

Louis H. Sullivan: That Object He Became

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Louis H. Sullivan (1856–1924) recounted a story when as a five-year-old he built a dam across a local creek. He characterised it in terms of power: ‘child power and water power’.¹ Instantiating a common theme throughout his writing, he believed that humans have some ‘innate’, ‘congenital’, and ‘natural’ power necessary to generate an organic or living architecture. He claimed that without a ‘clear vision’ of it, ‘there can be no genuine understanding of the nature of creative art of any kind’, especially architecture.² But for Sullivan, it was not the power we might expect. In his story, by the time the dam had retained a miniature lake, at that precise moment of stasis when those engineered powers stabilised in seeming equipoise, yet brimmed pregnant with imminent rupture, at the very moment of ‘grand climax – the meaning of all this toil’, Sullivan ‘tore out the upper center of the wall, stepped back quickly and screamed with delight, as the torrent started, and, with one great roar, tore through in huge flood, leaving his dam a wreck’. Surrendering to this wild exhibition of power, ‘he laughed and screamed’.³

Because in the late nineteenth century, power was contaminated with constructions of gender – the questions of who had it, or how, when, and where it could be deployed were all culturally determined by sex – I interrogate his understanding in terms of two categories of identity: gender and sexuality. In very general terms I make a simplified deduction: if Sullivan construed architecture in terms of power, and if he construed power in

terms of gender and sexuality, then in some way he construed architecture in terms of gender and sexuality. I begin with a close reading of his writings along with selected sources from his library. Therein, I pay particular attention to his often-encrypted references to a specific yet transgressive nineteenth-century voice of the topic, Walt Whitman (1819–1892). I rely upon a selection of scholarship that has been slowly evolving since the end of the twentieth century. In 1985, in his penetrating biography, Robert Twombly was the first to suggest in print that Sullivan may have been homosexual.⁴ His research and analysis made a significant contribution to the mapping of the architect’s sexuality. Given the era, it is not surprising that he relied upon essentialist constructs in the determination of stable identities. Just seven years later, in her dense meandering and humourous essay ‘D’Or’, Jennifer Bloomer unmasks those constructs as instruments of power. Using Twombly’s analysis of Sullivan’s sexuality as her point of departure, she undermines their supposed stability while exposing an inherent misogyny and homophobia. While she does not provide it, she calls for a ‘re-writing’ of ‘the text of Sullivan’.⁵ And in 2009, in her *Louis H. Sullivan and a 19th-Century Poetics of Naturalized Architecture*, Lauren Weingarden firmly established Whitman’s influence upon the architect. Through what she calls a semiotic analysis, she links the bard’s poetry and prose with Sullivan’s broader architectural world view.⁶ I rely on that analysis, but focus more specifically on how that influence may inform our understanding of Sullivan’s constructions of identity.

Like Twombly, I add to the map of his sexuality. But that is not my primary aim. More like Bloomer, I remain suspicious of any essentialist constructs and how they may collude in architecture's mechanisms of power. With the recent advances in queer theory and the consequent dismantling of those very same essences, I approach Sullivan's construal of architecture, power, gender and sexuality from a queer perspective.

Sullivan was born in 1856. He practiced architecture until his death in 1924. Social historians describe this period in the United States as one of significant cultural transition for what it meant to be a 'man'.⁷ They characterise it as a power shift from a nineteenth-century conception of 'civilised,' self-restrained, 'manliness', to a twentieth-century conception of 'savage masculinity'. As a reaction to broad cultural movements such as: the transition from agriculture to urban industrialisation; the need for the specialised businessman and the devaluation of physical labour; the rise of the woman's movement and women's suffrage; the huge influx into America of immigrants seen as racially inferior and primitive; the alienation experienced in the burgeoning cities; and the recent categorisation of 'homosexuality' as a disorder of sexuality and gender; each was seen as a consequence of 'over-civilisation', construed as feminising, and perceived as a threat to the power of American manhood. As a defense, men rejected 'manliness' in favour of the primitive, unrestrained, and savage performance of 'masculinity'. Though it is apparent that Sullivan understood the cultural forces that precipitated the transition, and recognised (and at times even decried) their alienating effects, he nonetheless eschewed the singular, gendered, raw, and primitive power of 'masculinity'. While he posited a world view in terms of power, it wasn't normative.

In his last writing on architecture, *A System of Architectural Ornament* (1924), Sullivan outlined a hierarchy of five powers. As if ascending a ladder, he

organised them in increasing force and moral value. Climbing, he described the various 'men' that occupied each rung: the worker of the physical powers; the scientist of the intellectual group; the emotional man of the emotional group; the philosopher of the moral group; and the 'dreamer man... the seer, the mystic, the poet, the prophet, the pioneer, the affirmer, the proud adventurer' of the spiritual group. Gaining creative strength in the ascent when he finally reached the top we find 'to our utter dismay, or utter joy', a man who 'is not what our kind for so long had believed him to be and still believes him to be'; for at that highest rung, as 'the last veil lifts, the reality-man is found sound to the core, the quintessence of power, the dreamer of dreams, the creator of realities, the greatest of artificers, the *master craftsman*'.⁸ His emphasised last two words tumble from the ladder like a dead weight crashing through his veil-lifting flight of rhetoric. The apron-clad 'master craftsman' is a lesser god, a humble god, no 'ideal man', no 'cosmic super-man', just the maker of ornament.⁹

In the *System*, Sullivan focused considerable attention on one other important 'power'. While he endowed 'man' with the powers of his hierarchy, he offered the emotion of 'sympathy' as an all-encompassing meta-power that integrated the five groups with each other and with the world. 'Man's power to create, is intimately based on his power to *sympathize*'.¹⁰ In his *Kindergarten Chats* (1918) he characterised it as that which 'contains, encloses and sets in motion and guides to a definite goal, all that is of human value – all of man's powers and the output of those powers.'¹¹ With slight variations, this was a consistent theme over the previous thirty-five years.¹²

Today, sympathy is defined as 'the quality or state of being affected by the condition of another, with a feeling similar or corresponding to that of the other'.¹³ Describing a kind of shared feeling, it situates at least two agents capable of feelings



