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**‘The Manly Love of Comrades’:  
Transcendental Metaphysics and Male  
Intimacy in Late Nineteenth-Century British  
Socialist Culture**

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**'The Manly Love of Comrades': Transcendental Metaphysics and Male Intimacy in  
Late Nineteenth-Century British Socialist Culture**

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*'In one word, does Whitman imagine that there is lurking in manly love the stuff of a new spiritual energy the liberation of which would prove to the benefit of society? And if so, is he willing to accept, condone or ignore the physical aspects of this passion?'*<sup>1</sup>

John Addington Symonds, the late nineteenth century poet and advocate of 'male love', posed this question to the 'sexologist' Havelock Ellis in 1893. His concerns reflect that of a highly specific historical encounter between the *fin de siècle* British socialist movement, the metaphysical philosophy of American Transcendentalism (as it is expressed through the poetry of Walt Whitman), and a small number of men seeking a radical new language through which to express marginalised forms of romantic and physical intimacy. At the centre of this tumultuous clash of politics, spirituality and desire was Edward Carpenter, the poet-philosopher and 'most influential' pioneer of male 'sexual freedom', whose role at the epicentre of a certain 'mental atmosphere of late-Victorian socialist England' has earned him recognition within the history of socialism.<sup>2</sup> Such a historiography, however, has not only failed to see how 'socialism' functions as a concept with changing, unstable meanings, but also, how this concept might be mediated as much by personal relationships, love and sexual identity as it was by class, economic interests and abstract philosophical ideals. Until fairly recently, historians have overlooked the immense significance Walt Whitman had for British socialist political culture, and the way in which his poetic language was used by those who wanted to build a new society upon the values of democracy, equality and comradeship. However, I aim to argue that even scholars who have done so continue to make an unjustifiable distinction between public 'politics' and private 'sexuality'. For Ellis and Symonds, as it was for Carpenter and a number of other men, it was 'manly love' itself, and the radically new forms of intimacy that love might entail, that contained the 'spiritual energy' which, if liberated, would work to the betterment of society and the establishment of a socialist utopia. Following cultural approaches to the study of political languages and identities, this essay seeks to, firstly, rethink previous portrayals of Carpenter's socialist message which have unnecessarily separated sexuality from

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<sup>1</sup>J.A. Symonds, *The Letters*, eds. H.M. Schueller, R.L. Peters, 3 vols (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1969) iii, 459.

<sup>2</sup> E. Delavenay, *D.H. Lawrence and Edward Carpenter: A Study in Edwardian Transition* (London, Heinemann, 1971) 1.

politics, and, secondly, contextualise his ideas within a hereto underlooked section of late Victorian radical 'politico-sexual' culture.

The 'new historiography' in the history of British socialism, a response to older Marxist and structuralist perspectives, tends to view 'socialism' as a diverse ferment of intellectual and popular traditions composed of narratives, concepts and identities, rather than a monolithic movement built around class politics and its institutions.<sup>3</sup> Whilst specific historical attention to Carpenter dates back to the late 1970s, these works often fail to contextualise his engagement with socialism within a specific culture surrounding Whitman's poetic narratives, and their attendant metaphysical implications.<sup>4</sup> Mark Bevir, on the other hand, has forcefully argued that Carpenter's articulation of a socialist narrative through the framework of Transcendentalist philosophy might be contextualised within a wider response to the 'Victorian loss of faith', a political environment in which leaders like John Trevor and Thomas Davidson drew upon Christian metaphysics in their various attempts to construct a 'religion of socialism'.<sup>5</sup> As Henry Mead points out, these 'monist' philosophies connected the realisation of the 'immanence' of God (the notion of a divine presence permeating and constituting all matter) with the realisation of a new and harmonious social order.<sup>6</sup> Kristen Harris has highlighted that Carpenter was part of a small but vibrant and enthusiastic culture within British socialism that felt indebted to the democratic idealism of Whitman's poetry, seeing its vision of love, comradeship and democracy as an expression of a divine unity to all creation.<sup>7</sup> The realisation of such a presence was, in the philosophies of these thinkers, conceived of as the means of bringing about a more fraternal and egalitarian society. By envisaging the achievement of socialism as a universal spiritual process rather than an institutional and political one, Carpenter and numerous others across Britain built a radical challenge to the social order around 'an ethical transformation

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<sup>3</sup> M. Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism* (Princeton University Press, 2011) 8; S. Yeo, *The New Views on Cooperation* (London, Routledge, 1988) 1-10.

<sup>4</sup> C. Tsuzuki, *Edward Carpenter 1844–1929: Prophet of Human Fellowship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); S. Pierson, *British Socialists: The Journey from Fantasy to Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> Bevir, *Socialism*, 16-19, 236.

<sup>6</sup> H. Mead, 'Edwardian Intellectuals and Political Religions: A Survey', *Religion Compass*, 4:10, (2010) 645.

<sup>7</sup> K. Harris, *Walt Whitman and British Socialism, The Love of Comrades* (Routledge, 2016) 91.

within their personal lifestyles', relationships with others, and sense of self.<sup>8</sup> In their political visions, 'comradeship' and 'democracy' thus represent a certain spiritual experience and relation between human beings, society and God, rather than a sense of class solidarity or a system of electoral representation.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the power of a discursive and language-based approach to the history of political cultures means that individual concepts can be situated in their relevant 'social ecology', and we, as historians, can avoid imposing abstract, preconceived socio-economic interests on complex and multifaceted popular movements.<sup>10</sup>

One might hope that in a self-conscious effort to recognise the ways in which Victorian 'political religions' fundamentally blurred 'personal and communal goals', historians might have given greater attention to the ways in which love, desire and sexual identity might mediate political narratives and generate new forms of socialist identities, especially in relation to thinkers who spent their lives fighting for the liberation of male sexual love.<sup>11</sup> What Bevir lionises as the 'new historiography' has not highlighted how politico-religious narratives might transcend what older historians saw as a rigid boundary between sexuality and socialist politics. As Jon Lawrence has argued, Bevir's 'striking' lack of attention to personal identity and popular culture means he offers little more than a 'mechanical' explanation of the 'meta-dilemmas' and technical philosophical debates within socialist intellectual culture, ignoring the way those might contribute to 'shifting understandings of self'.<sup>12</sup> Harris, despite her groundbreaking work in highlighting a hereto undiscussed political culture, chooses to focus on the 'broader democratic concerns' of its members. The reception of Whitman by homosexual men belongs, in her eyes, to a separate historiographical tradition, one quite beyond her 'political' scope.<sup>13</sup> However, perhaps the fundamental insight of the scant literature that exists on the topic has been the idea that for many British 'Whitmanites', 'democracy signified not merely an electoral system, but a 'spiritual

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<sup>8</sup> Bevir, *Socialism*, 246; S. Rowbotham, J. Weeks, *Socialism and the New Life, the Personal and Sexual Politics of Edward Carpenter* (Pluto Press 1977) 18; T. Brown, *Edward Carpenter and Late Victorian Radicalism* (London: Frank Cass, 1990) 5.

<sup>9</sup> Mead, *Edwardian*, 644.

<sup>10</sup> Bevir, *Socialism*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Mead, *Edwardian*, 644.

<sup>12</sup> J. Lawrence, 'The Making of British Socialism by Mark Bevir (review).' *Victorian Studies*, 56:2 (2014) 281-282.

