

HUMOR

Whitless

Sex and the single poet

Walt Whitman was a big, hairy homo. He was also a great poet. He wrote about the Brooklyn Bridge and singing the body electric and when lilacs last in the dooryard bloomed, but frankly, none of that interests me much. As a writer I'm ashamed to admit it, but his poetry can put me to sleep quicker than a Tylenol PM with a vodka chaser.

As far as I can see, Whitman subscribed to the theory that you shouldn't use one word when 15 would do in its place; his poetry reads like those Oscar speeches that the orchestra has to cut off.

What does interest me a lot, however, is Whitman's sex life.

I don't know why. At this point in my life, I don't question my various obsessions and compulsions; more importantly, neither does my partner. After 15 years together Floyd's learned just to roll his eyes and say "yes, dear" when, for instance, I wanted a pork pie hat after seeing *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. Every gay man I know had to pour ice in his lap when he saw Jude Law take a bath; me, I just wanted his adorable little hat.

But I digress. Turns out there's a very good book on the subject of Whitman's sex life called *Walt Whitman: A Gay Life* by Gary Schmidgall, which contains all kinds of juicy material previously unpublished:

*I share the midnight orgies of young men,
I dance with the dancers, and drink with the drinkers,
The echoes ring with our indecent calls,
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;*

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARC
by Marc Acito



I will play a part no longer—Why should I exile myself from my companions?

This poem reads like a 19th century personals ad, if you ask me: "Hairy poet seeks lawless, rude, illiterate prostitute for fun and companionship. Your nude daguerreotype gets mine. Send to walt@leavesofgrass-stains.com."

Some literary critics think Schmidgall has a lot more than just a schmidge of gall even to claim Whitman was gay. They insist the copious catalog of men he slept with refers to the 19th century custom of men sharing beds, which explains, presumably, why he roamed the city's dockyards and parks looking for men to sleep with. I guess I must have missed the Ken Burns documentary on the Great 19th Century Sleepover.

Whitman himself isn't much help, either, spending the last 30 years of his life editing all the soft porn out of his poetry, lines like "Thruster holding me tight, and that I hold tight!/We hurt each other as the

bridegroom and the bride hurt each other." Now if you ask me, that's some damn good poetry. Throw in something about a harness and a prison guard and you've got my attention.

I finished Schmidgall's book yearning for more smut, so I turned to the most obvious place—the Internet—where I found what are claimed to be nude pictures of the good gray poet. They're real 19th century daguerreotypes all right, not like those shots you see where Bruce Willis' head is superimposed on some



porn star's body, but we just can't know for certain whether they are of Whitman. I surfed well into the night and fell asleep at my desk. I awoke feeling uneasy, and not just because I was sleeping sitting up.

I realized that I wasn't alone in the room, that I was being visited by a spectral presence. The presence identified himself as a young dockworker who had spent an evening with Whitman in the fall of 1872. His name was Dover—Ben Dover—and, like Whitman, he expressed himself to me in verse, which I transcribe here:

*I thought that he'd be hot to trot
For all his sexy talk,
But then he grabbed me by the hand
And took me for a walk:
Past shipyards, houses, parks and squares,
An all-night pilgrimage,
"I won't get laid tonight," I thought
As we crossed the Brooklyn Bridge—
'Cuz Walt talked and talked and talked and talked
Of his Utopia
And everyone he's ever met;
Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.
I know that he's some famous guy,
So I didn't interrupt,
But all night long all I could think
Is can't this man shut up?
My sentiments exactly, Ben. Talk is cheap.
If you want to hold my attention, you'd better do it with cheap talk.
And that, my friends, is The Gospel According to Marc. ☐*

MARC ACITO can be reached at marcacito@atbi.com. Any information regarding the size of Walt Whitman's member (or your own, for that matter) should be sent there.

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