Fig. 1: Carson Pirie Scott and Company Store, Chicago, IL, 1899, 1903. Louis H. Sullivan, architect. Historic Architecture and Landscape Image Collection, Ryerson & Burnham Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago.

in a relationship of *shared* affection. As such, the definition is constitutive of one and *an other* able to be 'affected' by a 'condition', or capable of 'feeling'. Sullivan's usage intensifies this notion. For him sympathy becomes a kind of shared *being*. He credited Whitman, who 'beautifully expresses this idea' in the poem 'There Was a Child Went Forth':¹⁴

THERE was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he looked upon and received with
wonder, pity, love,
or dread, that object he became,
And that object became part of him for the day, or a
certain part of the day,
or for many years, or stretching cycles of years.¹⁵

Sullivan was quite taken by this poem. He often quoted from it in his autobiography.¹⁶ In his essay 'The Artistic Use of the Imagination', he referenced it in conjunction with this statement about the artist: 'into all that he sees he enters with sympathy; and in return, all that he sees enters into his being, and becomes and remains a part of him.'¹⁷ We might wonder how literally he intended this. Weingarden suggests that Sullivan meant it metaphorically. Yet she reminds us that his essay left the interpretation intentionally open-ended. He wrote that it was up to us 'to supply what has been left unsaid, to carry on such impulse as there may be as far as [we] may'.¹⁸

In the *System* Sullivan described sympathy as

the power to receive as well as to give; a power to enter into communion with living and with lifeless things; to enter into a unison with nature's powers and processes; to observe – *in a fusion of identities* – Life everywhere at work – ceaselessly, silently – abysmal in meaning, mystical in its creative urge in myriad pullulations of identities and their outward forms.¹⁹

In each case, sympathy grants a kind of subjectivity to the other. But for Sullivan, that meant even

'Life'. To be in a world of things was to inhabit not a world of objects, but subjectively, emotively, 'in communion' with the living rocks themselves, reciprocally. Overturning the binary oppositions of self and other, life and lifeless, subject and object, he posited a particularly fluid ontology where categorical being dissolves in vital consubstantiation. Indeed, identities fuse.

Returning to his story of the dam, it might be worth considering if and how Sullivan's understanding of 'sympathy' is evidenced within the text. He wrote that after he released the waters, 'he lay stretched on his back, in the short grass'. Quite satisfied in his engineering accomplishment, he fell into a deep reverie. 'Then he *loafed* and *invited his soul* as was written by a big man about the time this proud hydraulic engineer was born. But he did not observe 'a spear of summer grass'; he dreamed'.²⁰

For his introduction to the dream, Sullivan encrypted another reference to Whitman, whom he called 'a big man about the time this proud hydraulic engineer was born.' He inserted a modified quote from the poem eponymously titled, 'Walt Whitman'.²¹ Like Sullivan, Whitman, began with loafing and inviting of the soul:

I loafe and invite my Soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease, observing a spear of
summer grass.²²

The reference invites many questions. Why did Sullivan insert it here? What did Whitman add to this tale that Sullivan could not or would not, for whatever reason, say? The reference does not add 'poetry' given that Sullivan only added shared terms and truncated phrases diminished into prose. Besides a kind of name dropping, which could have been his intention, the inclusion suggests that he intended to refer to something from the content of Whitman's poem.²³