<sup>13</sup> Harris, *Walt*, 46.

equilibrium', a way of achieving a state of social *and* personal 'perfection'.<sup>14</sup> Such an all-encompassing notion means that Harris' decision not to include sexuality inevitably limits her analysis of the way in which a specific political narrative proved influential. Conversely, Sheila Rowbotham's in-depth biography of Carpenter seems to go the other way, focusing more on his radical sexual libertinism than his philosophical monism, playing down the idea that these might be inseparably linked.<sup>15</sup> Whilst Ruth Livesey goes furthest in highlighting how Carpenter's 'alternative form of masculinity' offered a basis for a 'socialist utopia of sexually liberated bodies', her focus on his aesthetic and corporeal experiences (his home-made sandals, vegetarianism and penchant for Jaeger cardigans) means she dedicates little space to the influence of Whitman's 'ecstatic idealism'. In this sense, she also fails to depict how Carpenter's monist philosophy offered a basis for a new politico-sexual identity.<sup>16</sup>

Coming from a methodological perspective in which 'narrative forms of language construct political subjectivities as stable and coherent', Lawrence pays more attention to the ways in which popular cultural and personal languages might help shape 'viable forms of social and political identity'.<sup>17</sup> I will argue that this is especially important in understanding the ways in which universalising creeds such as Transcendentalism shape identities through much more than what is typically considered 'political'. Tying political and sexual identity-making together, Ken Plummer has emphasised the concept of 'intimate citizenship', a way of understanding how sexualities (conceived of through the more versatile concept of 'intimate relations') have a place in society, politics and culture.<sup>18</sup> Seeking to uproot the distinction between private and public spheres, narratives of intimate citizenship are processes through which practitioners of certain forms of intimacy might come to negotiate their place in the 'workings of political and moral life'. By 'imagining' and 'articulating' narratives which construct 'sexual cultures' and 'identities' in relation to wider ideas about 'public citizenship', political actors make a case for new forms of intimacy to 'belong and participate in a group'.<sup>19</sup> In

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<sup>14</sup> Harris, *Walt*, 4; Mead, 'Edwardian', 645.

<sup>15</sup> S. Rowbotham, *Edward Carpenter: A Life of Liberty and Love* (London, Verso: 2009)..

<sup>16</sup> R. Livesey, *Socialism, Sex and the Culture of Aestheticism in Britain 1800 - 1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 102.

<sup>17</sup> J. Lawrence, M. Taylor, *Party State and Society: Electoral Behaviour in Britain Since 1820* (London: Solar Press, 1997) 19.

<sup>18</sup> K. Plummer, *Intimate Citizenship: Private Discussions and Public Dialogues* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003) 67-83.

<sup>19</sup> Plummer, *Intimate*, 80-3.



relation to these methodological ideas, I will analyse the ways in which socialists used Transcendental metaphysics and Whitman's poetic language to produce a *new* sexual and political identity, carving out a place for intimate relations between men within a wider radical socialist discourse.

Whilst I will first demarcate the conceptual relationships that structure this identity through a close textual reading of Edward Carpenter's philosophy and poetry, I will then move to contextualise his narrative of intimate citizenship within a broader political milieu. Correspondences between these individuals and the political tracts they produced highlight that 'socialism' would not only *include* but be *predicated upon* forms of male intimacy that were loving, affectionate, and even explicitly sexual. In doing so, I aim to not only overturn this historiographical tendency to separate public politics from personal sexuality, but also, to highlight how nineteenth-century ideas could be used to challenge a heteronormative political culture, and construct a sexual identity that was inherently antithetical to capitalism and its patterns of exploitation and oppression.

### **Divine Love and Sexual Desire in Edward Carpenter's Narrative of Intimate Citizenship.**

Whitman's magnum opus *Leaves of Grass*, as heavily implied in its 1855 preface, is in large part a conscious response to the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the New England Unitarian whose metaphysical essays became the basis of a philosophical movement known as 'Transcendentalism'.<sup>20</sup> Bevir highlights that two aspects of Emerson's philosophy specifically distinguished the British socialist culture surrounding Whitman, a relationship which I must briefly summarise. The first aspect, which I will refer to as 'Ethical Intuitionism', suggests that because God is one single substance, immanent throughout all of creation, then 'personal intuitions have moral authority'. Our deepest and most intuitively felt emotional impulses reflect a divine presence, an idea which philosophers who emphasise our speculative, rational and empirical faculties fail to take seriously.<sup>21</sup> The second is what Emerson calls the 'Over-Soul', the notion that, because God permeates the universe, and that he can be

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<sup>20</sup> R.W. French, 'Preface to 1855 *Leaves of Grass*', in R. LeMaster, D. Kummings (eds.) *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 307.

<sup>21</sup> Bevir, *Socialism*, 238.

known intuitively, what an individual feels deep inside themselves is a 'Divine Mind', the 'currents of the Universal Being', a force that unifies all of creation.<sup>22</sup> Emerson used these ideas to portray a transcendental spiritual experience, whereby an individual realises the unity of humanity and the cosmos through following his intuitive sense of what is right and wrong.<sup>23</sup> Whitman, however, tied these ideas to the political realities of American democracy. His poetry idealises democracy as a transcendental 'loving comradeship', envisaging the cooperation of free individuals in America as an ecstatic realisation of the Divine mind and a spiritual liberation of one's soul, the 'ultimate source of power and knowledge'.<sup>24</sup> Harris and Bevir highlight that Whitman's way of turning Emersonian abstract metaphysics into something far more tangible and political gave Carpenter the inspiration to write his own philosophy and poetry for the working class labour movement in Sheffield, the basis of which would be Whitman's ideal of 'loving comradeship'.<sup>25</sup> However, I will argue that Carpenter also found in Whitman's Emersonian metaphysics a profoundly personal message about his own intimate desires for other men.

Carpenter's encounter with Whitman catalysed a visceral transformation in his sense of self. Recalling with vivid detail the summer of 1868, when, at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, a fellow student handed him the 'little blue book' that 'produced a profound change' in his life and thought, Carpenter notes that 'what made [him] cling to [*Leaves of Grass*] from the beginning was largely the poems which celebrate comradeship'.<sup>26</sup> Whilst familiar with Emerson, indeed he believed that Emerson gave Whitman the 'high-soaring vision' that 'set his kosmos in order', Carpenter emphasises that it was Whitman's poetic vision of 'comradely love' that provided him with a kind of thinking he had never before encountered.<sup>27</sup> These ideas evidently reverberated deep within his psyche: 'that thought, so near and personal to me, I had never before seen or heard fairly expressed'.<sup>28</sup> Carpenter's epiphanic experience reading Whitman convinced him that 'continued existence in his surroundings', the stiflingly formal atmosphere of

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<sup>22</sup> Bevir, *Socialism*, 237.

<sup>23</sup> L. Gougeon, 'Emerson, Whitman, Eros', *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, 23:3 (2006) 128.

<sup>24</sup> French, *Preface*, 307.

<sup>25</sup> Harris, *Walt*, 95 Bevir, *Socialism*, 249.

<sup>26</sup> E. Carpenter, *My Days and Dreams* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1916) 65.

<sup>27</sup> E. Carpenter, *Days With Walt Whitman: With Some Notes on his Life Work* (London: George Allen, 1906) 163.

<sup>28</sup> Carpenter, *My*, 28, 65.

Cambridge, with its 'endless book learning' and merely 'ornamental cleverness', 'was becoming impossible'.<sup>29</sup> After much 'tension and dislocation' he took a leave of absence in Italy, where he experienced a 'change in mental attitude', becoming overwhelmed with a deep feeling that he 'really had something to write', something more relevant to 'actual life' than the 'cheap philosophising' he was accustomed to in the 'vacuity and falsity' of Trinity Hall.<sup>30</sup> Clearly, Carpenter found in Whitman's comradeship not simply a philosophical or political concept but something profoundly personal and deeply resonating. From his earliest and hereto completely overlooked essay manuscripts, I will show that Carpenter, in this period, quickly recognised ideas in Whitman's poetry that would allow him to construct a relationship between intimate social cooperation and metaphysical truth through intuitively realising the Divine mind.

