new-wash’d babe.” (LG, 133). Throughout the poem, as Whitman “weaves” his song, cataloguing the events of life from the life of a carpenter to the life of the President of the nation holding a cabinet council, he does not move away from the eventual reality of death, “the living sleep in their time, the dead sleep for their time.” (LG, 325). The constant effort made by Whitman throughout the poem is that death is not an end, he refuses to believe that he will cease to exist the day his bodily life comes to an end:

I know I am deathless,
I know this orbit of mine cannot be swept by a carpenter’s compass.

(LG, 406-7)

Yet, Whitman does not pursue this approach to death in later poems. When Whitman wrote his postwar elegy for Lincoln, “When Lilacs Last in Dooryard Bloom’d,” the poet’s treatment of death becomes quite conventional. Whitman’s Lincoln elegy was one of his best-known poems by the late Nineteenth Century and was generally accepted as one of Whitman’s central works. Other Safe poems of Whitman are “O Captain! My Captain!” and “Come up from the Fields Father.” It is important to note that all of these three poems deal with death more than they do with life. One poem deals with the death of a political and spiritual leader, one deals with the death of a soldier and the last with the death of the only son of an Ohio farming couple. Apparently death was a more acceptable and comfortable topic to many Nineteenth Century readers than life was, especially the way in which Whitman chose to celebrate life as a bodily function. Unlike one of the
processes of physical life such as sexuality, death, when presented in the elegiac mode was well accepted since it was a well-established form of literary writing. These later poems helped ensure the poet’s own fame, but to achieve this fame Whitman had to abandon his highly radical idiolect.

As time went on it became clear to Whitman that he had failed to gain sufficient symbolic capital within his literary field. He then chose to abandon his earlier techniques of difference and to adopt a position closer to that which had already been carved out by his more successful contemporaries. The radical idiolect that established Whitman as a unique poet was abandoned when it did not provide Whitman with the access to literary fame he very much desired. While he remained thoroughly American in his role as a cultural icon, he somehow ceased to contribute significantly to the ongoing development of American literature.

However, American readers waited several decades before another generation would recognize in Whitman the extremely unique poet who expressed the “Americanness” more successfully than any other, who managed to translate into powerful and lasting poetry the discourses of his time and nation.

In 1856, when Whitman was very much true to his unique style of writing, he wrote in the poem “A Song of the Rolling Earth”:

When I undertake to tell the best I cannot,
My tongue is ineffectual on its pivots,
My breath will not be obedient to its organs,
I become a dumb man. (LG, 104-7)

Here, he goes through a profound moment of uncertainty in his ambition to “Sing myself”. He contemplates the earth in its mute and concrete expansiveness. He makes a resolution not to get involved in a decorative form of writing. However sincerely felt, these resolutions do not last long, but even then there can be no doubt that Whitman was the creator of a powerful and unique poetic idiolect. He was one of America’s most radical poets.