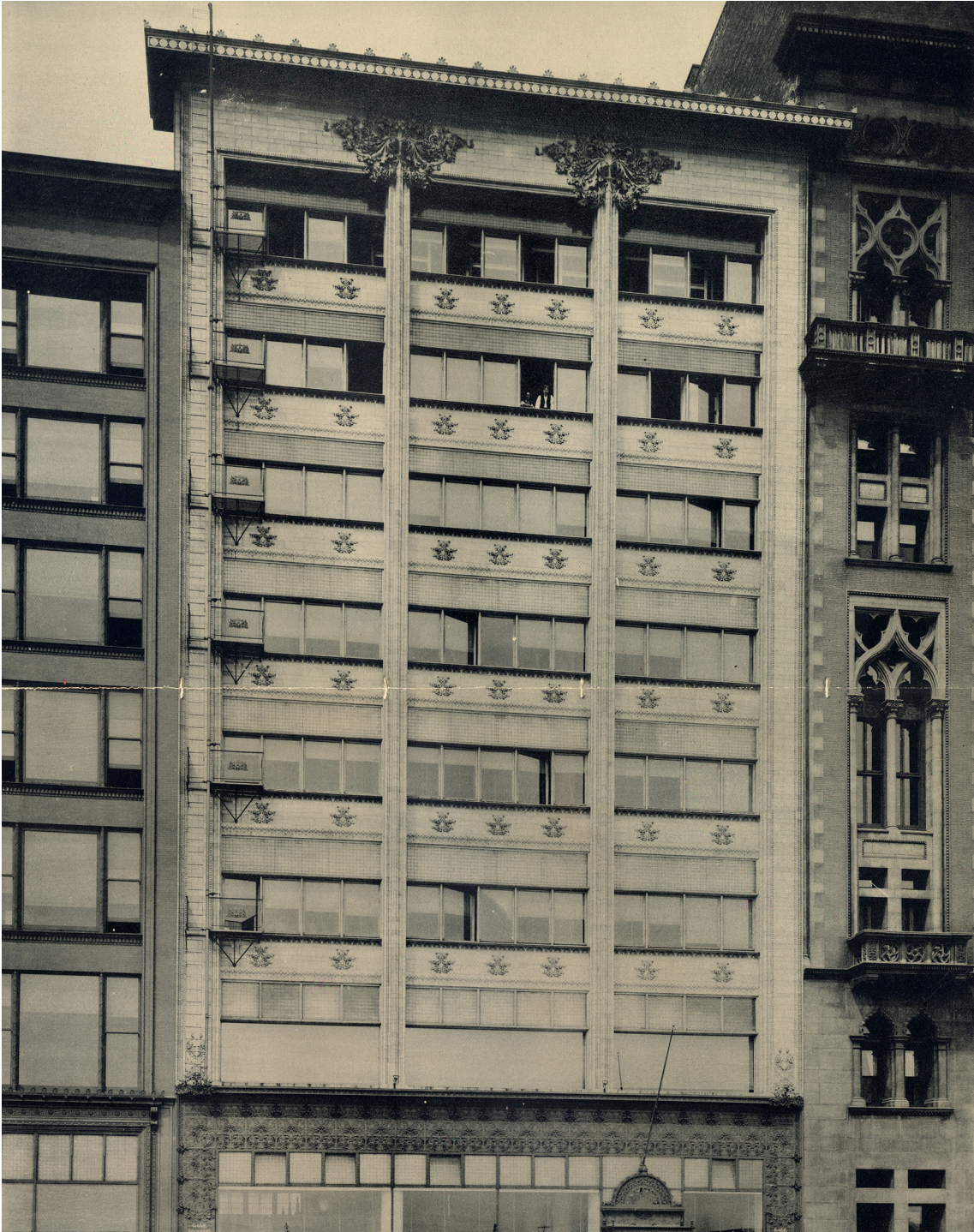


Fig. 2: Gage Building, Chicago, IL, 1898–1899. Louis H. Sullivan, architect. *Inland Architect*, Vol. 36, No. 1, Ryerson & Burnham Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago.

On the most basic level, both works are autobiographical. Both authors described scenes where they 'loaf' and 'invite my Soul'. Both made reference to a rather phallic 'spear' of grass, and both fell into a deep dreamlike reverie.²⁴ What follows are dreams of considerably different length (Sullivan's is all of seven lines, Whitman's is eighty-two pages), that nonetheless share striking similarities and a few noteworthy differences.

Sullivan briefly described his daydream:

Vague day dreams they were, – an arising sense, an emotion, a conviction; that united him in spirit with his idols, – with his big strong men who did wonderful things such as digging ditches, building walls, cutting down great trees, cutting with axes, and splitting with maul and wedge for cord wood, driving a span of great work-horses. He adored these men. He felt deeply drawn to them, and close to them. He had seen all these things done. When would he be big and strong too? Could he wait? Must he wait? And thus he dreamed for hours.²⁵

Any reader of Sullivan's autobiography will recognise this dream as yet another variation of that often-repeated leitmotif of his song of childhood. Watching his father riding the rough sea in a rowboat; the men cutting ice; the moulder; the shoemaker; the farmer; and the shipbuilder: each is another iteration of the beloved, big, strong, working men whom he 'adored'.²⁶ But here, Sullivan condensed the whole host into one dynamic sentence of 'digging', 'cutting', 'splitting', and 'driving'. In the rapid-fire repetition and tacit sentiment of love, it replicates Whitman's catalogues of those whom he loved: the carpenter, deacons, machinist and, 'the young fellow [who] drives the express-wagon, I love him, though I do not know him'.²⁷ But Whitman was more catholic in his embrace. His entries include the lunatic, prostitute, president, quadron girl, squaw, and 'clean-hair'd Yankee girl'; those who labour, sit, 'jeer and wink,' men and women and child; each

honoured with little more than a rapid line.²⁸ Sullivan saw the men like the powerful forces of the pent up waters of his dammed creek: 'these crowds of men working, doing many things, all moving at the same time – all urging toward a great end.'²⁹ It suggests Whitman's 'Urge, and urge, and urge, / Always the procreant urge of the world.'³⁰ For Sullivan, they 'were his beloved strong men, the workers – his idols.'³¹

But to this scene, Whitman lustily included what the respectable architect, decorously elided: overt sexual content.³² When Whitman lay on the grass he wrote,

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.
I mind how once we lay, such a transparent summer morning,
How you settled your head athwart my hips, and gently turn'd over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart,
And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held my feet.
Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and joy and knowledge that pass all the art and argument of the earth...³³

Whitman continued with seven more quick, mystical, earthy sentences, each beginning with a breathless 'and' like the rhythmic gasps of climax.³⁴ Described by Michael Orth as 'the crucial moment of the entire poem, the creation of the poetic fetus', he considers the 'unconventional use of fellatio rather than copulation as the process of conception... daring, but supremely effective.'³⁵ In the invitation of the soul, Sullivan's power of creation and its poetic progeny are conceived, not as pure acts of imagination, but erotically, in fellatio. The insertion of Whitman

sexually colours the daydream. The hydraulic engineer had the 'big man' speak for him.³⁶

Sullivan may have referenced Whitman's poem to suggest the scene that follows shortly thereafter. In what has been called the 'magnificent parable of the twenty-ninth bather',³⁷ Whitman described a scene, of twenty-eight men bathing in the waters by the shore:

The beards of the young men glistened with wet, it
ran from their long hair,
Little streams passed all over their bodies.
An unseen hand also pass'd over their bodies,
It descended tremblingly from their temples and ribs.
The young men float on their backs, their white
bellies bulge to the sun, they do not ask who
seizes fast to them,
They do not know who puffs and declines with
pendant and bending arch,
They do not think whom they souse with spray.³⁸

One is reminded of the scene from Sullivan's autobiography, also at the shore.³⁹ Sullivan's father stripped, ordered the six-year-old to strip, and threw the boy into the water. After a brief swimming lesson, the father offered a ride to the landing on his shoulders. Sullivan 'gloried as he felt beneath him the powerful heave and sink and heave of a fine swimmer, as he grasped his father's hair, and saw the bank approach.'⁴⁰ On land, after admiring 'his father's hairy chest, his satiny white skin and quick flexible muscles over which the sunshine danced with each movement', Sullivan fell again into a reverie that generated 'a new ideal now... a vision of a company of naked mighty men, with power to do splendid things with their bodies.'⁴¹ In many ways this is a touching, ingenuous story; yet it is almost too incestuously intimate in the wet, sensuous grasp, and 'heave and sink and heave' of the father's shoulders, that is then followed by the admitted 'vision of a company of naked men'. With the echoes of shore, water, bathers, wet hair,

white skin, the sunshine illuminating the contours of naked male bodies, the two stories encircle each other in overt sensuality. Sullivan could not have overlooked the comparison.