In a handwritten essay from 1870, two years after his first reading of *Leaves*, Carpenter defines 'Truth' not as an 'empirical' or 'logical' concept, one involving the establishment of factual evidence to prove or disprove the existence of a certain state of affairs, rather, as a case of that unexplainable inner feeling that Emerson saw as the 'currents of the Universal Being'.<sup>31</sup> Directly contrasting the conformity of statement to fact with a more personal and intuitive ethical 'Truth', Carpenter argues that whilst 'veracity' is a simple 'affair of words', 'sincerity' involves being true to one's inner self, honestly following that which is 'hidden in the secret sepulchre of the heart'.<sup>32</sup> If a 'man intent on murder' asked you the path his victim took, Carpenter explains, 'you would have no hesitation in picking the wrong path'. Such an impulsive moral regard for human life reflects the idea that 'Truth' is established through human relations, and 'you cannot enter into human relations with a man who has violated the first principle of humanity ... just as you cannot establish relations of truth or falsehood with a wolf'.<sup>33</sup> Thus, just as Emerson saw each man's intuitive moral sensibilities as simultaneously in accordance with every other man's, for they were all expressions of the same 'Divine mind', so too did Carpenter see this kind of 'Truth' as an inherently social concept, one expressed through 'human relations' and the incommunicable 'sympathies and

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<sup>29</sup> Carpenter, *My*, 66.

<sup>30</sup> Carpenter, *My*, 70-72.

<sup>31</sup> Sheffield Archives, Edward Carpenter Collection (hereafter: SA): Carpenter/MSS/6, E. Carpenter, 'Truth', 1870, 1-2.

<sup>32</sup> SA: Carpenter/MSS/6, Carpenter, 'Truth', 11.

<sup>33</sup> SA: Carpenter/MSS/6, Carpenter, 'Truth', 13.

affections' that make those relations possible. As he states: 'the question [of Truth] would not arise in an isolated man, a Robinson Crusoe', rather, 'it enters into our lives only because we are social'.<sup>34</sup> By considering intuitive ethical decisions as not simply morally correct, but 'True', and by construing this 'Truthhood' as a universal feeling, inseparable from the association of individual human beings, Carpenter hints at a wider metaphysical relationship between deep and sincere human emotion, social cooperation, and the fundamental nature of reality.

In an almost exact replication of Emerson's thought, Carpenter's early metaphysical essays find a 'yearning impulse' towards 'personal union with God' within everything from the 'polyp on the floor of the sea' to the 'lonely rock on the mountain top' to, most importantly, the deepest human feeling.<sup>35</sup> These impulses are all reflections of the 'Divine mind' that binds 'the movement of our thoughts' to the 'movement of of the stars and the planets'.<sup>36</sup> Whilst the 'pervasive monism of the age' influenced socialists as far and wide as the Labour Church, Social Democratic Federation and Independent Labour Party (ILP), few political intellectuals emphasised individual *intuition* as a means to access a Divine mind that spanned all creation.<sup>37</sup> Carpenter's unique logic allowed him to continually interchange intensely personal feelings with spiritually transcendent characteristics. For example, the 'intense realisation of the unity and common life of all races and creatures' manifests itself in individuals through 'forms and ranges of being', states of 'consciousness' such as 'Love and Sympathy'.<sup>38</sup> Love, here, signifies both an emotional mindset and a relation between all humanity and God. By intuitively responding to our 'inner unity with other human beings', we realise that we have our 'home in these other bodies as well as our own', bringing a sensation of intimate loving empathy and understanding.<sup>39</sup> Most significantly, then, is that love is not only a medium to 'enter into the harmony of others', but that it 'constitutes our reality', it reflects God himself.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> SA: Carpenter/MSS/6, Carpenter, 'Truth', 7.

<sup>35</sup> SA: Carpenter/MSS/4, E. Carpenter, 'The Divine Mind and Other Minds', 1870, 49.

<sup>36</sup> SA: Carpenter/MSS/5, E. Carpenter, 'Organisation and Consciousness', 1870, 5-6.

<sup>37</sup> Mead, 'Edwardian', 651; Yeo, *New*, 1-10.

<sup>38</sup> E. Carpenter, *The Art of Creation*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1921), 228.

<sup>39</sup> Carpenter, *Art*, 231-2, 91.

<sup>40</sup> Carpenter, *Art*, 91.

The significant political implication of Carpenter's metaphysics is that our 'inner selves' not only possess a *capability* for affinity and cooperation with others, but that if we are really free and true to our deepest emotions, those capacities would *inevitably* be realised. As he says, 'our only rational life is therefore in the fulfilment of our individuality, to recognise the Divine mind; and to know our fellow minds'.<sup>41</sup> Our intuitive affinity for humanity is 'Divine cosmic thought' itself, imposing itself upon us with 'an overwhelming force'. 'Antagonism' with others 'is a kind of pain', we innately crave the 'vital warmth' of our human brethren, because it is through them that we find God.<sup>42</sup> When free to do so, the loving empathy we intuitively sense will become realised in the 'structure of society'.<sup>43</sup> A more intimate and sympathetic community will bring 'great changes in the institutions and political forms', harkening the arrival of 'genuine democracy and socialism'.<sup>44</sup> The spiritual realisation of mankind's inherent unity is therefore a process that ties our innate compassion for others to a radical political programme. By construing emotions compatible with harmonious social relations as indicative of a divine presence, Carpenter teleologically concludes that it is 'root emotion and feelings from which modern democracy springs'.<sup>45</sup>

Carpenter's popular political poetry, *Towards Democracy*, reads much like Whitman's *Leaves*. Both are collections of lengthy, free verse monologues, using evocative phrases and transformative imagery to portray the coming together of humanity in democratic free association as a 'divine comradeship', built on a love, harmony, and understanding.<sup>46</sup> So too, does *Democracy* replicate what numerous critics have identified as the obvious homoerotic themes in Whitman's 'Calamus' sequence. In 'Calamus' Whitman unmistakably portrays loving comradeship in erotic, carnal, and often phallic terms, as a 'manly love of comrades'.<sup>47</sup> In *Democracy*, Carpenter simultaneously evokes 'the enfranchisement of the body' with the liberation of labour from capitalism; calling for both 'lovers of all handicrafts and of labour' and 'passionate

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<sup>41</sup> SA: Carpenter/MSS/4, Carpenter, 'Divine', 49.

<sup>42</sup> SA: Carpenter/MSS/4, Carpenter, 'Divine', 10-13.

<sup>43</sup> Carpenter, *Art*, 228, 232.

<sup>44</sup> Carpenter, *Art*, 228.

<sup>45</sup> E. Carpenter, *An Angel's Wings* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1898) 199.

<sup>46</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York, Redfield, 1871) 51; E. Carpenter, *Towards Democracy* (Manchester: Labour Press, 1896) 29.

<sup>47</sup> H. Aspiz, 'Sexuality and the Language of Transcendence', *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, 5:2, (1987) 1-7; Gougeon, 'Emerson', 126-146.

lovers of your own sex' to 'arise!'.<sup>48</sup> Fleshy and physical metaphors complement more abstract spiritual ones, indicating that the metaphysical realisation of socialism through love is a corporeal experience: 'sex still goes first, and hands eyes mouth brain follow; from the midst of belly and thighs radiate the knowledge of self, religion and immortality'.<sup>49</sup> The empowerment of labour, and the espousal of 'poverty' and 'hardship', occurs when 'the Godlike hand comes forth, sacred with the kisses of men', men who 'are amarous for the naked stinging touch of the world' and who 'wrestle limb to limb with the wind and the waves'.<sup>50</sup> The 'soul's slow disentanglement' from crude individuality towards social cooperation is often portrayed physically, and his idealisation of working people and their spiritual transcendence to political freedom manifests itself through vivid, surreal and heavily sexualised encounters. For example, Carpenter depicts the English working classes as 'thousands of men', 'naked breasted' and 'well equipped in muscle', 'loving without shame'.<sup>51</sup> Imagining himself being 'taken away by Death', 'lead through the Universe' and becoming one with 'the silver rays of the moon' and 'the midnight sea', he foresees that: 'the ploughman shall turn me up' among 'the roots of the twitch in the sweet smelling furrow', 'the potter shall mould me, running his fingers along my whirling edge', and the 'bricklayer shall lay me, and tap me into place'.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, the 'woodman', liberated from his monotonous toil, 'downs his felling axe' at the 'calls of life': 'sexual lusts and cravings', 'sweet fever for other flesh', and 'bitter-sweet passion', all 'falling swooned and breathless on beloved lips and limbs'.<sup>53</sup> The sexual and spiritual empowerment of the working class takes on the form of an 'immortal passion', it dashes 'against the barriers of the self' and 'ever-widens the bounds' of the soul.<sup>54</sup> In this political narrative, sexual intimacy is therefore a way of widening the bounds of the conscious self to all mankind and to the universe, a way of becoming a part of the Divine mind. Indeed, as I have established, Carpenter's metaphysics is entirely based around the inseparability of deep human emotion, of which sexual desire is undeniably a constituent part, from the transcendent experience of finding harmony in others.