When Sullivan inserted Whitman's poem as a bridge linking his story of the dam with his daydream, he placed Whitman's sexualised men between his hydraulic engineering story and the recurring dreams of the men that he adores. There is the overlay and interpenetration of Sullivan the dam builder, Whitman the poet, Sullivan's working men, and Whitman's sexualised men. For Sullivan, this was not only about the asexualised power of work, the power to create. By including Whitman, he was suggesting that this power is an erotic power as well.

But it is a particular relational positioning of power. Notice that when Whitman loafed, he *received* the advances of an unidentified lover. He was held from his beard to his feet. He was penetrated by the tongue of the other to his 'bare-stript heart'. *He was on his back*. Of the men swimming, someone 'seized' them. As erotically charged as all of the tales are, for the men, Whitman and the whole company of 28 bathers, it is a passive eroticism.⁴² In the terms of the nineteenth century, Whitman and the swimming men are in the 'feminine' role.⁴³ Sullivan inserted the Whitman reference to convey this relational understanding consistent with his understanding of 'sympathy' as 'the power to receive as well as give'. Moreover, in his story of self-assertion *and surrender*, that resolves in 'the peace and joy and knowledge that pass all the art and argument of the earth', unbounded from the strictures of convention, it was eroticised.⁴⁴

To suggest that Sullivan's understanding of architecture was contingent upon a sympathetic construction of power, where the normative relations of feminine and masculine are both overturned and eroticised, may seem rash. But a review of his



Fig. 3: Carson Pirie Scott and Company Store, Chicago, IL, 1899, 1903. Louis H. Sullivan, architect. *Inland Architect*, Vol. 41, No. 5, Ryerson & Burnham Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago.



Fig. 4: Gage Building, Chicago, IL, 1898–1899. Louis H. Sullivan, architect. *Inland Architect*, Vol. 36, No. 1, Ryerson & Burnham Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago.

library – the sources that he read – suggests that Sullivan knew what he was doing and intended it.⁴⁵ To be sure, he owned some of the expected ‘masculine’ ‘cowboy novels’ of his generation. But he also owned books about sex and gender that in the language of his era, argued that in every man there is more than a bit of a woman. There were three specifically about sex: Otto Weininger’s *Sex and Character* (1906), Patrick Geddes and J. Arthur Thompson’s *The Evolution of Sex* (1902), and Charles Godfrey Leland’s *The Alternate Sex* (1904). All three, written in the context of the burgeoning woman’s movement, sought to determine a scientific, biological basis for the differences of gender. All three argued for an irrefutable correspondence between anatomy and psyche such that the physical characteristics of a given gender manifested in unique corresponding mental characteristics. They believed that science, and in particular physiognomy, could in fact determine the relative positioning of power between men and women. Clearly ascribing to an essentialist, nature-given understanding of gender, they all believed that what looked like a woman, acted like a woman; and what looked like a man, acted like a man.

Weininger argued strongly for the view that women are by nature inferior.⁴⁶ Yet at the same time, he indicated there was no absolute distinction between the sexes. For him, there was no pure male and no pure female. Rather, in the same way that ‘there are transitional forms between the metals and non-metals, between chemical combinations and mixtures...and between mammals and birds,’ there were only transitional forms between male and female.⁴⁷ Surgical anatomy had revealed that in the bodies of both men and women could be found a ‘rudimentary set of parallels to the organs of the other sex’.⁴⁸ ‘There is always a certain persistence of the bisexual character, never a complete disappearance of the characters of the undeveloped sex.’⁴⁹ In any given body, through a set of ratios of the proportion of ‘male’ to ‘female’, or ‘female’ to ‘male’,

Weininger developed his ‘Laws of Sexual Attraction’ that explained why two people, to include those of the same sex, are attracted to each other.⁵⁰ Those bodies with a higher proportion of characteristics of the opposite sex were more prone to what he called, ‘homo-sexuality’. This certainly ran counter to the arguments of those who believed that homo-sexuality was acquired or a choice.⁵¹ For Weininger it was physiological. Indeed, based on his law, he argued for its de-criminalisation.⁵²

Geddes and Thompson were both eminent British biologists. While today architects know Geddes primarily from his prescient ecological work in planning, both men were known for their holistic interpretation of the sciences. Unlike Weininger, they were the preferred source of contemporaneous feminists because they argued that ‘to dispute whether males or females are the higher, is like disputing the relative superiority of animals and plants. Each is higher in its own way, and the two are complementary.’⁵³ However like Weininger, they believed they had found mental differences commensurate with physiological differences between the sexes. Now evidenced in cell metabolism and categorised under ‘intellectual’ and ‘emotional’, those differences fell not surprisingly into the usual stereotypes of the era. Those appropriate to this study include the notions that females ‘have indubitably a larger and more habitual share of the altruistic emotions’, and they ‘excel in constancy of affection and *in sympathy*’.⁵⁴ And that ‘share’ was as essential to the body as human cells.

In *The Alternate Sex*, Leland interpreted the individual strengths of the sexes differently. While he believed that women would always be inferior, he allowed that there were specific traits peculiar to women in which they excelled.⁵⁵ And like Weininger, and likewise based on anatomy, he concluded that

in exact proportion to male developments in women, or the female in man, there is a corresponding masculine

or *feminine degree of mentality*. This granted, it may be admitted that there must be, in accordance with what there is left of the other sex in all of us, just so much of its mind.⁵⁶

This portion of what there is left Leland called the 'alternate sex'. From the man's perspective, i.e., his, it was those attributes of women that were evident in men that most interested him. Leland believed the common stereotypes of his era, that 'woman in ordinary life thinks and acts less from reason and reflection than man, and much more from emotion and suggestion and first impression.'⁵⁷ But he claimed further that it was the woman in man that was more familiar with the memory cells of the brain and therefore assisted in memory.⁵⁸ She was also the 'spirit of the Dream'.⁵⁹ He concluded that it was the alternate sex in man that provided the 'material', 'action' and 'suggestion' for 'Imagination'.⁶⁰ Obviously, as the purveyor of memory, dreams and the imagination, the woman in man was a welcome visitor. Leland argued that she should be nurtured because her presence leads to genius. 'Great geniuses, men like Goethe, Shakespeare, Shelley, Byron, Darwin, all had the feminine soul very strongly developed in them... The feminine aid is not genius itself, nor poetry, but it is the Muse which inspires man to make it.'⁶¹ And about the disadvantaged men without evidence of the alternate sex, 'they rarely produce anything original, or in accordance with Beauty, because they lack Imagination. Now all of Imagination is not due to the inner-woman by any means, but there would be none without her.'⁶² With the promise of the genius of Goethe, Shakespeare and Darwin, and her role in dreams and imagination, surely Sullivan would have welcomed that woman into his brain.⁶³

The 'alternate sex', this 'woman in man', this gendered trope, what Leland sometimes called 'the Lady of the Brain', is humorous and disturbing.⁶⁴ But in some way, Sullivan bought it. There are too many similarities between the writing of the two.

Both placed dreams and the imagination in a fundamentally anterior relation with reason. Leland stated, 'so, as the flower precedes the fruit, Imagination and Poetry precede Reason, and Woman Man.'⁶⁵ Sullivan 'saw that Imagination passes beyond reason and is a consummated act of Instinct – the primal power of Life at work.'⁶⁶ He too agreed with sympathy's 'feminine' roots when he traced its genealogy from the heart. 'That from the heart comes forth Sympathy into the open: the subtlest, the tenderest, the most human of emotions; and that of Sympathy is born that child of delight which illumines our pathway, and which we call Imagination.'⁶⁷ And in his last important essay, 'What is Architecture: A Study in the American people of Today', (1906), we read where he sounds the most like Leland.⁶⁸ Here, Sullivan admonishes the American people and their architects. After repeating *three times* in succession, that they were in dire need of 'great thinkers, real men', he asserts,

You have not thought deeply enough to know that the heart in you is the woman in man. You have derided your femininity where you have suspected it; whereas you should have known its power, cherished and utilized it, for it is the hidden well-spring of Intuition and Imagination. What can the brain accomplish without these two!⁶⁹

Sullivan argued that 'real men' 'cherish' in their own hearts, the 'woman in man'. In the language of Leland, the language that he knew and that was available to him, he posited a power that was expressly 'feminine'. In more than just the spirit of the text, he agreed with Leland – he used the same words. For Sullivan, writing in 1906, 'femininity' was *power*. In 1922, writing in the *System*, he prioritised it such that the 'spiritual group' that 'sees as in a dream', the dream of woman's purview, and the 'emotional group' that 'embraces every power of feeling', i.e., of the heart, were both *above* the 'intellectual group' or what he called 'the cachet of manhood'.⁷⁰ In an inversion of the prevailing cultural

norms that elevated the power of the male over the female and of masculinity over femininity, Sullivan, in his essay on ornament with its ascending ladder of the five groups of 'powers', outlined a hierarchy where the powers most associated with women are both 'stronger' and higher than those associated with men. If there were any implied contamination of sympathy by 'femininity', it mattered not to Sullivan. He 'cherished' it.

But clearly the issue is more than 'femininity' or gender. From Whitman to Weininger to Leland and to Sullivan himself, there is an implied subtext of sexuality. As to Sullivan's understanding of Weininger's claim that all humans are 'bisexual' or his call for the decriminalisation of 'homo-sexuality', a few things remain clear. Weininger's use of the term 'bisexual' did not have the same meaning it holds for us today. For Weininger it meant that within the human body, sex characteristics of both genders are empirically evidenced.⁷¹ As historian George Chauncey indicates, 'at the turn of the century... *bisexual* referred to individuals who combined the physical and/or psychic attributes of both men and women. A bisexual was not *attracted* to both males and females; a bisexual was both male and female.'⁷² For Weininger, any conception of gender that determined a binary mutually exclusive opposition of 'female' and 'male' would have been nonsensical. All humans are both.

Chauncey also indicates that what is today understood as 'homosexuality', as an expression of desire, was then understood as gender 'inversion'. Consistent with Leland's characterisation, Chauncey indicates that it was conceptualised as a 'third sex' or an 'intermediate sex' falling somewhere between men and women.⁷³ Regarding the cultural understanding of 'homosexuality', the differences between Whitman's 1860 and Sullivan's 1922 were profound. In the interim homosexual behaviour had been brought under the regimes of science and medicine, characterised, categorised, and

pathologised. As Foucault suggests, in Whitman's time, 'the sodomite had been a temporary aberration'; by the time of Sullivan's autobiography, the homosexual was now a 'species'.⁷⁴ 'The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology.'⁷⁵ While Sullivan's femininity might be a breach of the code of masculine conduct, homosexuality was a breach of the essence of the man itself.⁷⁶

Beyond the books already described, Sullivan's library offers additional clues of what he probably knew.⁷⁷ In it one finds some of what historian Douglass Shand-Tucci calls 'telltale signs' of homosexuality: books by or about 'Michelangelo, J. A. Symonds... [and Richard] Wagner'.⁷⁸ While Wagner is generally not considered to have been homosexual, books about him were often considered just such a sign. Sullivan's library had books on the composer's life, work and music.⁷⁹ His love of Wagner was well known. Frank Lloyd Wright described it as 'extravagant worship'.⁸⁰ He also had one book in which two of the 'telltale' signs combined: John Addington Symonds's (1840-1895) two-volume biography of Michelangelo. In it, Symonds, the renowned English poet and cultural historian, illustrated how intervening redactors had bowdlerised all the pronouns of Michelangelo's sonnets to erase the evidence of apparent homosexuality. Symonds restored the original pronouns and Michelangelo's homosexual bent.⁸¹ While there may have been debate whether Michelangelo engaged in homosexual behaviour, with Symonds's biography Sullivan at least had convincing evidence that the painter of the Sistine Chapel wrote love sonnets to another man.