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<sup>48</sup> Carpenter, *Towards*, 29.

<sup>49</sup> Carpenter, *Towards*, 18.

<sup>50</sup> Carpenter, *Towards*, 59.

<sup>51</sup> Carpenter, *Towards*, 72, 267.

<sup>52</sup> Carpenter, *Towards*, 73.

<sup>53</sup> Carpenter, *Towards*, 226.

<sup>54</sup> Carpenter, *Towards*, 252.

*Towards Democracy* was Carpenter's most famous work. It was distributed among a 'provincial socialist network' and was eulogised by leaders from all corners of Britain's socialist culture, from the utopian William Morris to staunch Marxist Henry Hyndman.<sup>55</sup> However, in *Democracy* the implications of this new political intimacy for sexuality specifically are fundamentally ambiguous. The sensual element is buttressed by a multitude of other more conventionally political and spiritual themes, often articulated with very little obvious relation to physical concerns. Furthermore, whilst implicitly homoerotic, *Democracy* certainly does not explicitly advocate male physical intimacy. Returning to Carpenter's considerably less popular metaphysical tracts, however, it is clear that his ideal of love is conceptually broad enough to include such desires. In an 1894 essay, Carpenter points out that 'Sex-Love' is one of the deepest and most intuitively felt human emotions, it 'enters ... more into consciousness than hunger'.<sup>56</sup> So too is it a universal phenomenon, with a 'titanic' force that, like God, 'pervades and suffuses all Nature'.<sup>57</sup> This ubiquitous energy is consequently just as spiritually significant as divine love, indeed sex is 'Love's allegory in the physical world'.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, because sexual yearnings involve the abandonment and 'tearing asunder of the self' in the pursuit of another being, it naturally opens the gateway to the recognition of the Divine mind and our inherent unity with others. Therefore, in order to establish 'perfect intimacy' between all humanity, 'sexual and bodily intimacy', even if it is not 'the object for which they come together', must be accepted and allowed to flourish. Its denial would be a 'monstrous separation' of God where Carpenter believed he existed, in our bodies and in our souls, 'barring any real sense of repose and affiance' that comes with embracing a divine presence through intuitive love.<sup>59</sup>

However, Carpenter points out that despite its 'deep and universal' significance, the expression of sexual love is far from free.<sup>60</sup> The subjection of sexual relations to 'legal conventions' forces individuals to suppress their inner feelings for those they yearn for, whilst 'our literature, our customs, and our laws' all condemn promiscuous behaviour as salacious, vulgar and impure.<sup>61</sup> Whilst Carpenter's metaphysics demands

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<sup>55</sup> Bevir, *Socialism*, 246; Brown, *Carpenter*, 20.

<sup>56</sup> E. Carpenter, *Sex-Love and its Place in a Free Society* (Manchester: Labour Press, 1894) 4.

<sup>57</sup> Carpenter, *Sex-Love*, 5-7

<sup>58</sup> Carpenter, *Sex-Love*, 26.

<sup>59</sup> Carpenter, *Sex-Love* 14-15.

<sup>60</sup> Carpenter, *Sex-Love*, 4.

<sup>61</sup> Carpenter, *Sex-Love*, 19.

that our emotional intuition be followed, society regulates our bodily freedom in relation to our most intense and potent desires, hindering our comprehension of the Divine mind and the subsequent power of its binding love.<sup>62</sup> In the politically charged atmosphere surrounding late-Victorian sexual legislation, one of the most significant 'legal conventions' was Henry Labouchere's 1885 amendment to the Criminal Law Act; the use of which had, among other things, 'criminalized very nearly all male homoerotic activity and speech', ramping up the prosecution of high-profile 'sodomites' like Oscar Wilde in the years immediately leading up to the publication of *Sex-Love*.<sup>63</sup> Most importantly, however, is that regardless of what laws Carpenter was specifically referring to, the struggle to liberate the free expression of sexual love from *any* legal and social bondage becomes inseparable from the wider political struggle for a free society. Carpenter makes clear that 'the inner laws of the sex-passion, of love, and of all human relationships' must be accepted and allowed to flourish, 'since they alone are the powers which can create and uphold a rational society'. Social and sexual struggle are really two sides of the same coin, for 'real love is only possible in the freedom of society; and freedom is only possible when love is a reality'.<sup>64</sup> It is significant, then, that we do not reduce Carpenter's message to a *purely* sexual one. Chiefly, he was concerned with the nature of God himself, of which sex and love are only expressions. As he states: 'perhaps the corporeal amatory instinct and the ethereal human yearning for personal union are really ... one thing with diverse forms'. Sex, love, affection and sympathy are all manifestations of the same 'all-penetrating subtle influence of spiritual love'.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, it is precisely Carpenter's Transcendental metaphysics that binds social and sexual liberation. If intuitive intimacy and affection are the basis of a new utopia, one that will come about through radically reforming the way human beings relate to each other, Carpenter makes clear that the form of this emotion not only *can* be, but *has* to be, inclusive of far more than just heterosexual love or homosocial friendship. Carpenter's metaphysics laid the conceptual groundwork to not only liberate marginalised forms of intimacy but make their liberation an absolutely integral aspect of his political worldview.

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<sup>62</sup> Carpenter, *Sex-Love*, 14-16.

<sup>63</sup> R. Jackson, 'The Open Closet in Dubliners: James Duffy's Painful Case', *James Joyce Quarterly* 50:1 (2012), 284.

<sup>64</sup> E. Carpenter, *Love's Coming of Age* (London: Mitchell Kennerly, 1911) 148.

<sup>65</sup> Carpenter, *Sex-Love*, 8.



In his most open and explicit defence of male love, a text often considered in the abstract, divorced from this wider metaphysical perspective, Carpenter suggested that it was the 'Uranian' who will be the vanguard of this new loving society.<sup>66</sup> It is the Uranian, Carpenter's term for men who love other men, and his inherent capacity for 'sincere affection', that most perfectly realises comradely love. Whereas Uranian love was comparatively rare, 'the germs of it are', for reasons outlined above, 'quite universal'.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, 'the comradeship on which Whitman founds a large portion of his message may become a general enthusiasm', whilst the Uranians would be its 'pioneers and advance guard'. Such a revolution in human relations would coalesce in a new and harmonious socialist order, a 'great movement' which will transform society by 'substituting the bond of personal affection and compassion for the monetary, legal and other external ties' that sustain capitalism.<sup>68</sup> Here, 'True Democracy' rests not on class struggle or violent political revolution, but on 'a sentiment which easily passes the bounds of class and caste', uniting humanity in 'closest affection'. Of course, whilst all love does not see hierarchies and prejudices, for 'Eros is a great leveller', Carpenter had good reasons to believe that Uranian love specifically could reform civilisation.<sup>69</sup> He observed that 'Uranians of good position', middle class men such as himself, are often 'drawn to rougher types', attracted to the rugged beauty of 'manual workers'. Albeit 'not publicly acknowledged', these relationships evidently 'have a decided influence on social institutions, customs and political tendencies'.<sup>70</sup> Marginalised from social normality already, Carpenter saw Uranians as already quite free from the shackles that status, class and financial circumstance placed on the free expression of 'passion' and 'comrade-like equality' between lovers.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, Uranian sexual union could be the perfect prototype to catalyze and invigorate the destruction of capitalism and its class system. Carpenter himself was involved with the Sheffield working class not only politically, organising socialist societies and distributing strike propaganda, but also romantically and sexually. His relationships with working men like George Merrill involved liberating a new kind of love that gave 'expression and utterance' to his 'most

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<sup>66</sup> J.S. Quinn, C. Brooke, 'Affection in Education: Edward Carpenter, John Addington Symonds and the politics of Greek love', *Oxford Review of Education*, (October 2011) 37:5, 683;

<sup>67</sup> E. Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex: A Study of Some Transitional Types Between Men and Women* (London: Unwin and Allen, 1921) 114-117.