Sullivan also had books *about* Whitman. He owned one volume of Horace Traubel's diaries, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* along with Edward



Fig. 5: Façade detail of the Carson Pirie Scott and Company Store, Chicago, IL, 1899, 1903. Louis H. Sullivan, architect. Richard Nickel, photographer. Richard Nickel Archive, Ryerson & Burnham Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago.

Carpenter's *Days with Walt Whitman*, (1906).⁸² The diaries recount Whitman's warm and affirming correspondence and conversations with and about Symonds, and Carpenter as well.⁸³ The latter, whom Chauncey calls the 'gay sociologist', or the 'gay intellectual', included in his small book the incident where Whitman met Peter Doyle, the man who would be the poet's lover for almost a quarter of a century.⁸⁴ It was a 'quite romantic' scene, described by Doyle in an interview.⁸⁵ Today it is recognised as just another piece of *explicit* evidence of Whitman's homosexual behaviour that for years redactors had distorted to erroneously portray as 'homo-social'.⁸⁶ Carpenter, who expended one whole chapter on the subject of Whitman's sexuality, what he euphemistically titled 'Walt Whitman's Children', concluded,

Whether this large attitude towards sex, this embrace which seems to reach equally to the male and the female, indicates a higher development of humanity than we are accustomed to – a type super-virile, and so far above the ordinary man and woman that it looks upon both with equal eyes; or whether it merely indicates a personal peculiarity; this and many other questions collateral to the subject I have not touched upon.⁸⁷

'Touch upon' he did. After fifteen pages of 'telltale' signs, Carpenter disingenuously left it up to the reader to decide.

When Weingarden establishes the influence of Whitman upon Sullivan's architecture, we must ask: does that include the poet's sexuality? Beyond the reading of the poetry, which as indicated invites considerable interpretation of transgressive sexual content, Carpenter's book provided first-hand affirmation on the part of the poet himself.⁸⁸ Sullivan's well-known adulation and repeated references to Whitman suggest his acceptance, if not endorsement of it.⁸⁹ This interpretation is further reinforced by his awareness of Michelangelo's affections

as presented by Symonds. And it was upon Michelangelo that he bestowed his highest *architectural* honour. Of Sullivan's three-day excursion in Rome at the completion of a term at the École des Beaux-Arts, he spent *two of them* in the Sistine Chapel, 'alone there, almost all the time.'⁹⁰ Speaking about the experience he wrote,

Here [Sullivan] communed in the silence with a Super-Man. Here he felt and saw a great Free Spirit. Here he was filled with the awe that stills. Here he came face to face with his first great Adventurer. The first mighty man of Courage. The first man with a Great Voice. The first whose speech was Elemental. The first whose will would not be denied. The first to cry YEA! in thunder tones. The first mighty Craftsman.⁹¹

Having communed for two full days in silence, with frescoes teeming with 'a vision of a company of naked mighty men', Sullivan dubbed Michelangelo the *first* master-cum-'mighty Craftsman'.⁹² Then, suggesting considerably more than just a non-normative claim of 'homosexuality', he continued for another full page-and-a-half in the same gushing, breathless, hagiography and capped it off with another quote from Whitman: the title and first line of 'THERE was a Child went forth every day'.⁹³ In the intimation of the words that follow, 'the first object he look'd upon, that object he became'; and in the next line and the next and the next line after that, the child in endless fusion with a world of 'early lilacs', 'the Third-month lambs', 'the field sprouts', 'the barefoot negro boy and girl', 'the schoolmistress', 'his own parents', 'the blow, the quick loud word, the tight bargain, the crafty lure', 'the streets themselves and the facades of houses', a teeming world with 'shadows, aureola and mist', together with Whitman *and Sullivan* suggest consubstantiation with the naked mighty men, Michelangelo, and even themselves; for 'these became part of that child who went forth every day, and who now goes, and will always go forth every day, / And

these become part of him or her that peruses them here.⁹⁴ At the very moment that Sullivan identifies Michelangelo as the first master craftsman, at the pinnacle of his hierarchy of powers, he returns us to Whitman. As if needing to remind us yet once again that if we are ever to fully understand architecture, we must understand sympathy; and if we are ever to fully understand sympathy, we must 'enter into a unison with nature's powers and process; to observe – in a fusion of identities'. Deliberately constructing an alternative epistemology that transgresses the binary oppositions of self and other, life and lifeless, subject and object, male and female, and heterosexual and homosexual, Sullivan offers an emotive and fluid ontology where categorical being dissolves in vital consubstantiation – identities fuse – and they are eroticised.

Notes

1. Louis H. Sullivan, *The Autobiography of an Idea* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956), 55.
2. Louis H. Sullivan, *A System of Architectural Ornament*, (New York: The Eakins Press, 1967), not paginated.
3. Sullivan, *Autobiography of an Idea*, 55.
4. Robert Twombly, *Louis Sullivan: His Life and Work*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 399.
5. Jennifer Bloomer, "D'Or", in *Sexuality and Space*, ed. Beatriz Colomina (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 175.
6. Lauren S. Weingarden, *Louis H. Sullivan and a 19th-Century Poetics of Naturalized Architecture*, (Farnham, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009), 8; 215–237.
7. For similar arguments, see Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of North America, 1877–1920* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009); Thomas C. Leonard, *Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics & American Economics in the Progressive Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).
8. Sullivan, *System of Architectural Ornament*, not paginated.
9. For this model of a superior human Sullivan might have been influenced by G. Stanley Hall's 'cosmic super-man,' or Herbert Spencer's 'ideal man'. But his description comes closest to a conflation of Nietzsche's Übermensch with Edward Carpenter's description of Whitman as the 'master-workman.' In his library Sullivan had G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*, vol. 1 (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1904); Edward Carpenter, *Days with Walt Whitman: With Some Notes on his Life and Work* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1921 [1906]), 105; and Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. Alexander Tille (New York: Macmillan Company, 1896). Frank Lloyd Wright indicated that Sullivan was greatly influenced by Spencer and that he gave Wright a copy to read. There was no Spencer in the auction catalogue. Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1932), 95.
10. Ibid.
11. Louis H. Sullivan, *Kindergarten Chats and Other Writings* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1979), 149.
12. Louis H. Sullivan, 'Ornament in Architecture', in *Louis Sullivan: The Public Papers*, ed. Robert Twombly (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 82. Louis H. Sullivan, 'What is the Just Subordination?' in *Louis Sullivan: The Public Papers*, 31 and 35.
13. *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. 'sympathy'.
14. Louis H. Sullivan, 'The Artistic Use of the Imagination (1899),' *Louis Sullivan: The Public Papers*, 66.
15. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860), 221.
16. Sullivan, *Autobiography of An Idea*, 25, 37, 40, 61, and 236.

17. Sullivan, 'The Artistic Use of the Imagination (1899)', *Louis Sullivan: The Public Papers*, 66.
18. Weingarden, *Louis H. Sullivan*, 234.
19. Sullivan, 'A System of Architectural Ornament', not paginated [emphasis added].
20. Sullivan, *Autobiography of An Idea*, 56 [emphasis added].
21. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, (1860), 23–104. This is the edition in Sullivan's library that was sold at auction. In later editions Whitman revised the title to 'Song of Myself'.
22. *Ibid.*, 23. These are the fourth and fifth lines of the poem. The first through the third are the famous beginning, 'I CELEBRATE myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me, as good belongs to you.' Whitman's shared atoms would be consistent with Sullivan's sympathy.
23. As a kind of name dropping, Sullivan might simply be saying that he is aligning his work with Whitman's. This too would be consistent with the thesis.
24. Whitman observed the spear of grass. Sullivan seemingly in a hurry to dream did not. Robert Atwan suggests that it is the same Calamus grass that provided the title for the often-homoerotic poems of the 'Calamus' section of *Leaves of Grass*. The shape of the grass suggests phallic imagery. That symbolism is further reinforced with the 'spear'. Robert Atwan, 'Observing a Spear of Summer Grass', *The Kenyon Review*, New Series 12, no. 2 Impure Form (Spring, 1990): 17–19; 21–2; 24. Gary Schmidgall offers a similar interpretation; see Gary Schmidgall, *Walt Whitman: A Gay Life* (New York: Dutton, or The Penguin Group, 1997), xxv, and 70.
25. Sullivan, *Autobiography of An Idea*, 56.
26. *Ibid.*, 23, 34, 68, 68–9, 69–70, and 86. Sullivan placed himself in relation to these men in the terms of 'adoration'. It was not unique to this story. In variations of adoration, including worship, honour, and idolisation, this general power relationship with men appears throughout *Autobiography of an Idea*, 57, 68–69, 85–86, 101, and 247.
27. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, (1860), 40.
28. *Ibid.*, 39–43.
29. Sullivan, *Autobiography of An Idea*, 86.
30. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, (1860), 25.
31. Sullivan, *Autobiography of An Idea*, 86.
32. For additional symbolism of the poem, see Atwan, 'Observing a Spear of Summer Grass,' 17–22.
33. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, (1860), 27–8.
34. *Ibid.*, 28.
35. Edwin Haviland Miller (ed.), *Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself': A Mosaic of Interpretations* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), 65. In this collection of critical interpretations, Miller includes Michael Orth's (1968) comments and critique.
36. Geoffrey Saunders Schramm, 'Whitman's Lifelong Endeavor: *Leaves of Grass* at 150' (The Walt Whitman Archive: <http://www.whitmanarchive.org> [accessed, 20 October 2013]), 3. Sullivan's circumspection is understandable. From today's perspective, it is difficult to imagine, but Whitman was severely censured for the sexual content of his work. According to Geoffrey Schramm, the *New York Times* wrote of the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* (the edition Sullivan owned), that 'If possible, he is more reckless and vulgar than in his two former publications.' When his employer at the Department of the Interior found a copy in his desk, Whitman was fired. The 1881 edition was banned in Boston as obscene literature.
37. Miller, *Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself,'* 74. Sculley Bradley (1939) made this comment.
38. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, (1860), 36.
39. Sullivan, *Autobiography of An Idea*, 78. On the Atlantic coast in Newburyport, MA, Sullivan used the term the 'sea.'
40. Sullivan, *Autobiography of An Idea*, 79.
41. *Ibid.*
42. Miller, *Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself,'* 67. Albert Gelpi describes it as 'a bearded body in the woman's position.'
43. Unless it is clearly coming from the cited reference, throughout this essay I will qualify 'feminine' and 'masculine' with quotes. Determining the characteristics of anything as either is problematic. By definition they presuppose an insufficient and dangerous essentiality regarding the properties of gender.