<sup>68</sup> Carpenter, *Intermediate*, 116-117.

<sup>69</sup> Carpenter, *Intermediate*, 114-115

<sup>70</sup> Carpenter, *Intermediate*, 115.

<sup>71</sup> Carpenter, *Intermediate*, 16-19.

intimate self', the very same kind of love that structures 'our union with Nature and humanity'.<sup>72</sup> By conceiving the 'Free Society' as one where human relations 'may at last take place according to their own inner and true laws', Carpenter found a central place for male sexual intimacy in his political worldview.<sup>73</sup> Whilst Oscar Wilde picked oakum in Reading Gaol, a punishment fitting for those the state brandished as 'sodomites', Carpenter dared to speak a new name to that love Wilde knew, putting forward a philosophical case for the legitimisation of male intimacy within a radically new political narrative.

In constructing a politico-sexual subject, Carpenter utilised a philosophy that allowed him to be both ambiguous and specific at different times as to the nature and implication of socialist comradeship. He used Transcendental ideas about the Divine mind to conflate the realisation of freedom and democracy with loving brotherhood and harmony. However, because the form of this love is ultimately determined by the individual and their intuitively held desires, Carpenter opened up a space to include forms of intimacy that had been marginalised and oppressed. The language which Carpenter used to describe comradeship, in his most widely read political treatise, echoes Whitman's homoeroticism in *Leaves*, strongly implying that metaphysical truth can be found 'by the manly love of comrades'.<sup>74</sup> Therefore, Whitman provided Carpenter with a language and conceptual framework through which to articulate a radically new intimate relationship between men, an ideal of 'loving comradeship', one that plays a fundamental role in his utopian vision of an ideal civil society.

### **'Spreading the Gospel': Contextualising a Political and Sexual Identity within British Socialist Culture.**

Carpenter's narrative of intimate citizenship can be situated within a wider political culture that connected intimate relations between men to radical social change through organising around the figure of Walt Whitman. Transcendental metaphysics were used to construct a politico-sexual identity by a number of socialists who fraternised with Carpenter and were captivated by his lesser known sexual tracts. Whilst my analysis is

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<sup>72</sup> Carpenter, *My*, 166, 303.

<sup>73</sup> Carpenter, *Love's*, 143.

<sup>74</sup> Whitman, *Leaves*, 127.

confined to a relatively small number of men, my aim is to highlight that these intimate conceptions of what 'comradeship' and 'democracy' might mean could survive and thrive within a broader political environment, contributing to an evolving debate over what socialism was and who it was for. Whilst my last section relied on specific texts in order to evince Carpenter's narrative of intimate citizenship, this section will rely more on correspondence and accessible propaganda writings from the late 1880s and '90s. To this end, I aim to explain how this narrative of intimate citizenship could produce political identities that men found invigorating and liberating, a medium through which to mobilise support for a sexually inclusive socialist politics.

Carpenter's correspondence with his friends in Bolton suggest that not only was Whitman's spiritual conception of loving comradeship highly influential in the North of England, but that it gave men a new language through which to express intimacy and affection, men who really believed they were on the verge of establishing a new kind of society. This loose affiliation of active socialists in the Lancashire mill town were dedicated to spreading Whitman's 'gospel', as they put it, to the working people of their increasingly industrial locale.<sup>75</sup> As Michael Robertson noted in his book concerning the oddly pious devotion of Whitman's transatlantic followers, the college expressed an immense religiosity and an almost cult-like fanaticism, heralding the realisation of 'comradeship' as the literal embrace of divine truth.<sup>76</sup> Harris has shown how the so-called 'Eagle Street College', or 'Church', were highly active in their community, disseminating socialist propaganda, taking part in socialist discourse and encouraging 'group-reading' sessions of *Leaves* to introduce poorly educated workers to the spiritual wonders of comradesly love.<sup>77</sup> Whilst familiar with Whitman and Emerson before they first met Carpenter, Carpenter gave to the college a more sophisticated metaphysical insight into the significance of Whitman's ideas.<sup>78</sup> Members James William Wallace and Dr. John Johnston describe meeting with Carpenter for the first time in 1891, whereupon they came to view him as 'the most important of contemporary English poets' for his 'penetrating and luminous' interpretation of *Leaves*, opening their eyes to

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<sup>75</sup> P. Salvesson, *Loving Comrades: Lancashire's Links to Walt Whitman* (Bolton: Bolton Worker's Education Association, 1986).

<sup>76</sup> M. Robertson, *Worshipping Walt: The Whitman Disciples* (Princeton University Press, 2010), 40.

<sup>77</sup> Harris, *Walt*, 49-55

<sup>78</sup> J.W. Wallace, J. Johnston, *Visits to Walt Whitman in 1890-91* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1918) 26, 50, 67.

the 'serene wing' and 'eternal silences' of Whitman.<sup>79</sup> Johnston kept a specific inventory of all the works he owned that had been written by Carpenter, and the two became particularly close, holidaying together in Cadiz in the early spring of 1892.<sup>80</sup>

Intriguingly, Wallace had an extremely similar Transcendental conception of loving comradeship and its role in achieving socialism to that which Carpenter had. Imagining his role as the 'focaliser and distributor' of 'Divine Love', Wallace saw it as his duty to make permanent 'Walt Whitman's place as [English Socialism's] aspiring prophet', to enlighten the nation to an 'awakened spiritual nature'.<sup>81</sup> His own propaganda writings read very similar to Carpenter's, being virulent in their critique of capitalism and conceiving its antithesis, 'comradeship', as an intimate moral affinity between individuals participating in a wider divine consciousness. Attacking 'competition', Wallace argued that 'the ruling principle in business' was 'selfishness and greed'.<sup>82</sup> Capitalism's 'low materialism' encouraged 'the most superficial pleasures'.<sup>83</sup> But in the midst of this spiritually moribund system, Wallace believed, 'a gradual awakening of the democratic spirit amongst the masses of the people is occurring', a movement for the 'establishment of socialism' based on Whitman's 'Religion' of 'Democracy'. Like Carpenter's, Wallace's political utopia is predicated upon man realising the 'divine nature of the central self'.<sup>84</sup> This inner self obeys only 'intuitions', it 'refuses to accept opinions, advice, laws and conventions' when those institutions conflict with 'inner guidance'.<sup>85</sup> It is precisely this 'consciousness' that he saw as 'the root of Democracy'. It stirs within man a deep 'sympathy and affection', the 'basic elements of all metaphysics'. For 'when we sympathise with and love others', we understand that their 'joy and their sorrows are our own also', uniting us with humanity through 'the recognition of the same central self in

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<sup>79</sup> Wallace, Johnston *Visits*, 26.

<sup>80</sup> University of Manchester, John Rylands Library, Papers Relating to J.W. Wallace and the Bolton Whitman Fellowship (hereafter: UML): GB/133/Eng/1186/12/3, J. Johnston, 'Exercise Book', n.d; UML: GB/133/Eng/1186/1/5/2; E. Carpenter, 'Picture Postcard', 26 Mar. 1903; UML: GB/133/Eng/1186/2/8, J.W. Wallace to E. Austin, 22 Sept. 1921.

<sup>81</sup> Bolton Central Library, Whitman Collection (hereafter BCL): ZWN/6/1/95: J.W. Wallace to H. Traubel, 15 Jan. 1893.

<sup>82</sup> J.W. Wallace, *Walt Whitman and the World Crisis* (Manchester: Labour Press, 1920) 1.

<sup>83</sup> Wallace, *Walt*, 1-2.

<sup>84</sup> Wallace, *Walt*, 9.

<sup>85</sup> Wallace, *Walt*, 12-13.

others'.<sup>86</sup> 'The essence of our Socialism', Wallace preached to members of the ILP, 'is universal sympathy and love'.<sup>87</sup>

As Carpenter predicted, the doctrine of universal sympathy and love had radical implications for intimacy in Bolton. Robertson has uncritically noted that Wallace and Johnston embodied a 'model of male affection' that was 'unusual for men of the time'.<sup>88</sup> Their intense and rhapsodic correspondences with each other and to friends were adorned with declarations of love and adulation, littered with tender wishes of 'loving comradeship' and 'heartfelt affection', most interestingly in non-political quotidian contexts.<sup>89</sup> Letters from American literary critic Horace Traubel describe Wallace 'as close and as necessary ... as the beat of [his] heart', a heart which 'cries out for [Wallace] in all the languages of Earth and more besides' as he yearns for 'a single touch of [Wallace's] palm'.<sup>90</sup> For several months between 1893 and '94 Wallace and Traubel wrote to each other almost daily in this endearingly romantic style.<sup>91</sup> The group also paid constant homage the physical qualities of men whom they admired, particularly Walt Whitman himself. As Johnston confessed to his idol: 'It is one of the desires of my life to look upon your venerable face in the flesh, and to be taken by the hand of my loving Comrade'.<sup>92</sup> In Wallace and Johnston's recollections of their 'pilgrimage' to Camden to visit their 'prophet', it is striking how the pair were infatuated with his 'robust manliness', 'magnificent proportions' and 'shining hair' (a lock of which Johnston managed to obtain as a 'present'). They fell in love with the 'irresistible magnetism of his sweet aromatic presence' producing 'an attraction which positively astonished' them.<sup>93</sup> In Camden they discussed everything from 'heroic and manly' American boys bathing in the Delaware river to the work of John Addington Symonds, whose exploration of 'masculine and impassioned' love in Dante's *Inferno* Johnston gave to Whitman as a gift.<sup>94</sup> Certainly, Johnston was 'intensely fascinated' with 'sexual

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<sup>86</sup> Wallace, *Walt*, 14.

<sup>87</sup> BCL: ZWN/6/2/23, J.W. Wallace, 'Lecture Notes', 26 May 1894.

<sup>88</sup> Robertson, *Worshipping*, 39.

<sup>89</sup> UML: GB/133/Eng/1186/2/4/1 J.W. Wallace to J. Johnston, 3 May 1891; Symonds, *Letters*, 808.

<sup>90</sup> UML: GB/133/Eng/1186/1/2/10: H. Traubel to J.W. Wallace, 21 Aug. 1919.

<sup>91</sup> Traubel's half of this voluminous correspondence is held at BCL: ZWN/5/1.

<sup>92</sup> 'J. Johnston to W. Whitman', 17 May 1886, *The Walt Whitman Archive*

<<https://whitmanarchive.org/biography/correspondence/tei/loc.02438.html>> [accessed 20/04/2019].

<sup>93</sup> Wallace, Johnston, *Visits*, 33, 262.

<sup>94</sup> Wallace, *Walt*, 43; Symonds, *Letters*,

inversion', despite crossing out his expression of such an interest in his diary.<sup>95</sup> Describing an instance in which a young American composer named Phillip Dalmas threw his arms around him and kissed him, Johnston was struck by a 'strange and indescribable feeling', an 'inexpressible tenderness and affection', a 'universal sympathy'.<sup>96</sup> Evidently, Bolton socialists felt that the Transcendental language of Whitman's comradeship could be equally used to describe a political challenge to capitalism as it could the emotional energy of a passionate kiss between two men, walking in the Lancashire fields on a warm summer day.

For Symonds, this affectionate intimacy was an expression of what he called 'Whitmanly friendship', the ideals of loving comradeship that *Leaves* advocated and described.<sup>97</sup> What Symonds found so impressive and admirable about the activities of Bolton socialists was that they seemed completely 'immersed in a definite atmosphere of friendship, essential kindness and brotherly benevolence'.<sup>98</sup> Praising Wallace, he explained that their behaviour clearly harkened a 'luminous ideal of a new chivalry based on brotherhood and manly affection'.<sup>99</sup> One of Traubel's probable lovers, Gustave Wiskell, quite similarly suggested that Whitman's profound and invigorating language of 'self-primacy' might encourage men to explore 'femininity' and 'emotive love', and that his friends in Bolton had realised these ideals.<sup>100</sup> Of course, as they all believed, it was these endearing relations were the very thing that would help 'the modern world [become to be] lead by human brotherhood and by spirituality'.<sup>101</sup> Symonds was completely self aware of this fact, noting that the 'best outcome of Whitman's teaching' is 'this creation of Comradeship', those 'sensitive pulsations of emotion, noble in its quality, between men so far apart'.<sup>102</sup> Clearly, the new language that Whitman gave these men was as radically political and socially relevant as it was a means to express privately intimate affections.

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<sup>95</sup> Salvesson, *Lancashire*, 5.

<sup>96</sup> BCL: ZWO/1/1/28, 'Johnston's Diaries', 23 July 1894.

<sup>97</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 543.

<sup>98</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 793.

<sup>99</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 542-3.

<sup>100</sup> BCL: ZWN/1/4/8, G. Wiskell, 'Self-Primacy in Whitman', 31 May 1897.

<sup>101</sup> Symonds, *Letters*,

<sup>102</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 385; Symonds, *Letters*, 666.

Like the Bolton group, Symonds was already infatuated with Whitman before he met Carpenter, for, coincidentally, he too had heard lines from *Leaves* emerge passionately from the lips of his male lover in the dormitory rooms of Trinity College, Cambridge, some ten years before Carpenter had almost the exact same experience at Trinity Hall.<sup>103</sup> Pencil-scrawled notes in his copy of *Leaves* discuss the ‘most original and important part’ of Whitman’s ‘prophecy’ in Calamus; the ‘volcanic force’ of ‘passionate ecstasy’, ‘adhesiveness’ and the ‘love of comrades’ in encouraging ‘the interaction of class with class ... through bonds of friendship’.<sup>104</sup> Copied out in the back pages are excerpts from Emerson’s seminal metaphysical essay ‘Nature’.<sup>105</sup> Despite his familiarity with Whitman and Transcendental philosophy, in *Towards Democracy* Symonds found by far ‘the best interpretation of Whitman’s spirit, and he ‘read it with sustained interest’ throughout his life.<sup>106</sup> Symonds believed that Carpenter offered ‘certainly the most important contribution which has yet been made to the diffusion of Whitman’s philosophy of life’, even going so far as to call his work a basis for ‘the new religion’. Furthermore, Symonds’ made clear that Carpenter did not simply ‘echo’ Whitman, but ‘has given [Whitman] a thoroughly personal ... and if I may so put it, feminine, interpretation towards the leading ideas’.<sup>107</sup> The parts where Symonds ‘most intensely accepts’ Carpenter’s message are the stanzas in which he talks about the relationship between the middle and working classes through transcendent, manly affection. He especially admired the poem ‘In the Drawing Rooms’ where Carpenter contrasts the ‘endlessly complacent faces’ of the bourgeois salon with the firm gaze of a ‘grimy and oil-besmeared’ railway stoker, whose eyes meeting his in a fleeting moment of romance expressed the moon, the sun, and all of ‘Nature standing supreme’.<sup>108</sup>

In his memoirs, Symonds described, in very similar terms to Carpenter, his infatuation with and sexualisation of the English working class. For Symonds too was accustomed to loving the ‘powerful’ and ‘vigorous’ bodies of young working men, their muscular arms and strong hands stirring in him an energy which no woman’s hands

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<sup>103</sup> J.A. Symonds, *Memoirs*, (ed.) A. Regis (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) 368.

<sup>104</sup> Bristol: University of Bristol Special Collections (hereafter: UBSC): A400e, J.A. Symonds, marginalia in W. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Philadelphia: D.Mckay, 1884) 95- 109.