44. Emory Holloway (ed.), *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman* (New York: P. Smith, 1932), 83. Whitman wrote of his power, 'of slipping like an eel through all blandishments and graspings of conventions.'
45. Williams, Baker & Severn, *Catalogue at Auction* (Chicago: Ryerson and Burnham Libraries, 1909), not paginated.
46. Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, n.d.), 252. He wrote, 'However degraded a man may be, he is immeasurably above the most superior woman.'
47. Weininger, *Sex and Character*, 2–3.
48. *Ibid.*, 6.
49. *Ibid.*, 5.
50. *Ibid.*, 29.
51. *Ibid.*, 45–6. Weininger used the term 'homo-sexuality.' Knowing that the preferred and affirming, but still inadequate terms today are 'gay' or 'queer,' I nonetheless opt for the term 'homosexuality.' Coming from Sullivan's era and the oppressive regimes of medicine, religion and the law I chose this term precisely because it situates the discourse back within the language of the era.
52. Weininger, *Sex and Character*, 51.
53. Patrick Geddes and J. Arthur Thompson, *The Evolution of Sex* (London: Walter Scott, 1989), 289. A rather dubious endorsement for women's equality, Geddes and Thompson based these findings on the study of evolution. They would make their position quite clear regarding women's suffrage when they wrote, 'What was decided among the prehistoric Protozoa cannot be annulled by Act of Parliament' (*Ibid.*, 267). See also Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization*, 153.
54. Geddes and Thompson, *Evolution of Sex*, 271. Obviously, Sullivan was aware of the association. He characterised the 'feminine' as 'intuitive sympathy, tact, suavity and grace'; see Sullivan, *Kindergarten Chats*, 23 [emphasis added].
55. Charles Godfrey Leland, *The Alternate Sex or the Female Intellect in Man, and the Masculine in Woman* (London: William Rider & Son, Ltd., 1904), 4–6. Later in the book, having illustrated the strengths of women, he stated that 'there is small difference indeed as to which is the Superior Sex in the transaction – which ye may all reason out everyone his or her own way, drawing everyone his or her own conclusions' (*Ibid.*, 77).
56. *Ibid.*, 35. Emphasis in original.
57. *Ibid.*, 62.
58. *Ibid.*, 65.
59. *Ibid.*, 62.
60. *Ibid.*, 68.
61. *Ibid.*, 41.
62. *Ibid.*, 42.
63. It is likely that Sullivan would have agreed with at least three of Leland's five choices for genius: Goethe, Darwin and Shakespeare. Sullivan had seven volumes of Goethe and a volume of *Shakespeare's Works* in his library. In his autobiography, he described his reading of Darwin, among others, as 'an enormous world opening before him'. Sullivan, *Autobiography of an Idea*, 249.
64. Leland, *The Alternate Sex*, 33
65. *Ibid.*, 73.
66. Sullivan, *Autobiography of an Idea*, 236.
67. Sullivan, *Kindergarten Chats*, 133.
68. 'With the exception of his books,' Robert Twombly calls this essay Sullivan's 'last major theoretical work.' Twombly, *Louis Sullivan: The Public Papers*, 174.
69. Sullivan, 'What is Architecture,' *Louis Sullivan: The Public Papers*, 187 and 190. More authors cite Sullivan's essay of twenty years earlier, 'Characteristics of American Architecture' (1885) where he deplored an American architecture that was not 'virile.' Suggesting that he was asking for a more 'masculine' architecture, he assessed the contemporaneous architecture as having a 'marvelous instinct,' and 'stubborn common sense,' but as if hidden behind a veil of American Romanticism it was like the emasculated Hercules at the foot of Omphale. Sullivan called for the awakening of an authentic power in the making of a distinctly American architecture. Narciso G. Menocal, *Architecture as Nature: The Transcendentalist Idea of Louis Sullivan* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), 17. Sherman Paul, *Louis Sullivan: An*

- Architect in American Thought* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1962), 32–5.
70. Sullivan, 'A System of Architectural Ornament', not paginated; Sullivan, *Autobiography of an Idea*, 176.
71. Weininger, *Sex and Character*, 5; 45–52.
72. George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture and the makings of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 49.
73. *Ibid.*, 48–9.
74. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 43.
75. *Ibid.*, 43.
76. And it was against the law. Sodomy laws in the United States were not even begun to be repealed until 1962.
77. In addition to those listed, the library also included Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1895), 13. Nordau outlined the decadence, with hints to the sexual 'decadence', in *fin-de-siècle* France.
78. Douglass Shand-Tucci, *The Crimson Letter: Harvard, Homosexuality, and the Shaping of American Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003), 146. Shand-Tucci was describing the 'telltale signs' that he found in a library from about 1912. Chauncey offers similar 'telltale signs' and indicates that within gay folklore of 1890–1940, the 'heroic figures' from the past who they claimed were 'gay' included Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde, and Julius Caesar. Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 283.
79. Julien, *Richard Wagner: Sa Vie et Ses Oeuvres*; Nohl, *Life of Wagner*; and Upton, *The Standard Operas*, of which the most pages were devoted to Wagner. The library also included fourteen volumes of what were identified as 'Oratorios, etc.' Williams, Baker & Severn, *Catalogue at Auction*, not paginated.
80. Wright, *Autobiography*, 101.
81. John Addington Symonds, *The Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti*, vol. 2 (London: John C. Nimmo, 1893), 93–179.
82. It is unclear which of the three published volumes Sullivan owned: 1905, 1908, or 1914. Given that he auctioned his library in 1909, it seems likely that he owned the first volume that covered the dates 28 March to 14 July, 1888. But it should be noted that Sullivan is mentioned in the third volume. Whitman saved a letter that Sullivan had sent him. Traubel read it and recorded Whitman's response. Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden (November 1, 1888 – January 20, 1889)* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, Inc., 1961 [1914]), 25–6.
83. Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 107, 144, and 231. Carpenter was known for his positive portrayal of and advocacy for homosexuality and homosexuals, whom he called 'Uranians', in a number of treatises and books, to include *Love's Coming of Age*. Any close reading of Traubel's diaries discloses numerous tell-tale signs.
84. Rodger Streitmatter, *Outlaw Marriages: The Hidden Histories of Fifteen Extraordinary Same-Sex Couples* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 1. Carpenter says the relationship lasted ten years; see Carpenter, *Days with Walt Whitman*, 149.
85. Carpenter, *Days with Walt Whitman*, 148.
86. Whitman's homosexual behaviour is so generally accepted today that Schmidgall would characterise his claim that he fathered six children 'the most hilarious lie of Whitman's career.' Schmidgall, *Walt Whitman: A Gay Life*,
87. Carpenter, *Days with Walt Whitman*, 151–2.
88. Both editions of Sullivan's *Leaves of Grass*, 1860 and 1872, included the explicitly homoerotic 'Calamus' poems.
89. For known references made to the poetry of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* in his autobiography, see: Sullivan, *Autobiography of an Idea*, 25, 37, 40, 56, 61, 236, and 249.
90. *Ibid.*, 234.
91. *Ibid.* In this instance Sullivan uses a variation of G. Stanley Hall's 'cosmic super-man.'
92. *Ibid.*, 207–8, and 234. Sullivan dubbed Wagner the other 'master craftsman' in only slightly less passionate terms. Whitman is the only other person he speaks of in the same laudatory terms but he never

explicitly refers to him as the 'master craftsman' or 'mighty craftsman.'

93. *Ibid.*, 236.

94. Whitman, 'There was a Child Went Forth,' *Leaves of Grass*, 221–3.

Biography

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