<sup>105</sup> UBSC: Symonds, *Leaves*, 300.

<sup>106</sup> J.A. Symonds, *Walt Whitman: A Study* (London: John Nimmo, 1893) 149; Symonds, *Letters*, 674-6.

<sup>107</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 675

<sup>108</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 675. Carpenter, *Towards*, 139.

could ever stir.<sup>109</sup> When discussing his affinity for the working class with Wallace, Symonds' politically 'fraternal love of man' could be unproblematically demonstrated through emotional descriptions of their beautiful 'simplicity and manly affection'. Indeed, in the long summers Symonds' spent away from his wife, retiring to Venetian canals and Swiss mountains, the 'postillion, stevedore, gondolier, farm servant and porter' were among his dearest 'friends'.<sup>110</sup> In these men he found a great deal of 'the emotion', in a 'wholly admirable and manly form', whilst his relationships with them were a 'perpetual aid to [his] soul toward a higher spiritual frame'.<sup>111</sup> Of course, Symonds' sexual love for the working class was not simply a matter of physical attraction but held a deeper philosophical and political meaning, as it did for Carpenter in his writings. As he explained to his Carpenter: 'the blending of social strata in masculine love seems to me one of its most pronounced and socially hopeful features'. Anticipating Carpenter's venerations of Uranian love's 'levelling' quality, Symonds' notes that 'masculine love ... abolishes class distinctions', opening a 'cataract-blind eye to the futilities' of social divisions. Love transcends the boundaries of 'prejudice and education', and therefore, if 'acknowledged and extended', Symonds believed it 'would do very much to further the advent of socialism'.<sup>112</sup> This idea that sexual 'inverts' had an 'innately democratic attitude', entirely suited to embracing Whitman's 'comradeship', was penned some 20 years before Carpenter wrote his *Intermediate Sex*, although was likely written after Symonds' had read a privately circulated version of Carpenter's *Sex-Love*.<sup>113</sup> Regardless of who specifically influenced who, the ideas that Carpenter discussed in his tract should not be seen as Bevir might have portrayed them, as important *only* within a technical philosophical discussion about the implications of Transcendentalism on socialist thought. Rather, we should see his political narrative as equally rooted and mediated by the real intimate experiences of men and the politico-sexual culture in which those experiences were shared, discussed and interpreted.

Typically, Symonds has not been seen as a socialist by historians, but his romantic vision of an equal society based on love, comradeship and democracy highlights his engagement with a distinctive intellectual current of a wider socialist

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<sup>109</sup> Symonds, *Memoirs*, 138.

<sup>110</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 825; 601n.

<sup>111</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 808.

<sup>112</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 808.

<sup>113</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 798-799, 809, 814.



culture, one that transcended philosophical, literary, and popular political spheres. His brother-in-law T.H. Green 'inducted [him] into the philosophy of democracy and socialism', inspiring in him a 'sympathy with the masses'. Like many British socialists at the time, Symonds did not condone 'the passions of the French' or the 'extreme German school'.<sup>114</sup> Instead, he defined democracy as 'social advantages on equal terms', and 'socialism' as 'an equitable distribution of wealth', both of which he believed were 'the cardinal questions of the modern world'.<sup>115</sup> Although unimpressed by 'crude socialist revolutionary movements', he was also convinced that the wealthy classes and 'capitalists' needed to make 'great sacrifices' towards an 'even distribution of wealth'.<sup>116</sup> Whitman's vision of a democracy built on personal transformation offered a perfect expression of this idea. As he explained to Traubel, 'Revolution is always a bad thing' but *Leaves* 'revolutionised' his personality, 'made [him] love [his] brethren, and 'seek them out with more perhaps of passion than [Whitman] would himself approve'.<sup>117</sup> Whitman's was a 'prophecy of comradeship' whose 'vision of the future' based on 'equality' in 'amative' 'brotherhood' will be realised as he awakens us to the 'God in man's heart'.<sup>118</sup> In this very new vision of socialism, loving 'comradeship [was] the binding emotion of the nations'. 'Manly attachment' and 'athletic love' become expressions of the 'sublimest thoughts and aspirations', not 'merely a personal passion' but a 'social and political virtue'.<sup>119</sup> Whitman's metaphysical language of comradeship did not simply make Symonds a 'socialist', much more specifically it offered him a radically new political identity with radically new possibilities for individuals and their relationships with others.

The socio-political possibilities of manly love also excited and inspired Traubel, a much more active socialist, after his first reading of Carpenter's *Sex-Love*. Carpenter's explicit inclusion of sex into his ideal of universal love motivated Traubel to ask Wallace for details of all the 'Whitman people' he knew in Britain.<sup>120</sup> So too did he ask Johnston what he thought about the meanings and significance of Carpenter's text for Whitman's

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<sup>114</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 176.

<sup>115</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 177.

<sup>116</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 84.

<sup>117</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 667.

<sup>118</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 551-552, 599-601.

<sup>119</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 601; Symonds, *Whitman*, 68-79.

<sup>120</sup> BCL: ZWN/5/1/512, H. Traubel to J.W. Wallace, 25 Mar. 1894.

'doctrine of Comradeship', requesting extra copies for 'missionary purposes'.<sup>121</sup> These letters all discuss setting up 'democratic' and 'paid membership' or 'organisation' based around a 'Whitman creed', 'a simple union of comrades' to spread the 'good word'. Most interestingly, Traubel, upon being 'informed' that Carpenter endorsed 'sodomistic practices' in his pamphlet, and that Whitman had been charged with the same 'offence', asked Wallace to send a passage which 'gives rise to such a nasty suspicion'.<sup>122</sup> It might seem odd that Traubel, a man who had numerous male lovers, could so easily feign naivety when talking with a religious fervour about distributing texts that unavoidably implied male sexual desire.<sup>123</sup> However, this more than anything, serves as a testament to the ways in which a narrative of intimate citizenship could mobilise *new* forms of political identity. Carpenter's Whitmanian conception of socialism as an expression of comradely love, whilst clearly functioning as a medium for men to express their sexual desires for other men, produced a very different kind of subject to that evoked by the language of 'sodomite', traversing the boundaries of what was considered 'sexual' and simply 'affectionate'. As Traubel's friend and mistress Miriam Bains said of him and Carpenter, they were 'the prophets' of their day, bringing 'a vocabulary that is new, superbly fitted for the ears of the future'.<sup>124</sup> In so doing, they 'amplified the ideals of love and comradeship that Whitman left nebulous', in other words, gave a more coherent form to the practical, physical and sexual implications of a socialism based on divine love and intimacy.<sup>125</sup>

If Whitman's 'nebulous' ideal of comradeship could allow men to feign naivety in regards to the question of physical sexuality, it could also allow them to be quite explicit about exactly what they meant. Symonds comes across as frustrated at the very vagueness of comradeship and the ambiguities in regards to its physical implications. Evidently 'perplexed about the drift of Calamus', Symonds probed quite literally everyone he knew who wrote about Whitman to elaborate on their personal interpretations of 'manly love'.<sup>126</sup> Surely, Wallace and Johnston could not ignore the

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<sup>121</sup> BCL: ZWN/5/1/518, H. Traubel to J. Johnston, 29 Mar. 1894; BCL: ZWN/5/1/521, H. Traubel to J.W. Wallace, 2 Apr. 1894.

<sup>122</sup> BCL: ZWN/5/1/759, H. Traubel to J.W. Wallace, 13 Jun. 1895.

<sup>123</sup> M. McKay, 'Walt Whitman in Canada, The Sexual Trinity of Horace Traubel, Frank and Mildred Bain' *Whitman Quarterly Review*, 30:1 (2012).

<sup>124</sup> McKay, *Whitman*, 126; M. Bain, *Horace Traubel* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1913) 29.

<sup>125</sup> Bain, *Horace*, 29.

<sup>126</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 542-3, 553, 792-3,

blatant fact that 'a large number of men born with homosexual tendencies ... could not fail to think their emotions justified by reading Walt'?.<sup>127</sup> In his musings to sexologist Havelock Ellis, an 'expert' in the study of so-called 'sexual inversion', Symonds pondered that whilst Whitman's 'Doctrine of Comradeship' is clearly 'spinal', as inherently corporeal as it is transcendent, it remained unclear if Whitman advocated 'anything approaching its Greek [i.e. pederastic] form'.<sup>128</sup> For Ellis, however, whose 'long and interesting talks with Ed Carpenter' were very enlightening, Whitman's comradeship included 'any passionate form of emotion', leaving its 'mode of expression to persons concerned'.<sup>129</sup> Resolute in his quest for clarity, Symonds' asked Carpenter if he had considered whether 'comradeship' might have some bearing on the physiological benefits to a man's 'health' when he 'absorbs' another's semen. He explained that not only did the 'powerful nervous agent' support a 'thriving' health and 'physical condition', but that it could have an implication for the wider social order.<sup>130</sup> In fact, he had 'no doubt' that the 'absorption of semen implies a real modification in physique of the person who absorbs it' a change which 'constitutes an important basis for subsequent conditions - both spiritual and corporeal'.<sup>131</sup> 'Sex [had] been unaccountably neglected' by physiologists and psychologists, but Symonds was sure that if a scientific project was undertaken that was free from 'religious and legal presuppositions', it would have found a clear basis for the ideal of 'passionate comradeship'. For it was physical 'sexual relations between men' and 'true affection' that allowed 'comrades to be united in ways that would be otherwise quite inexplicable'. Physical union offered men an 'elevated form of love', a 'different sphere of energy' that would 'emerge and take its place in service of mankind', just as 'Whitman, in Calamus', predicted.<sup>132</sup> The 'manly love of comrades', because it was an expression a divine presence, was an energy that permeated everything from socialist political relationships to intimate personal ones. It seeped through the social body as it did through an individual's bodily fluids.

Symonds eventually asked Whitman, when the latter was at the old age of 71 and riddled with consumption, if he himself had ever considered the 'possible intrusion

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<sup>127</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 729.

<sup>128</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 459.

<sup>129</sup> UBSC: DM/109/28/5/1a, H. Ellis to J.A. Symonds, 6 May 1890.

<sup>130</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 810-11

<sup>131</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 798.

<sup>132</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 799.

of those semi-sexual emotions and actions which no doubt do occur between men' into his 'conception of comradeship'.<sup>133</sup> Building on themes present in his discussions with Ellis and Carpenter, Symonds emphasised that he did not mean that physicality might be a 'necessary part of the relation' between comrades, but was curious as to whether Whitman was prepared to leave its mode of expression 'to the inclinations and the conscience of the individuals concerned'.<sup>134</sup> Whitman staunchly replied that such 'damnable' and 'gratuitous .... morbid inferences' were an 'undreamed and unrecked possibility' that he most assuredly 'disavowed'.<sup>135</sup> No doubt disappointed with the response, Symonds felt that Whitman would not have given the same reply 'when he first published Calamus', convinced instead the aged poet was merely aware that 'lending influence to sods' would undoubtedly tarnish his posthumous legacy in the literary world.<sup>136</sup> However, Symonds' response highlights perfectly his understanding that, regardless of what Whitman might say or think, the reception of his work by the English socialist movement had already created the conditions for a new narrative of intimate citizenship to flourish. For Symonds saw that 'the emotional language of Calamus is such as has hitherto not been used in the modern world about the relation between friends'; a radically new way of talking about human relationships tied inexplicably to a worthy social and political ideal. Whitman, Symonds argued 'cannot be ignorant that a certain percentage of male beings are always born ... whose sexual instincts are what the Germans call inverted', and that they might find in Whitman's ideal of 'manly love' a basis for putting forward a new idea; that a 'great spiritual factor lies latent in Comradeship, ready to leap forth and to take a prominent part in the energy of the human race'.<sup>137</sup> The themes, motifs and metaphors these men found in Whitman were important because they provided a conceptual and linguistic framework for men to construct new romantic and sexual identities in relation to radical socialist politics, regardless of Whitman's personal inclinations.

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<sup>133</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 482.

<sup>134</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 482.

<sup>135</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 818.

<sup>136</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 808.

<sup>137</sup> Symonds, *Letters*, 493.

## Conclusion

Today, as strategies for political mobilisation increasingly come to revolve around 'identities', understanding how narratives can construct viable constituencies of support has become ever more important. Modern LGBT politics, Plummer argues, is often couched in narratives of intimate citizenship that rely on postmodern values of tolerance, pluralism and a recognition of individuality, ideals that fit quite nicely with that of the globalised liberal capitalism of the twenty-first century West.<sup>138</sup> Since the 1980s, the corporatisation and commodification of sexual radicalism has built a gay identity within the framework of a wider neoliberal subjectivity, expressed in terms of 'pink money', 'rainbow capitalism' and the achievement of civil rights within a heteronormative consumerist framework. By interrogating the philosophical grounding of nineteenth-century socialist radicalism, I have highlighted that some of the earliest attempts to mobilise gay men in England drew upon intellectual concepts that made male intimacy inseparable from radical social change. By acknowledging the diverse 'currents of radicalism' within socialist political culture, and by emphasising the 'contingent ways in which people modified their inherited intellectual traditions', I have shown that Transcendental ideas could be used to blur the boundaries of what was political and what was sexual or intimate.<sup>139</sup> For Edward Carpenter and others who engaged with Whitman's work, intimate citizenship was based around transcending the boundaries of the conscious self, establishing a spiritual community through absolute understanding and loving acceptance, and by freeing the mind, body and soul from the restrictive nature of capitalism, materialism and sexual regulation.

Whilst Lawrence has criticised 'mechanical' depictions of socialist cultures that focus too heavily on philosophical dilemmas and intellectual debates, I have tried to highlight that, for these men at least, politico-sexual identity could be at once an abstract metaphysical idea *and* evoke a deep sense of personal belonging. In their respective memoirs, both Carpenter and Symonds talk of their difficulties in childhood dealing with their 'mental and moral confusion', forced as they were to hide what Symond's called his 'real, inner self' behind his 'outer, artificial self'.<sup>140</sup> In Walt Whitman

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<sup>138</sup> Plummer, *Intimate*, 23-28.

<sup>139</sup> Bevir, *Socialism*, 298.

<sup>140</sup> Carpenter, *My*, 28-30; Symonds, *Memoirs*, 149.

and the philosophy of Transcendentalism, these men found a way to make their inner selves inseparable from their outer selves, and tie this liberation to a wider social and political ideal. They found a philosophical framework that legitimised the intuitive emotional impulses and sexual desires that they experienced. The language of comradeship and love, with its political and spiritual implications, provided a very different identity than the language of 'sodomite' or 'sexual invert' would have done. The influence of their narratives went beyond those whom we might now consider 'homosexual', being taken up by a wide range of men and women who were attracted to a vision of socialism based on love, kindness, affection; forms of intimacy that masculine, heteropatriarchal norms make difficult to express at all, let alone in a public, political context. So too, did these narratives influence men whom we might not typically conceive of as 'socialist'. Symonds' middle-class, scholarly life, largely spent in the hills surrounding Davos, was clearly alienated from the working class labour movement that Carpenter helped forge in Sheffield. However for both of these men, the liberation of the working class would come about through the acceptance of a divine love, a spiritual brotherhood, and a harmonious social order built on intimate friendships and personal understanding. From his own perspective, Symonds' sexual encounters with the Swiss working class were just as much a socialist revolutionary act as the labour strikes that Carpenter supported in England's industrial North. That sexual identity mediates political philosophy here is an understatement, the two dimensions of character were inseparably linked in an ideological narrative and linguistic framework which connected radical social change to the same divine presence that guides our inner desires.

Whilst the monist metaphysics of Transcendentalism holds few followers today, this essay has highlighted how specific philosophical concepts and political ideologies can be appropriated and reinterpreted to be more sexually inclusive, and how one needn't draw a distinction between the struggle to liberate marginalised sexualities and the liberation of all humanity from the shackles of oppression.

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